

Speech by Jean-Pierre Michiels on The dangers of the far right in power for culture.

Summer University 2024 – Culture Seminar

First of all, I would like to excuse Amytess Girgis, who was supposed to be part of the panel of speakers but was prevented from attending due to her studies in political science.

At my side, Pablo Batalla is a historian, journalist and author of essays.

As far as I am concerned, I am the leader of the Movement of Communists of Wallonia-Brussels (in Belgium). I worked in a continuing education association (popular education) and although retired, I still remain active there. Finally, I am one of the coordinators of the Culture Network of the Party of the European Left.

France, thanks to an electoral system specific to it, has just escaped a victory for the National Rally announced since the European elections and in the first round of the legislative elections two weeks ago. Among all the reasons to rejoice at this defeat of the far right, the cultural sector can clearly do so, because one of the sectors that the far right primarily attacks when it comes to power is culture.

The far-right's conception of culture is restrictive because it rejects its universalism in favor of a "national", "regional", or even "local" culture in an assumed withdrawal into itself. It favors heritage over creation. It hates the mixing of cultures, the miscegenation that corresponds to its rejection of the other, especially immigrants.

Folklore, entertainment, classics in theatre, music and painting are its priorities... insofar as they constitute the national heritage protected from "contamination from abroad".

Its culture is essentially narrow and inward-looking. An example in Belgium where the far right is especially strong in Flanders, it has a high esteem for the painting of the famous Flemish painters (Rubens, Memling, Van Dijk whose Prado has a very rich collection) forgetting that these painters were often in contact with Italian painters and influenced each other. So there were already reciprocal cross-fertilizations at the time that contributed to the immense talent of these artists.

The far-right considers literature to be a danger. And as soon as it comes to power, it proceeds to withdraw books arbitrarily deemed suspect or of no interest. And in this sorting, it will give priority to national authors reputed to defend "Christian values", national or local (the land, traditions). It also considers poetry to be a minor art of no interest.

Culture is judged by the far-right as a luxury reserved for the privileged (the rich, the well-to-do, the establishment) who can afford it. Culture is expensive, too expensive, and we must therefore drastically cut spending. It puts pressure on programming by reducing subsidies for theatres, performance halls and festivals, etc.

For the far right, artists are not workers in their own right. It is therefore opposed to the creation of a status that would allow intermittent workers to be paid as unemployed, for actors and actresses when they are not performing in public, but also for artists when they create (a book, a play, a song, a painting, etc.), when they rehearse or record, all obscure,

invisible activities that are carried out without the presence of an audience but which constitute the essence of the creation of a work, of the work done by the artist-creator...

Imagine the setback that this could represent in countries that have made recent progress in this area, such as Belgium. Imagine the message sent to governments that are still reluctant to move forward with granting a status for artists.

In the field of the media, the far right intends to privatize public channels "in the name of freedom of expression". We can see what this can lead to, as in France where a billionaire openly close to the far right has appropriated important media such as Europe N° 1 and has created a television channel, CNEWS. They are entertainment channels, but they do not hesitate to take up the doxa of the far right and do not respect the balance (which is often very relative) between the different parties.

I will end with a quote from Marcel Hicter, a former Belgian socialist politician (Walloon) who has worked hard for an advanced cultural policy and is one of the founders of cultural policy in the French-speaking part of Belgium.

Culture is not a museum. It is a permanent desire to surpass oneself. It is the categorical refusal of our minds, of our hearts, to the future Dachau and Buchenwald (...) Culture is the affirmation of Freedom and Humanity.

This is the complete opposite of the culture of the far right and fascism, I would add.