

19.05.2005

**Georges Corm**

## **"Laicism Should Not Be Seen as a Specifically Western Doctrine"**

**Georges Corm, economist and former finance minister of Lebanon, doesn't spare the Islamic world criticism, but he also says that the West is far less rationalist than is commonly believed. By Alexandra Senfft**

The former finance minister of Lebanon, Georges Corm, argues that both the West and the East suffer from a fear of chaos, which leads them to censor any critical thinking which could lead to change.

He's formulated sober, solid arguments, asking provocative, sharp questions and demands a fundamental renewal of fossilised structures of thinking – in East and West.

Corm's first work, entitled "Occident, la fracture imaginaire," was first published in 2002 by Édition La Découverte in Paris and has now appeared in an expanded and revised edition in German.

### **Hypocrisy, decadence, corruption**

In his book Corm concentrates on the lack of symmetry between the Western and the Islamic worlds. He doesn't spare the region from which he comes from criticism. He attacks "its unmatched decadence, its religious hypocrisy, the small-mindedness of its politicians, the material and political corruption of its regimes, its astonishing inflexibility."

At the same time, he believes that the widespread cliché that the West is a glowing example of rationalism while other societies are the opposite is a myth. Corm, who is a consultant for international organisations and central banks, regards the assumed split between East and West – as described in Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations" – to be an artificial creation.

The idea serves "highly mundane power interests and geopolitical conflicts."

Western observers and even experts on Islam, he says, have interpreted religious and ethnic factors as the main causes of the wrongs of the world.

"The more the split deepened between, on the one side, the material wealth and the overwhelming technical progress of the West and, on the other side, the stagnation of other civilisations," he writes, "the more the West took refuge in an anthropological way of thinking which created essentialist theories under which the differences were the expression of an unbridgeable gulf. One gets the impression that, when it considers its own identity, the West considers its differences with Islam as something sacred."

Corm says the "West" – and by that he means "what the United States has added in power, technology and ideas to its European place of origin and its culture" – may have brought about a separation of the secular and the religious, but it still remains strongly influenced by mythic and religious ways of seeing the world.

### **Neo-Liberalism is the "credo" of the West**

In the USA, for example, it's not laicism which is the fundamental political principle, but freedom of religion: "In God we trust." And in the same way as communism was a replacement for religion among those who followed it, the economic "credo", i.e. belief, of neo-Liberalism has the same effect today.

As it searches for its own identity, the West reduces complex phenomena to their lowest common denominator; the sacred has been taken from its position as the core of the church and of the life of the faithful, and transferred to ethnicity and nationality.

The definition of the sacred, says Corm, should also take into account social and political issues as well as regional interests.

"Analysts scarcely ever deal with mundane factors like the power games of local elites, the smuggling and drug-dealing carried out by mafia-like organisations, or organised crime," writes Corm. "The main thing they want to do is to determine identity."

The Palestinian suicide bombers, for example, may fight under an Islamic banner, but their real motive is the liberation of their country – an aim which has nothing to do either with religion or with internationalist militant Islamism.

### **Reinvigorating the spirit of the enlightenment**

"The difference in the speed of the spread of technical progress makes globalisation more complicated," writes Corm, "since it leads to a different level of development in the various regions of the world or within individual social groupings. The differences in the rhythm of development lead here and there to cracks in an imaginary dividing line, which put a brake on globalisation and which found their most spectacular expression so far in the events of 11th September."

Corm says, as long as both the West and the East continue to nurture this imaginary split which threatens us all, and as long as both insult the other with the old clichés, there'll be no progress.

Corm regrets the decline of politics and calls on the West to reinvigorate the spirit of the Enlightenment, instead of withdrawing to binary patterns of good and evil.

That includes practising a real laicism, since, he writes, only when laicism "is deprived of its status as a 'specifically' Western and Christian doctrine," will it win universal acceptance.

"International law must reject any religion which is based on theological interpretations, whether they are those of Judaism, Islam, Christianity or any other religion." Only then will it become credible and generally effective.

He says he's discovered that there are inadequacies in the way technical and social subjects, which are needed for the development of today's world, are taught at schools and universities: "The dominance of technicians and technocrats, money and media, which turn citizens into passive consumers and unthinking electoral machines – all that should be enough reason to rethink curricula at every level of education."

"Science, technical progress and politics must experience a new cooperative renaissance" in order not just to make the world more modern, but to make it more humane.

But Georges Corm does not say where the initiative for this synthesis should come from, and, if it did come, whether its morals and ethics would have the power to weaken the worldwide influence of capital.

But since he's not exactly optimistic, his readers are likely to share his fear that we are in for depressing times, not least because we tend, as he puts it, "to confuse power and good sense."

*Alexandra Senfft*

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*Translation from German: Michael Lawton*

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