

CULTURE REPORT

EUNIC Yearbook 2011

EUROPE'S FOREIGN CULTURAL RELATIONS

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EUNIC YEARBOOK 2011



Cultural relations are the glue that holds alliances together. The geopolitics of the 21st century mean we need to see a revival of cultural diplomacy. China and India are already expanding their external cultural policies. Despite Europe's huge cultural diversity, the EU has still not developed an adequate cultural strategy for its foreign policy. The establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) provides an opportunity to tighten up and co-ordinate the EU's existing cultural foreign policy. In this edition of the Culture Report, 30 authors from 20 different countries examine what this all means.

Foreword: Crisis and new awakenings *by Sebastian Körber*

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Peeking through the open window When young Arab activists manned the barricades during the Arab spring with the help of social networks like Twitter and Facebook, they were demanding the same rights and freedoms as their European counterparts. Now it is time for Europe to turn its attention to its immigrant population and find ways to help them become more integrated into society. By Hela Khamarou



Culture can be a facilitator, a means of projecting a new, positive image of Europe. But the question must be asked: what is this image exactly? When looking at Europe as a whole it is clear that there is a lack of a common culture that unites all Europeans. Europe is an artificial construct that is first and foremost economically-driven. Europe is not America. There is no such thing as the United States of Europe, no matter how much we like the sound of it. We are simply not there yet. But in that case, where are we? How does this very complex continent perceive itself?

We tend to believe that “culture” is a tool that brings people together, smooths out differences, and builds bridges to encourage dialogue and unity. In this sense,

we believe culture to be a positive phenomenon. But it can also work to underscore differences and act as a kind of centrifugal force. Xenophobia is nourished, at least in part, by fear and cultural differences. Ignorance often goes hand-in-glove with an incomplete or erroneous sense of one’s cultural self. One needn’t go very far back in time to find that worst-case scenarios are rather more common than the name suggests. Our shared culture is steeped in a shared history that just shows us what not to do. At best it can serve as a signpost for the future.

History is what glues Europeans together, for better or worse. From Greek philosophy, Roman savoir-faire, Christianity, Renaissance, colonial expansion, industrialization and wars –more than we care to remember, we are identified, admired, and feared by others on the basis of our past. Over the centuries, European culture developed into a patchwork of overlapping influences that were at times complementary but also at times conflicting.

European thought is based on different religious and secular philosophical currents. Traditions such as the Enlightenment, Naturalism, Romanticism and, more importantly, democracy have all helped to shape how Europe perceives itself today. While disagreeing about many issues, all 27-member states of the Eu-

ropean Union today agree on the notion of democracy as a central pillar of their shared political life, including freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom of representation.

An alternative to the New World

Culture can be defined as the relations that people have with one another, which includes both contrasts and similarities. In this respect, Europe portrays itself as being different, more authentic, and grounded in a long history, unlike its cousin across the Atlantic. The “Old Continent” is presented as an alternative to the “New World”.

Yet talk of a common culture as such represents a dilemma. It is a myth – how much of it is real, and how much of it is merely the product of how we like to perceive ourselves? And if this idea of Europe is merely an aspiration, what can be done to translate its moral and cultural values into reality?

In this respect we have more questions than clear answers. And what should we use as a benchmark for defining an entity such as the European Union as an alternative to the political practices of others? Is it better to compare Europe’s democratic achievements with those of its contemporary peers or with those of earlier, less accomplished versions of itself? A case in point might be the neighbouring Arab world, where European nations have not always been willing to help when it co-

mes to implementing their own democratic ideals.

The unprecedented revolutions in Arab countries have left many European policy makers scrambling for an apt response. When young Arab activists manned the barricades with the help of social networks like Twitter and Facebook, they were demanding the same rights and freedoms as their European counterparts. A recent article by Bernard Lewis in the *Jerusalem Post* cited growing sexual frustration as a key factor in these upheavals. In this respect, the deciding factor might well have been the ideas, cultural values, and perhaps the material accomplishments of Western culture. More and more people were taking a peek through the open window afforded by satellite TV, the internet and cheap telecommunications, and at the same time it served to reinforce Europe’s sense of self.

Attitudes towards the United States also contribute towards finding a sense of identity. Europe tends to compare itself favourably to the USA, a view reinforced by American behaviour. Visiting Europe is seen as a sophisticated thing to do and has become almost a rite of passage for many (well-heeled) American students. The US produces blockbuster movies, to be watched while ingesting copious amounts of popcorn; Europe produces ‘films’, to be discussed over a glass of wine. Americans eat McDonalds, whereas, in 2011, French gastronomy was included in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage programme. But globalisation has cast a shadow over this European uniqueness. Economic imperatives trump cultural identity, which seems increasingly at risk of becoming more uniform and standardised across the world.

“Our shared culture is steeped in a shared history that just shows us what not to do.”

Despite remaining a cultural attraction, in economic terms Europe is considered less appealing than the USA or emerging countries such as India, China and Brazil. The 'old' ways of doing things involving intricate social legislation, worker protection, and indeed, Europe's pre-occupation with safeguarding its distinctive cultural heritage, tends to be viewed negatively in the world's boardrooms. The recent financial and economic crises have highlighted these issues. The cover of the August edition of Time magazine proclaimed: "The Decline and Fall of Europe". The continent does seem to be at a pivotal moment in its history. With the monetary union under pressure, young Eurosceptics protesting in Spain, Greece, and Portugal, and the rise of populist politicians who are either sceptical or downright hostile towards Europe, is it time for us to say goodbye to the old order?

A European Eldorado

One of the biggest challenges facing Europe today is how to integrate its many immigrant cultures. New population groups with different cultures, customs and traditions have arrived in Europe, hoping to find an Eldorado. But reality tells a different story. The waves of migrants have engendered a sense of fear among native inhabitants, who are not willing to see their own cultural foundations altered by people with different religions and customs. Here culture is not serving to connect but to divide. Politicians have tried for decades to deal with this issue, but with no great success. Europe is not Canada, where the policy was to assimilate migrants into the culture of

their adopted land. Immigrants were asked to shed their past and embrace a new culture. This was the underlying idea of the policy of "assimilation".

It should be remembered that, in practice, European policies have not served to extend across national borders in social terms, despite the insistence that multiple cultures and bi-national citizens would enrich our continent. When it comes to accepting ethnic pluralism, there is a huge gap between word and deed. Countries such as France fear they will lose their own culture because of the arrival of migrants with totally different beliefs and customs. I am of course referring to Islam, which is seen as the biggest threat to Europe as an entity. Even though Muslims follow a different religion with different traditions and customs, I do not believe they present a risk to European identity.

The notion of identity in itself is not set in stone. I also believe we should not speak of "an identity" but of "identities". We have multiple identities. Cultural crossovers should not be seen as a danger to a nation's stability but rather as a way to strengthen it. It is a phenomenon that is based on the notion of constructivism as a theory of international relations. Of course, some types of "baggage" can be more bulky and troublesome than others. But identities adapt and continue to grow. Any "baggage" brought along from the "other world" does not have to conflict with what is already in place. Immigrant populations are not hatching subversive plans; instead the reality is much simpler and less dramatic – they are just seeking a better life.

Of course it takes time for immigrants to adapt to the culture of their adopted country. Imagine you are fleeing a war

zone as a refugee and trying to find a peaceful land that will provide a better future for your children, while having to cope with a foreign language, strange customs and different ways of dressing. All this takes a huge amount of time. I remember members of my family telling me how shocked they were when they first went into a supermarket in France after arriving from Iraq, and saw the vast range of products on offer. It was something they were totally unused to, and they needed time to adapt. It's like a child going into the Harrods toy department at Christmas for the very first time and staring wide-eyed, caught between temptation and the fear of being punished for touching a toy. The child is just flabbergasted. This may be a trivial example, but it shows the importance of details when sketching out the bigger picture.

A real lose-lose situation

But it is more difficult to adapt to a new culture, (and here I don't mean in any way to suggest that migrants should abandon their native culture), if the country they are settling in rejects them out of fear. Then it becomes a real lose-lose situation. Our refusal to accept other cultures just makes the situation more difficult than it already is.

“Immigrant populations are not hatching subversive plans; instead the reality is much simpler and less dramatic – they are just seeking a better life.”

In 2010 France held a countrywide debate on what constituted “French culture”, spurred on by fear that their culture could be shattered by one specific community: the Muslims living in France. I should stress that those Muslims who were targeted by people of a particular political leaning (the right and far right) were in fact French citizens. This made it all the more shocking when it was claimed that they did not adequately conform to French culture.

As a result, immigrants tend to experience discrimination and rejection in their “Promised Land” and become alienated both from their own and their host culture. This alienation can then develop into a very real threat. Other cultures – which were originally considered as something positive – start to break down into ever smaller units and this has a direct effect on the social cohesion which is the foundation of whole societies.

Our world seems more and more interconnected and interdependent in all domains of human activity, but international relations and inter-cultural dialogue do not seem to have been strengthened to the same extent, or at least inadequately. Ever since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, misunderstandings and mistrust have increased on both sides. America's war on Islamic terrorism has infected public discourse in Europe. Populists have risen to the challenges of cultural diversity by sowing division and reinforcing stereotypes. Instead of dialogue they have espoused confrontation. And their message is being heard all over the world.

We are facing a multitude of challenges, but Europe is still seen as a place

where it is possible to have a good life. Every year it attracts tens of thousands of migrants. Instead of imposing assimilation on the new arrivals, we should favour the notion of integration without obliterating the immigrants' own culture. It should be viewed as enrichment when Europe's identity – whatever that may be – is enhanced by a greater variety of cultural expression and cultural identities, not as an obstacle to social cohesion.

Our current challenge is to tackle obstacles through the promotion of mutual understanding. It has always been the case that ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity constitutes the very identity of Europe. This does not obviate the need to build on common values and, if necessary, investigate and redefine what constitutes these values. Education plays a key role and should be used to build bridges between cultures.

Europe's values and ideals are exactly that: values and ideals. We still have a long road ahead when it comes to putting them into practice. By presenting these ideals to ourselves and to the outside world we should not delude ourselves into thinking we have already achieved them. However, this should also not prevent Europe from continuing to promote these values and ideals. Europe is now just one world power among many and it should lead by example, not by imposing restrictive measures.

Hela Khamarou was born in Paris of Iraqi parents, and she still lives and works in the French capital as a freelance journalist and author.