

HARVARD REVIEW



NUMBER TWO

FALL 1992



Société Imaginaire: A New Context For Dialogue

Much as we curse the meaningless symposia and other events of that sort, little as we can understand the principles underlying the erratic choices made by translators and publishers — we do need live encounters and authentic exchanges of ideas with other writers and we do need genuine insight into what is the best in foreign literatures.

Since I first heard of the Batuz Foundation and its *Société Imaginaire*, I can't shake off an instinctive feeling that this may be a case in point; that this seemingly utopian idea may be not that utopian after all. This is what Batuz himself — an artist, therefore a person who definitely knows what he is talking about when speaking of the situation of contemporary culture — writes about the *Société*:

We are living in a period of great historic changes in which political, economic and social questions capture almost all of our attention. Meanwhile in the cultural sphere an even greater change has occurred. We should give it more consideration since it has no historical precedence.

The change is in cultural processes which show a contradictory tendency. While an ever increasing communication system exposes everybody to the "same" (pop) culture, thus accelerating a process toward an unavoidable but superficial "integration," our knowledge about the true values of the different cultures which are in the process of integration decreases in the same proportion.

We are all conscious of these facts. Nothing can show us better than the thousands of symposiums and conferences dedicated to this subject all around the world. Still their approach, even with all their good intentions, is doomed to fail, since such complex questions cannot be dealt with in the same time span of a couple of days. There is another factor: every participant "sees" the question solely from one point of view, and through this partiality, never can grasp the totality and wholeness of the process of cultural integration.

With a one-dimensional viewpoint, we cannot approach a phenomenon which has "nuclear" characteristics. We must realize that we are living already in a "nuclear culture" which is a culture that contains all other cultures: overlapping, superposing, opposing each other.

If we must face and deal with a new, multicultural, simultaneous world with innumerable possibilities of interrelations, it must be evident that it demands of us an equally new method of apprehension.

However, it must also be clear to us that none of the structures of currently existing societies are able to contain a comprehensive global culture. Until the present time all ideologies aiming at a global culture of worldwide integration were tied to local interests or those of a polis, a state or a nation, and therefore outside of these spheres of interest had to remain either purely theoretical or fall under the influence of power politics. Therefore, the realization of this new idea had to occur at the same time and in many places simultaneously, in an imaginary space, like a field of energy

spanning the continents, a place devoid of local interests: in the *Société Imaginaire*.

Thus Batuz. Sounds idealistic? But let us realize three facts that are distressingly obvious. First, there will be no future for this planet if its inhabitants don't start trying to comprehend each other, to see some common human core underneath the appearances of difference. Second, it is culture that is largely responsible for this still-not-really-begun process of mutual communicating and understanding. Third, culture will never accomplish its task if it stays within the currently existing structures of communication, which have so far managed to accomplish only one — but truly amazing — feat, namely combine extreme rigidity with extreme randomness.

We need a combination of the opposites of these two qualities: flexibility in exploring new, unorthodox ways of communicating and exchanging ideas, plus ability to select what is genuinely valuable in others' cultural past and present. It seems to me that *Société Imaginaire* can be precisely it: an extraterritorial domain of cultural understanding — one without any boundaries, but, at the same time, one not without principles; one that opens you up while also putting you on a firmer ground of value.

Stanislaw Baranczak

The "Société Imaginaire" - "A Solidarity Among Artists"

Solidarity among artists? What does that mean? Batuz, whom many believe to be a dreamer, gives such a substantive example that I am completely dumbfounded. After all, Argentinian painters have, he says, donated one painting each. The proceeds from the sale of the works have not only allowed for the financing of an excellent catalog to be produced and the purchase of airline tickets to Europe, but for the painters to invite authors, critics, and museum experts from their own country in order to share with them their new experience. So it began. All that is described in the "gray book," says Batuz. Do you understand? "*Société Imaginaire*, Centro de Difusión de Cultura Latino-Americana." Do you understand? No?

"Solidarity among artists?" asks my wife, wondering. "What does that mean? That doesn't exist, for every artist wants to have his own individuality and doesn't need any other individualities. Hence, antagonism among artists is more natural than solidarity. But, on the other hand, only an artist can properly understand another artist. In this sense, there can be undoubtedly solidarity, but only in this sense?" says my wife, casually and scowlingly at lunch, exhausted from the hot day and the stressful life together with an artist, that is, with me. At that point something occurs to me.

Something that had occurred next door, in another room of our apartment, in my own. At the end of the seventies, under communist government, we edited at that time the first underground newspaper in Poland. Back then, no one dared to dream of what would eventually develop into the Solidarity movement, the rallying point of all of us in the 1980s. But we practiced solidarity even before, even at the time of this underground writing. And we all were, almost exclusively, artists. It was immaterial to us whether we also were liberals, conservatives, socialists, Christian Democrats or something else. One of our co-workers was a well-known Marxist. Our solidarity was a moral principle, and not a political, ideological or religious option.

A solidarity of this sort—in Poland it was referred to as the Ethos of Solidarity—has been the objective for ten years of the Solidarity Union, an objective that fascinated the world, the more so as it caused the downfall of communism. But this solidarity came to an end a very short time after the officials of the Solidarity Union had assumed the political power in the state.

Some believe that it had to happen this way, because in the democratic-parliamentary system the principle of rivalry obtains. But that goes beyond my topic. What interests me is the question as to whether the principle, which has proven itself in a seemingly hopeless struggle and would seem to fail almost immediately in the “normal” political arena, could be useful to the world’s modern culture in its state of crisis. It looks as if this principle should be irreplaceable in hopeless situations. Or, said in another way, it is useful for all those who are in a state of need or belong to a minority.

The artists are a minority in the world, because the world prefers, perhaps only for the time being, the works of machines to the works of man. Something like this. In Poland, for example, there are also other reasons for the predicament in which the artists find themselves.

The plan to save culture by means of the *Société Imaginaire* is a hopeless enterprise. The members of the *Société Imaginaire* are few. But I do recall that the editors of the first underground news edition in the communist state were also considered to be engaged in a hopeless undertaking. And we were only a few editors. Our first edition totalled six issues. Batuz, do you understand? No?

Jacek Bochenski

The Batuz Foundation, with its headquarters in Buenos Aires (for Latin America), Washington (for North America), and Bad Ems (for Europe), as well as subsidiary branches in many American and European universities, has the task of promoting and maintaining the continuity of an international dialogue between important personalities in art, literature, the humanities, and politics, on central contemporary topics. For information, contact Prof. Timothy Keating, Dean, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY 13820-4020.