A LASTING PEACE THROUGH THE FEDERATION OF EUROPE: EXPOSITION AND CRITIQUE OF ST. PIERRE’S PROJECT

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

STATEMENT OF ST. PIERRE’S PROJECT

Never did the mind of man conceive a scheme nobler, more beautiful, or more useful than that of a lasting peace between all the peoples of Europe. Never did a writer better deserve a respectful hearing than he who suggests means for putting that scheme in practice. What man, if he has a spark of goodness, but must feel his heart glow within him at so fair a prospect? Who would not prefer the illusions of a generous spirit, which overleaps all obstacles, to that dry, repulsive reason whose indifference to the welfare of mankind is ever the chief obstacle to all schemes for its attainment?

I doubt not that many readers will forearm themselves with scepticism, as the best defence against the pleasure of yielding to conviction. I pity the melancholy mood which makes them take obstinacy for wisdom. On the other hand, I trust that every generous spirit will share the thrill of emotion with which I take up the pen on a subject which concerns mankind so closely. I see in my mind’s eye all men joined in the bonds of love. I call before my thoughts a gentle and peaceful brotherhood, all living in unbroken harmony, all guided by the same principles, all finding their happiness in the happiness of all. And, as I dwell upon this touching picture, the idea of an imaginary happiness will cheat me for a few moments into the enjoyment of a real one.

In these opening words, I could not refrain from giving way to the feelings which filled my heart. Now let us do our best to reason coolly. Resolved as I am to assert nothing which I cannot prove, I have the right to ask the reader in his turn to deny nothing which he is unable to refute. It is not so much the reasoners I am afraid of as those who, without yielding to my proofs, steadily refuse to bring any arguments against them.

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No man can have thought long upon the means of bringing any Government to perfection without realising a host of difficulties and obstacles which flow less from its inherent nature than from its relation to its neighbours. The result of this is that the care which ought to be given to its internal welfare has to be largely spent upon its outward security; and we are compelled to think more of providing for its defence against others than of making it as good as may be in itself. If the social order were really, as is pretended, the work not of passion but of reason, should we have been so slow to see that, in the shaping of it, either too much, or too little, has been done for our happiness? that, each one of us being in the civil state as regards our fellow citizens, but in the state of nature as regards the rest of the world, we have taken all kinds of precautions against private wars only to kindle national wars a thousand times more terrible? and that, in joining a particular group of men, we have really declared ourselves the enemies of the whole race?

If there is any way of reconciling these dangerous contradictions, it is to be found only in such a form of federal Government as shall unite nations by bonds similar to those which already unite their individual members, and place the one no less than the other under the authority of the Law. Even apart from this, such a form of Government seems to carry the day over all others; because it combines the advantages of the small and the large State, because it is powerful enough to hold its neighbours in awe, because it upholds the supremacy of the Law, because it is the only force capable of holding the subject, the ruler, the foreigner equally in check.

Such a form of Government is to some extent a novelty, and its principles have been fully understood only by the moderns. But it was not unknown among the ancients. The Greeks had their Amphictyons and the Etruscans their Lucumonies; the Latins had their *féria* and the Gauls their city-leagues; the Achæan League gave lustre to the death-struggles of Greece. But not one of these Federations was built up with half the wisdom which has gone to the making of the Germanic Body, of the Helvetic League, or of the States General. And if these Bodies are still so scarce and so far from the perfection which we feel they might attain, that is because the realisation of the good invariably falls short of the ideal; because, in politics as in morals, the more we enlarge our knowledge, the more we are forced to recognise the extent of our misery.

In addition to these formal Confederations, it is possible to frame others, less visible but none the less real, which are silently cemented by community of interest, by conformity of habits and customs, by the acceptance of common principles, by other ties which establish mutual relations between nations politically divided. Thus the Powers of Europe constitute a kind of whole, united by identity of religion, of moral standard, of international law; by letters, by commerce, and finally by a species of balance which is the inevitable result of all these ties and, however little any man may strive consciously to maintain it, is not to be destroyed so easily as many men imagine.

This concert of Europe has not always existed; and the special causes which produced it are still working to preserve it. The truth is that, before