

BOOK REVIEW

Dominique WOLTON, *Vive l'incommunication. La victoire de l'Europe*, Paris, Editions François Bourin, 2020, ISBN: 979-10-252-0489-4

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Dominique Wolton, in his latest book, explains that misunderstandings and misinterpretations between Europeans constitute a strength, not a weakness, for the construction of Europe, for the future of Europe. It is, in the end, a “Victory of Europe”. A victory over what, or over whom? Over itself, despite a fairly general denial, and an inability to recognize this victory.

In the foreword, the author mobilizes the paradigm that he has set up and that he continues to refine from book to book: that of communication as foundation of social and political relations, of mechanisms of identification, of relationship to otherness. The question of communication is much more complex than the question of information. However, it ultimately arouses only a limited theoretical interest: why? The author’s hypothesis resides in our “will not to know” (p. 13), because the experience of communication is difficult and it is easier to rely on stereotypes to avoid worrying about communication. In this theoretical scheme, three realities are possible: situations of inter-comprehension, without distortions of the message, “incommunication”, situations that are finally very common - if not the most common, the other being more or less different from what we believe them to be, and situations of “acomunication”, with an absence of dialogue, rejection, ignorance and finally, perhaps, barbarism as described by Tzvetan Todorov (in *The Fear of Barbarians*). Within this framework, Brexit can be seen as a “tragedy of acomunication” (p. 34). This seemingly simple paradigm is robust and far-reaching, as it can be mobilized for the analysis of marital situations, social conflicts or even diplomatic negotiations.

It is obviously sensible to apply it to Europe, to the European project, and not only to the European construction but also to the evolution of mentalities, representations, opinions within the European spaces, the more or less connected public spaces, those of the European Union as well as those of the Council of Europe. Europe is a project, an experiment, a success, which “is based on lack of communication, the triumph of misunderstandings, of double talks and dialogues of the deaf” (p. 14).

Dominique Wolton invites us throughout 140 pages to share his original approach and to consider his proposals. Systematizing a search for situations of communication in a context of inter-comprehension that is more than relative,

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amounts to considering situations of incommunication as failures. On the contrary, these types of situations that underlie negotiations, avoid breakdowns, show a sharing of values, of respect, of listening and should be valued.

But why do Europeans not like Europe? Why are they not proud of what has been achieved? Dominique Wolton hypothesizes that there is a lack of love, pessimism and a deficit, not in terms of membership, in the end, but in terms of confidence in the project on the part of each and every European. Many authors have put forward a trivialization of the project, after two or three generations, which does not make us dream (any longer?). For many Europeans, space has been invested, the exotic is elsewhere and one may wonder whether going further in integration remains useful, whether it is a question of going into depth or of enlarging the perspective. The author invites us to “assume the horizon of mistrust” (p. 23); not to consider permanent negotiation, incommunication as a proof of failure, but on the contrary, as a form of effective political communication. Europe is “ahead of this new form of political intelligence” (p. 25). The discrepancy observed between the economic, financial and political project is thwarting the aspirations of citizens. However, the construction of Europe has not always been dictated by economics: the choice of economic integration is indeed a political choice, like the accession to the European Union of Southern or Eastern States after the end of the fascist regimes and of the USSR. But analysts very often remain prisoners of an economic/political articulation that is not enough. The appreciation, the defense and the understanding of the articulation between the political, economic, cultural and social spheres justify the author’s proposed project to recognize the effectiveness of incommunication, with an approach that takes into account differences, cultural diversity, ecological sensitivities and social positioning.

The construction of this book is in the image of the defended thesis: coherent and effective. Dominique Wolton develops “the assets” of Europe and its political project in ten themes, then comments and analyses in six parts “the failures” of Europe, before developing, in a third chapter - proposals, “the projects (chantiers)”.

The main asset lies in the political project, the desire to avoid war and to establish a secure and democratic institutional environment, including relations to neighbouring countries. “No one agrees on anything”. The “political-economic-cultural triptych” (p. 37) is part of a necessary cooperation underpinned by incommunication and diplomacy, which is a “value”, an “exercise in intelligence” (p. 39) that makes it possible to avoid acommunication. Europe has clearly demonstrated its ability to adapt by resisting the “ideology of globalization” (p. 41), by constantly combining the economic with the political and the social, by learning, finally, to manage incommunication, whose importance in the world makes it possible to highlight another strong hypothesis of Dominique Wolton: “the superiority of human communication over technical communication” (p. 45).

The relationship to “the other” would thus be particular for Europeans who know “that the other is intelligent” (p. 48) and who recognize his rights. Europe, a

“pioneer” for the “identity-culture-communication trio” (p. 49), recognizes cultural and linguistic diversity, in particular - another theme dear to the author. It must be acknowledged that multilingualism is developing, often on the basis of a complicated cross-border dimension, linked to the history of borders, and even in France, whereas the French prism places little emphasis on inter-comprehension within language families. A stay, even a short one, in Central Europe or in other European regions makes it possible to realize this quickly. Perhaps this multilingualism protects against communitarianism, which in the end is not very well established in Europe. Dominique Wolton rightly points out that very little research has been carried out on cross-border cohabitation. We can add that the same applies to another aspect: the development of intra-European mobility. We still do not know how many “mobile” citizens live and work in different countries - a population that is often invisible (for national elections in particular), full-fledged European citizens who do not have the feeling of migrating, but who participate well in the evolution of identities within Europe. Are they 4, 10, 15%? The crowds at the airports and on highways give indications of the size of this population - at the end and at the beginning of the week.

The Europe also conjugates laicism, the eighth asset for the author, at least in its minimal sense, with “a common background of sensitivity” (p. 55). His democratic experience, his “emancipatory values” and, lastly, his youth, “ready to set off again for the first utopias” (p. 57), but which should at least be listened to, are added to the list of assets on which Europe should be able to rely in order to “domesticate its own demons and communications” (p. 58).

These demons and failures remain numerous and sensitive. The “return to Europe” of Central Europe (Rupnik, 2013) and the German reunification in 1991 were legitimized by hope, confidence, a willingness to participate, to re-establish, and finally by a thirst for justice. Dominique Wolton is right: there was a lack of communication between East and West, with Central and Eastern Europe, and after the Soviet period, other memories have resurfaced - some demons, such as the enforced Magyarization of Slovakia at the beginning of the 20th century, or the dismantling of Hungary within the Treaty of Trianon. However, the mobility to the West of several million citizens of the countries concerned puts these failures into perspective, even if this concretization of the rights linked to European citizenship had, for the moment, a rather limited impact on the institutions. The West has certainly lacked attention vis-à-vis the East, but the populations are nevertheless mixing and discovering new ways of working and communicating.

Liberal economism is the second failure proposed by the author who denounces the formal abandonment of a social capitalism and the generalization of an ideology resulting from globalization. This alignment “has been a factor of disillusionment and anger” (p. 67) in the face of a Europe “in the wake of ordinary capitalism” (p. 68), with a final “betrayal of the elites” (cf. Jennar, 2004) and a “rise in power of the Eurocrats” (p. 69) that have made the Europe complicated and difficult to understand.

The “Fortress Europe” is another failure, that of self-confinement, even of denial of the history of migration. New threats have not been clarified, conjured, thus reinforcing the mistrust. This picture is supplemented by “the relationship to utopia and to the digital ideology” (p. 78) and by “European youth in escheat” (p. 81).

So what are the projects proposed by Dominique Wolton? Above all, we need to debate, to break the indifference towards a lot of reform proposals, to build a public space thanks to the media and the participation of citizens. But, above all, and in a more original way, we have to promote tEurope as a “labouratory of positive incommunication” (p. 86) through the imaginary, the “non-serious”, the utopia (cf. Wolton, 2013). It is therefore necessary to promote a “self-criticism of the Elites and Eurocrats” (p. 88), as well as of the Nation-States (which are not the only model of States in Europe) to make Europe attractive and to relaunch its political project, based on its own values. Perhaps this should also take into account the changing hierarchies of values, particularly among the young people, whom the author considers to be one of Europe’s assets, and who often cultivate a preference for empathy, recognition of otherness, relationships.

This part of the book sets out many interesting proposals, but it is not always easy to try to link them to measures and possible reforms. Exchanges are fundamental in a process aimed at “mobilizing the common cultural fund” (p. 98), and the authors of the Elysée Treaty in 1963 had already planned to multiply cultural, linguistic and educational exchanges as a basis for Franco-German reconciliation. A project linked to that of Erasmus, after all, and which could, as the author proposes, still be extended. This program causes already a leverage effect, bringing together not only young people, students in particular, but also their families and friends. The reintegration of culture into politics is perhaps the strongest proposal for the future, when culture is already a very important economic market and EU investment in culture is still low, far too low.

A particular proposal was, of course, expected, in the frame of a book by Dominique Wolton, about information and communication! There is not, finally, any European space of information and debate, no European media. The Eurobarometers regularly report on Europeans’ feelings of not being properly informed. Information does exist, however, but we must address this issue through communication, by enhancing it, and rethink the “information-communication-culture-knowledge square” (p. 110), in particular by trying to restore trust. In the post-digital Europe that Dominique Wolton foresees, it will be necessary to rediscover history and geopolitics, to take the time to travel and (re)discover, to reopen many debates and to review the modalities of citizens’ actions.

This motivating book invites us to share a new analysis, a reversal of perspectives, and at the same time to plan organizing a rupture, at the level of each person and his or her responsibilities, by making the “bet of humanism” (p. 127) and by seeking to restore confidence. The very last sentence of the book calls us to seek “a little joy and optimism”, essential conditions for “restoring confidence and saving

peace, which remains Europe's utopia and challenge" (p. 137). This sentence echoes the plea of Georges Snyders, who in 1986, spoke out against a sad, serious, "dull" school - to use a term used by Dominique Wolton for Europe. Snyders explained that it was necessary to try to convert the scholarly culture for those who resisted it, through an effort of mediation, by creating and discovering pleasure and joy for students. Dominique Wolton, in turn, proposes to convert Europe and brought us back to our responsibilities.

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