

## New European Narratives

### Summary:

The loss of the 'grand narratives' – which was a giant liberating step in human history, needed to overcome 'total' ideologies – hasn't made the question of 'meaning' redundant. On the contrary: 'meaning' is precious – particularly in societies under pressure.

Any new narratives of meaning need to reflect the freedom and experience, as well as the aspirations, of individuals – their 'roots' and 'wings'. Yet narratives do not stop at individuals only. Narratives of a good future need to be *shared*.

Today, narratives of meaning are a matter of culture more than anything else; and a matter for *us*, citizens assuming responsibility.

'Culture roots us in our past and enables us to imagine and create our future...'<sup>1</sup> - And Europe's history makes it a very special place to share meaning, freely, to redevelop 'roots' together and to grow 'wings' to fly.

### The term 'narratives'

Narratives are imaginative stories, *imaginaires* that reflect and generate convincing ideas, sometimes utopian dreams; they elicit and disseminate strong opinions or knowledge, and encourage collaboration. They play an important role in the processes of memory, belonging and self-identification, sometimes constructively, sometimes also destructively. People unite around shared meaning and can feel motivated to act.

Narratives shared by people can inspire or celebrate change; they refer to common convictions and aspirations for goals deemed worthwhile, values that help make choices. Narratives are not only 'theoretical', or purely 'constitutional' 'texts': they are based on knowledge that appeals to the emotions, expresses passion for 'the common good'.

There, in their bonding power, lies their strength; and their danger as well. They satisfy the desire for meaning and (at their best) human dignity and beauty too. Enlightened narratives also reflect fruitful processes of confrontation and respect for difference. While history is full of tragic totalitarian and 'exclusive' narratives, the human hunger for freedom has always invented ways to overcome oppression, in struggles based on courageous dissent. Respectful and critical narratives create inclusive bonds, inviting others to join, but never blindly. Such narratives are the work of imaginative citizens: the stakeholders of new meaning.

### The power and weakness of narratives

Some narratives influence the course of life for many; powerful stories that 'make history'. These encapsulate individual and collective memories, fears and hopes, and project a different way of life. Individual voices, known or not yet heard, flow together and constitute a swarm of change.

Just 20 years ago, in 1989, the almost poetic dreams of a few powerless 'Middle-European' writers and artists such as Vaclav Havel came true, despite seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Jones Expressive Lives. Demos 2009

impossible conditions for change. The energy unleashed by *Solidarnosc*, as led by intellectuals, artists and workers, liberated Poland from totalitarian rule. Poland joined the EU 15 years later. Not all such stirrings gained full momentum, their catchwords (like 'perestroika and glasnost') soon evaporated, and their protagonists re-appeared – cynically – in commodified form. And so we have 'Vodka Gorbachev'.

In another domain, that of the interaction between different cultures, seemingly abstract concepts like Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' were invigorated by *Realpolitik* and used and misused in the context of urban strife and even contemporary wars (Iraq). The concept of 'multiculturalism' which, ever since the 80s, had helped pacify cities like Birmingham, was translated into ethnic segregation and became a weapon for populists after 9/11. And so we have virtually a new narrative of xenophobia and 'homeland security'.

### **The end of 'total' narratives v the democratic European narrative**

Revisiting the last century with even greater distance, the power of two totalitarian narratives and practices (socialist and national-socialist) still makes us shiver: 'Volk, Rasse and Lebensraum' on the one hand, 'dictatorship of the proletariat' on the other. 1945 ended one, and 1989 the other, thanks to those who believed in - and fought for! - the narrative of democracy and market economy.

After WWII, Europe started its new career, predominantly through a step-by-step post-national intertwining of national interests to prevent war. The new narrative included commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law, firmly maintained by bold political and intellectual leaders. As much as it started top-down, gradually the new generations subscribed to it, as a narrative rooted in the experience of war and destruction but also in the success of the (social) market economy. People trusted the project in large numbers and for a long period of time. In essence, they knew what it meant and what they gained from it. They had confidence in it.

This confidence has partly been eroded, despite the many important developments made possible by the EU. Trust has become - measurably - fragile, for many reasons; the European narrative isn't working any longer, at least in the eyes of many. There is little enthusiasm, or readiness to engage. The politics of fear find fertile ground.

### **Forgetting, 'splitting' and the *Neue Unuebersichtlichkeit***

However impressive the founding narratives and the success stories of 'Europe' have been, young people today might think Jean Monnet is a brand of Champagne. History is forgotten or not properly taught, and the young seem to take some past achievements for granted. It's just another time – new wings, new roots, and today's concerns....

Yet memory is crucial for the destiny of narratives. Some memories lose their emotional relevance with the shift of generations; many young Czechs are innocently ignorant of what happened in 68: 'Was it the year of Woodstock?' (That was 69!) Other memories, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, do still resonate with many, East and West. Yet the politics of fear also resonate, igniting or increasing anxiety about East-West (labour-) mobility: 'Stay where you are.'

We also tend to forget what happened synchronously. 1989 marked not only the end of Soviet rule in Central Europe; it was also the year of the Fatwa against Salman Rushdie: the first writing on the wall, which developed into hate narratives for decades.

Leaders – or are they stewards? – also fade in public memory. Such is becoming the fate of Jacques Delors, whose masterpiece, the Euro, ‘made life more expensive’, people argue. There is not much evidence that the single currency brought noticeably greater cohesion to Europeans.

What is not (cannot be) forgotten is ‘externalised’, split, stored somewhere in the box called ‘I don’t understand’: the unthinkable – war in Europe after 45 – happened; nationalist narratives blew up neighbourly relations in Yugoslavia. And EU-Europe was quite helpless.

Many fundamentally important questions remain unanswered, for example why religion re-appeared on the political stage. Muslims were mass murdered in Srebrenica, and Muslim fundamentalists led by new leaders like Bin Laden started dominating the global agenda.

There is a good deal of confusion in the minds of people, and in the realm of decision making. And several ways to describe the *Neue Unuebersichtlichkeit*. In fact, what we have in common, at least in Europe, is the weakness (or absence even) of meaningful narratives.

### **Meaningful narratives**

‘Disentangling certainties’ has been one of the key aspects of continuous enlightenment; scepticism as an antidote to totalitarian seduction. The end of the old megalomaniac ideologies signalled the maturity of societies – something that is so precious that it needs to be actively nurtured; we cannot take it for granted, ever. It is very clear, for example, that the ‘capitalist counter-narrative’ has just demonstrated again its enormous risk to fail and lead to global economic collapse.

On the other hand, the amount of uncertainty and even confusion which people can deal with seems to have its limitations. At a certain point, disorder and unrest take over, and injustices arise that cannot be countered. We find ourselves adrift, with no-one at the helm.

As ever in times of missing narratives, issues of (good) leadership become pressing. This has been very much the case since 89. In most EU countries uncertainty fuelled extremism, with most of the decent parties struggling to fill the void of democratic leadership.

The EU had a particularly difficult time in that scenario of post-89 enlargement and necessary ‘deepening’, and much went wrong. Brussels was busy sacking President Jacques Santer’s Commission in 1999, the very year that NATO bombed Belgrade and – on another note – exploding Google moved to Silicon Valley. Artificial agendas of European competitiveness didn’t do the trick either. In 2000 the dubious ‘Lisbon agenda’ was launched, which still echoes more like a nostalgic ‘Fado’ than a promise.

Worse was to come. In 2001, the political fall-out of 9/11 had to be handled, and most Europeans understood that it was not handled well by that master of simple stories, G. W. Bush, but that Europe couldn’t stop him either. A few years later, the prime institutions of capitalism started crashing in the US, giving rise to a disease that spread to the remotest places. The paean of the market economy, one of the few remaining

master narratives, has faded, but with no clear alternatives as yet. Meanwhile, taxpayers are left to pay the bill for bailing out the banks, even as the banks start to make huge profits again.

Looking back at it, the post-89 picture is far from rosy; indeed, it is a rather chaotic one. But isn't it fair to say that it has always been like that: up and down? And that Hegel was eternally right when he said the pages of happiness are empty in the book of history? Didn't citizens always have to be damned good at forgetting or just not wanting to know?

### **Anything goes**

For most people in most EU countries it has been relatively easy to suppress the otherwise hugely disturbing awareness of disasters happening elsewhere – next door, in fact. In large parts of Europe, it has felt like being in a safe haven.

What gave rise to this happiness? Steady growth rates, improving health, social welfare, consumerism and a leisure society. This is not just an illusion, and there has been genuine good news, such as Finland's escape from its great post-89 depression (beautifully mirrored in Kaurismaeki's films) towards the 'Nokia/Pisa-country' of innovation and wealth, at least in many parts of Finland: accompanied, incidentally, by a growing disillusionment with the EU.

Somehow the average middle-class person in the EU got disengaged from politics. Complex decision-making was delegated to experts and politicians who could easily be blamed when things went wrong. Participation lost its ideological, faith-based, civilian aura, and was replaced by merry self interest. The 'fairy tale narratives' were largely individualistic and post-modern, value-free and seemingly happy. 'Anything goes.'

But does it? Ultimately, we are not at all sure. Some still hope so, under the (often misused) flag of 'liberalism' and scepticism. Others try to establish fundamental rules for the game, such as 'new nationalism'. Was post-modernity the end of history? It seemed to have been the end of the power of traditional authorities to imagine strong narratives for a good future. A few personalities, e.g. Pope John Paul II or stars like Bono, continued to serve that purpose - but for limited segments of society only.

We know now: many things *simply don't go*; or, if we aren't careful, *nothing will go anymore*. There is not much on offer to deal with the existential threats facing mankind and the global civil society – threats such as climate change, dwindling energy resources, 'wild capitalism', the lost balance between competitiveness and shared responsibilities. And ahead of us, we face issues of global governance, global peace and sharing; of freedom versus surveillance and control; of social equality and liberal values; of demography; of cultural diversity and the freedom of the arts versus homogenisation....

There is no way back to the 'good old times'. But what are the best ways forward?

### **Civic responsibility**

When Barack Hussein Obama – an icon of new leadership – was inaugurated, thousands gathered in liberal Amsterdam to view the event. They shared hope and enthusiasm, mainly; a few warned against messianic expectations. Most people expected *the* ultimate rhetorical thunderstorm. But Obama quietly unfolded some very serious stuff, and appealed to citizens: 'There is work to be done... the time of protecting

narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions — that time has surely passed.... What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility.'

In fact it was a speech about 'the price and the promise of citizenship', the civic paradigm pushed for by someone who is unrivalled as a model of a democratic credible leader. Without the active participation of the many informed and concerned citizens, without our commitment to shape public life, to act jointly, coherent and legitimate policies cannot be developed, or will fail.

### **The European Paradigm**

Compared with most regions of the world, Europe, more precisely the EU, still has unique advantages in organising the existential balances between freedom and equality, 'capital' and 'labour', public and private, elitist and popular culture, diversity and unity, etc. However, the processes of erosion didn't stop at the Schengen border: global trends are affecting markets and values; expectations are high, trust and confidence are relatively low.

Ultimately, a triple challenge faces Europe and its citizens:

- Global competitiveness (not to become a museum of diversity for the rest of the world)
- Global responsibility and sharing (v. post-colonial domination or 'neutralism')
- Meaning, values, and culture within a transnational democracy

Europe can be home for all its diverse citizens and cultures, but there isn't yet a strong European civil society. Europe is a good place for sharing roots and finding wings to 'fly', but there isn't much of a European public sphere yet. Europe has been, and can continue to develop as, a model for organising effective democracy beyond the nation-state; yet the project Europe isn't owned strongly enough by its citizens. Europe has the capacity to shape globalisation rather than be its object. Yet it can fail on many fronts. Its success isn't taken for granted. Hard work and clear-cut proof of efficiency is one requirement; shared beliefs another. Europe needs new narratives.

### **A community of difference in need of new narratives**

*It is that simple.* Efficiency, even if abundant, isn't enough to create 'meaning'. And without shared meaning, efficiency itself will founder. The more complex things get, the more commonality is needed. Techniques of governance – even control – don't work without trust. Trust requires the successful weaving together of individual aspirations to form a social fabric. Trust requires knowledge, understanding, proximity, hospitality, identification.

*It is that complicated.* The European founding narrative has lost its urgency for many (mostly young) people – not its meaning, though. The EU – as the embodiment of the project Europe – isn't loved, isn't perceived or actively supported as an agent of wellbeing; it is felt as 'cold', too big to understand, too alien to identify with, too distant to influence. Often it's seen as a necessary evil.

Europe has some positive connotations still. There is, perhaps, even an intuitive 'pride' in being European. People appreciate Europe's 'intercultural respect' in its foreign policies, its social standards and cultural diversity policies, its regard for environmental and climate matters, for freedom and the rule of law. And they urge for more of the same.

This 'post-modern pride' usually grows when Europeans go abroad or witness the 'dangerous simplicity' ruling elsewhere (G.W. Bush). There is even a sense of solidarity when obvious disasters call for it; there is some sense of belonging to Europe – an awareness of the tragic lessons from our history. It may even be more widespread than ever before.

However, this appreciation, even pride, and this sense of belonging are not connected to the concrete reality of the European project as it unfolds day by day; not strong enough for a felt commonality, responsibility and participation.

There is a clear deficit of community-building stories, images and even rituals in public spheres: we need to develop post-national narratives of a common future. And there are many good reasons for this deficit, one being that we have – thank God – learned the lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: to defend the right to remain rational when it comes to political emotions, and be utterly sceptical in public (then national) affairs. We don't want shared power without the strongest possible commitment to diversity; we don't want just another empire. On the contrary, one of the achievements of the EU is its deliberate 'sobriety' after the catastrophes of nationalism and communism.

*It is complex, but simply put:* Europe, the EU, is a very advanced, blessed 'community of difference'. It deserves the best possible narratives of this community of difference, told by its citizens.

Future European narratives cannot and should not simply be translated from the nation states - which of course remain the first address of governance. We have not yet discovered or invented the *post-national community markers* that could strike a balance between community and difference. We don't have the language yet for a reality that is only slowly emerging. How do we *replace 'sameness as the glue' by 'difference as the glue'?*

New European narratives will encapsulate the absolutely vigilant notion of critique, and dissent in lively and controversial public spheres. Only then will successful narratives end the 'blame game', and help build up a transnational civil society; they will 'work' when commitment is shared and responsibility translated into participation. They will by nature be cultural narratives, expressions of the 'demos'.

### **Cultural narratives and the role of the arts**

Culture is about meaning. Cultural narratives – built up by the many 'stories', *imaginaires*, expressions of individuals and groups; 'expressive lives'<sup>2</sup> – constitute meaning, inspiring, challenging, shared. These voices from below - all too often unheard, authentic, vulnerable, provoking, moving, shocking, beautiful - provide the means for meaning: content.

Content is not just a commodity. 'Content is culture. The currency through which we build a sense of who we are.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Demos 2009

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Jones, Expressive lives, Demos 2009

Imagination, the ‘imaginative’ power of culture, opens the realm of complexity more than any other area of life. Innocence goes with doubt and irony; hope with anger; cultural expression and interaction allows for open communication as opposed to ideological simplification. Authenticity admits the significance of non-linear, lateral thinking.

Cultural narratives, woven from innumerable human voices, can bear a utopian potential: they can project the best aspirations into a future realm of practice and politics. Arts and culture empower people to think freely, to imagine the unimagined, to feel responsible across borders and boundaries. Artists in particular offer a wealth of unseen perspectives and unexpected pathways of human exploration. Art is the most beautiful form of freedom - at the very heart of the idea of Europe. Art is one of the most important sources of knowledge, too.

‘As politics, the economy and society go through momentous change, we need spaces in which to renegotiate values, to express our beliefs and to encounter those of others more than ever. We need seriously to investigate the roles that culture and creativity play in our lives. Culture must be understood as the grand calculus of our decisions, choices and values past and present. Creativity is the means by which we form, shape and renegotiate it.’<sup>4</sup>

Cultural policy therefore is ‘about providing the opportunity for citizens to take an active role in shaping the culture of which they are part.... Cultural policy makers and practitioners have the responsibility both to enable this expression and reflect the values behind it as forms of citizenship.’

### ***ECF wants to INSPIRE, ENGAGE, EMPOWER***

We at the European Cultural Foundation want to inspire citizens to engage in building a shared future in Europe. Our remit is culture. We believe that culture matters: art and culture empower us to imagine alternatives, which is necessary for making choices, good choices. Engaging with art and culture asks the essential questions, frees up critical *and* utopian potential, and builds ‘narratives’ of meaning.

- We promote cultural expression and interaction and help stimulate and amplify stories, images, songs, performances; vital expression and artistic work of excellence – thus we contribute through our support to a body of narratives for a good future
- We stimulate and share reflection and interaction processes. Meaningful narratives of a good future need to draw on different sources of knowledge. We help to connect them, link inspirational ideas and people, and voices that are all too often unheard
- We focus on two challenges: citizen/stranger<sup>5</sup>, and citizen/neighbour<sup>6</sup> – and use the results to contribute to convincing narratives of a diverse and good neighbourly Europe
- We connect practice with policies, and advocate for adequate culture policy frameworks – frameworks that empower new narratives.

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Jones

<sup>5</sup> Putting emphasis on young people’s *imaginaires*

<sup>6</sup> Exploring good neighbourhood and hospitality with cultural actors of change