

LAUDATIO*

Lord DAHRENDORF

Chair of the Hannah Arendt Prize Jury

TODAY WE ARE ASSEMBLED TO CELEBRATE THE AWARD OF THE FOURTH Hannah Arendt Prize to the New Europe College in Bucharest. For the first time the Jury has left the confines of the "Visegrad" world, or even of the first five countries to negotiate entry into the European Union (though along with Bulgaria, Romania is at least in the "tent" of the "ten plus one" identified as future members). Such political considerations were of course far from our minds when we took our decision. We were impressed, rather, by the sheer excellence which the New Europe College represents in an environment in which civil society had been razed to the ground along with ancient buildings and institutions, and replaced by bombastic edifices and avenues of power. Many of us hope that the President and the new government of Romania will succeed in rebuilding a liberal order. We are encouraged by the fact that the man who created the New Europe College, the courageous public intellectual Andrei Plesu, is a member of that government.

Let me remind you what the Hannah Arendt Prize is about. Established by the Körber Foundation and the Institute of Human Sciences, it is designed to reward "exemplary reform efforts at institutions of higher education and research" in order "to promote the development of open, free and democratic civil societies" in East Central Europe. Once again the Jury of which I have the honour to be the chairman, has been able to rely on nominations by numerous correspondents to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude. We then decided on a short list of five finalists who were invited to present their case in the form of an extensive "self-study". All five were visited by the majority of members of the Jury. The visits were always rewarding, though not always easy. We shall not forget the rickety Antonov turbo prop plane which took off from Bucharest in a snowstorm in order to bring us to Cluj, though the generous hospitality of the University there made up for all surprises on the way. In the end a decision had to be taken. This is, and was once again, the truly hard part of the Jury's work, especially since we had the self-denying ordinance not to split the Prize five- or even two-ways.

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In the end, we awarded the Prize to the New Europe College. It is an institute of advanced study, though one with special features. If one word characterises its work, it is *linking*. The Relink programme alone deserves high praise. It is designed to facilitate the re-entry of Romanian scholars who have spent time abroad; nearly half the Fellows fall in this category. The New Europe College also links some of the best and most reform-minded teachers in academic institutions all over the country; Fellows come to Bucharest part-time and continue to teach elsewhere. The New Europe College links subjects. It is set up to promote the renewal of the humanities and social sciences in Romania; but this remit covers a wide range of subjects. Seminars at the College are devoted to cultural studies and to economics, but also to architecture and to philosophy. Such seminars involve graduate students and visitors as well as Fellows. The New Europe College is anything but a closed club; it is wide open for people and institutions outside.

Thus the key effect of this institute is to create a network of individuals who work in a variety of institutions but have the New Europe College as a *collegium* to fall back on. It sets standards which inform the wider system of higher education in Romania. It radiates ideas and proposals for change. Andrei Plesu, the founder, has been described as "a merry and melancholy man" by Wolf Lepenies, the Rector of the Berlin Wissenschaftskolleg, who has himself done so much to promote

* Held on the occasion of the awarding the 1998 Hannah Arendt Prize for Institutional Reform in Higher Education and Research in East Central Europe to the New Europe College

indigenous excellence in East Central Europe. Being "merry and melancholy" are actually quite good qualifications for a foreign minister; in the case of the New Europe College it was Pleșu's incorruptibility in all regards, his persistence, and his genial and wise presence which made all the difference. It was also, to be sure, the New Europe Prize which he received in 1993 and which provided the wherewithal for the College. Anca Oroveanu who is now the Scientific Director has a different style but is in her own way impressive and quietly effective. She demonstrates that the College can now sustain itself, at least intellectually. With the help of the Hannah Arendt Prize and other major support which may now be forthcoming, the physical environment of the College will, one hopes, move from one of genteel poverty to one of modest prosperity.

The Hannah Arendt Prize, so generously funded by the Körber Foundation, was set up for a period of five years. The Jury, and other friends of the initiative, are now in the process of discussing the future. My own impression is that so far as higher education goes, the core countries of East Central Europe – those in the "tent" – are now well under way towards what in some of them is called, normalisation. By that I mean that the problems of Poland or Hungary, at least in the field of higher education, are not so dissimilar to those of Germany or Britain. Even the fact that reforms, new initiatives, are more likely to occur at the fringe of universities than through their normal institutions of governance, is a pan-European experience. Perhaps the great expansion of higher education, the consequences of which are one great theme of academic reform in the old West, has not yet quite happened in East Central Europe. But when it does, it will raise issues familiar to many of us.

Some might argue that "normality" is still some way off in the countries at which the Hannah Arendt Jury has looked above all. They are no doubt right. Still, increasingly one feels - at least the chairman of the Jury feels - that we have as much to learn from innovation in East Central Europe as we can teach the universities in the new democracies. Thus there may not be many more Hannah Arendt Prizes, at least in their present form.

In the light of such reflections, it gives me great pleasure to praise an institution which is clearly special. In the name of the Jury, I congratulate the New Europe College, its founder and its present leaders and members, on the award of the 1998 Hannah Arendt Prize.

Palais Schwarzenberg, Vienna, June 9, 1998