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CULTURE REPORT

EUNIC YEARBOOK 2018

Cultures of We?

Europe and
the search for a
new narrative

ifa | Steidl

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With Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, the world has changed. And so have the parameters for Europe's external relations. It is time to reconsider the continent's role in the world. How can it respond to isolationism and populism, but at the same time to wars in Syria and the Ukraine, the refugee crisis and climate change? What answers can Europe find to these challenges, while still defending its own democratic structures and the core values of human rights, multilateralism and international solidarity? How is it possible to bridge the divide within European societies and prevent the rise of populist movements and nationalism, xenophobia and extremism? What role can culture play in finding solutions to these problems? 30 contributors from 25 different countries seek answers to these and other questions.

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European Life is the name of the series of photographs by Berlin-based photographer Edgar Zippel that is featured in this edition. Zippel travelled around Europe capturing people as they went about their daily lives, unfurling Europe from its easternmost edges. The people appear strangely disconnected, fragile, turned in upon themselves. The scenery is rather sad, seldom glamorous. As we look at the photos, we ask ourselves “What’s worse, their mood or their situation?” They seem to be far removed from the vibrant continent that is Europe.

Cultural civil war We have to realise that Europe and the United States are currently in a state of cultural civil war. Our two authors argue that this war is not being fought with weapons but in people's minds. This war is not about territory, but about cultural hegemony. It's about defining who we are, what kind of society we live in and who we view as our friends.

By Jochen Hippler and Fatemeh Kamali Chirani



Europeans and Americans have for a long time enjoyed presenting themselves as examples of being civilised, cultured, and democratic. They liked to brag about the uniqueness of their Enlightenment, which finally lead to the codification of human rights, among other good things. During the Cold War, Westerners imagined themselves as the democratic counter-pole to Communist dictatorship, and after its end, as the libertarian alternative to ethnic chaos and Muslim extremism.

They were the good guys, which had to do with their values of liberalism, liberty and democracy, at least from their perspective. It

did not seem too relevant that from the perspective of former colonies such as Namibia, Algeria, Vietnam and so many other places, or from the perspective of Auschwitz, this self-perception might have raised some doubts. On the other hand, Westerners liked to imagine that their countries and values, or economic system, were a shining beacon to guide all of humanity. Historical 'progress' meant that after going through 'development', all other countries and cultures would become more and more like the West. The modernisation theory of the 1950s and 1960 expressed this expectation very openly, and the drunken triumphalism after the end of the Cold War produced many examples of such wishful thinking. A case in point was the extraordinary idea that even the whole of history had come to an end. Western values were the fulfilment of this human history.

Looking back, it is tempting to make fun of such excesses of cultural narcissism. But in fact, they were not funny. Self-delusion is sad, at least when we remind ourselves where the US and Western Europe ended up, culturally and politically, and how quickly.

What do 'Western values' mean today;

what are 'European values' in 2018 and beyond? The United States of America are – still – the most important country globally, and while we would hesitate to still call it 'the leader of the free world', it remains both democratic and Western. However, what happened to 'Western values'? US President Donald Trump seems to despise anything that is presented as such. He is recognisably proud to be racist. He is xenophobic, at least if people are not from Norway. Haiti, El Salvador and Africa are 'shithole countries', as far as he knows. Mexicans are drug dealers and rapists, Muslims even more dangerous. In his own country, Trump neither understands nor accepts the rule of law or the separation of powers.

He systematically considers lying to be his unalienable right, because his lies are 'alternative facts'; while everybody else is berated for not telling the truth (even if they do). He does not know and does not care about the importance of free media or a democratic opposition. He threatens a foreign dictatorship with – nuclear – destruction, and briefly thereafter turns around to stress, 'I probably have a very good relationship with Kim Jong-un'. Who happens to be the same person whom Trump had called the leader of a 'band of criminals' just before, and later said he was a 'madman' and 'a sick puppy'. It is 'probably' not reassuring that suddenly the US President thinks he has a good relationship with this gentleman.

There are two points here to make. Firstly, it is quite difficult to identify anything approximating the much-talked-about

'Western values' when this leader of the free world is talking – or texting. Secondly, the main problem is not Donald Trump as a person, but that his presidency is an indication of a major cultural shift in the US. Not too long ago it would have been unimaginable that a person could be elected to the US presidency who arrogantly bragged about his ability to 'grab pussy' because of his status as a celebrity. The cultural climate in the US has dramatically changed, and the effect on political values has been considerable.

Confused emotions and xenophobia

In Europe and beyond we can see corresponding developments as well. The Brexit campaign in Britain sacrificed reason, rational debate and logic to confused emotions and xenophobia. To a large extent it was a referendum against migration, with undertones of 'Britain first'. At the same time, we have governments in Poland and Hungary that are cultivating extreme nationalist discourses, again with strong xenophobic elements and anti-Muslim hysteria. Remarkably, they are also weakening the independence of the courts, restricting freedom of expression and aiming for a kind of democracy controlled from above. Playing by the rules and accepting the values of the European Union seems to be unacceptable to these EU members. In France, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and Italy we can see the rise of right-wing populist movements, which are doing very well at the polls. While all these movements and governments are different from each other,

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Global challenges

they still share several cultural (and political) characteristics. First of all, nationalism is a key element of their rhetoric. It is an ethnically defined nationalism, not based on a common political system, on democratic and inclusive values, but on ethnic identity. Secondly, this identity often connects to very conservative or right-wing cultural and political rhetoric. Gays and lesbians, progressives and minorities are excluded, ideologically. Thirdly, xenophobia is a key element. Foreigners in general and, in many cases, Muslims in particular are perceived as a threat, as invaders, or as a fifth column. Fourthly, while democracy generally is not officially rejected, it is limited, redefined, narrowed. Democratic culture is systematically undermined.

Such trends are not specific to EU member countries alone. Putin, Erdoğan and Duterte are part of the right-wing populism that has emerged on every continent. However, for the US and the EU the problem presents itself differently. Russia, Turkey and the Philippines have not systematically presented themselves as symbols of enlightenment, democracy, tolerance and liberalism, and have even less been perceived as such. But for the EU and the US, it is precisely these values that have been their trademark. Even NATO presents itself not just as a military alliance, but also as a community of values.

Three aspects are important. One, the EU's credibility is at stake. Lecturing other countries about human rights, freedom of speech, separation of powers and democratic values in general is much less convincing if several EU member countries are busy undercutting, debasing and questioning these va-

lues. Two, European identity will be affected, undercut, or deformed. The meaning of being 'European' (or 'Western') changes. While in the past the positive self-perception of (Western) Europe as civilised, democratic and enlightened was to some degree hyperbole and boasting, it was not completely wrong. Instead of describing reality, it was more of an ongoing project, still waiting for fulfilment.

A cultural civil war

Still, it was not wrong, but just pretending to have reached a destination when there was still a long way to go. Compared to the disasters and barbarism of the first half of the 20th century, its second half was much more democratic, more civilised. Compared to many other regions of the world, Western Europe was indeed a positive exception, and it still is. The possibility of further progress in this regard is now threatened from within. Three, taken together, democracy, liberalism, and human rights are under attack. This goes way beyond European borders. Putin, Erdoğan, Sisi, Assad, and the spectacular success of authoritarianism in China, among others, are globally undercutting the further expansion of these values. Now, with the US President, the Polish, Hungarian and other Western and EU governments joining in, together with relevant sectors of their populations, humane ways of organising human societies are on the defensive.

We have to accept that today Europe and the United States are going through a cultural civil war. This war is not being fought

violently and with weapons, but in the minds of people, at the grass roots of society, online, on radio and TV, and in print media. Major media channels are accused of 'conspiracy against the people' or of 'treason', are called *Lügenpresse* or 'fake news' if they happen to disagree with the cultural insurgents, or with Trump, Orban, Putin, or Erdoğan.

This war is not fought for territory but for cultural hegemony. It is about defining who we are, what kind of societies we are living in, and who our enemies are. In Germany, mainstream politicians have repeatedly been called *Volksverräter*, a term well-known from the Nazi dictatorship when it justified juridical mass murder.

We are in the midst of a cultural civil war, whether we like it or not. In some places, the insurgent barbarians have already conquered the citadel, while other hordes are still gathering noisily outside the gate and city walls. Appeasement will not work. Accommodation would be suicidal, culturally speaking. European and other Western intellectuals have to a large extent tamed themselves and restrict themselves to lamely lamenting the empty-headedness of the cultural insurgents. True enough. However, being a 'moron' (according to former US Secretary of State Tillerson) did not keep Donald Trump out of the White

What is needed today is not more of the fashionable self-pity, nor an arrogant ignoring of this ongoing conflict. A war strategy is needed that recognises the struggle will be long and require blood, sweat and tears. Which, in cultural terms, means it will require lots of effort, patience, and commitment.

House. Being demagogic fools did not keep these people out of the Austrian Government or the German parliament. What is needed today is not more of the fashionable self-pity, nor an arrogant ignoring of this ongoing conflict. A war strategy is needed that recognises the struggle will be long and require blood, sweat and tears. Which, in cultural terms, means it will require lots of effort, patience, and commitment.

Distant 'elites'

To win this war, two things are absolutely necessary: Firstly, we have to deal with the causes of the breakdown of political culture in Europe and the US. Secondly, we have to go on the offensive culturally, and re-conquer the hill of cultural hegemony. The second aspect will not be possible without the first.

The cultural insurgency did not happen by accident; it has reasons, which we should take seriously. These are often linked to a growing rejection of what is seen as distant 'elites'. The Trump phenomenon, Brexit, the rise of right-wing populists in Germany and elsewhere are an outflow of this rebellion against 'the elites', which are perceived as selfish, arrogant, and patronising. The problem is that this criticism is not without merit.

The problem in responding is that in many regards the criticism might be articulated in very crude ways and is linked to surprising scapegoats. (Attacking refugees and Muslims is often justified by stating that the 'elites' are acting for 'them' and not for 'us'.) But it is true that political, economic, and cultural

Global challenges

elites today are more distant from their own societies compared to 30 or 50 years ago. In addition, often our societies are regulated in a very opaque, anonymous und bureaucratic way, which can appear frustrating and incomprehensible. Years ago, even former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt publicly remarked that he could not even understand his public utility bills at all, which should be much easier than understanding the workings of our society and politics. Besides this, our elites, as far as they can be identified, seem to have lost both the ability and the interest in actually ruling their respective countries.

Muddling through

Globalisation (supported by those elites) has, after more than two generations, dramatically reduced the ability of the state to improve the economic and social wellbeing of society. To a large degree, power is no longer controlled by national governments (or the EU), but has moved to anonymous global markets. So, why should people vote for a government if it will be helpless to overcome social ills? No wonder participation in elections has weakened over time. Our rulers now seem to accept being administrators instead of political leaders. Muddling through has displaced confidently creating a better future. The New Deal, Social Democracy, the Welfare State, Socialism, even the *Freie Marktwirtschaft* are dead or dying, while nothing has taken their place. There is no credible

narrative for shaping our future politically, and no vision. Nobody can tell us where we want to go.

The elites are self-absorbed and playing games, but they are not doing their job of actually leading. Why should anybody trust them? The rebellion against 'elites' might therefore be crude, often silly, reactionary, and threaten many cultural values that have been achieved since the Enlightenment and especially after the Second World War, but it is not difficult to understand. Beneath all the racist trash and authoritarian nostalgia is buried a point that has to be appreciated – and dealt with – if the cultural civil war is to be waged seriously. Most Western elites are politically bankrupt, and do not even recognise it, since they themselves are doing well.

Connected to this is another key point: Western intellectuals have proven as sterile as the political and economic elites. Academics have largely turned into bureaucrats, sacrificing rigorous and critical thinking for self-referential and fashionable boredom. We, too, are just muddling through. Radical, critical analysis and visionary thinking is not at the centre of our work, but rather producing mainstream-oriented, acceptable contributions that either justify the status quo or are satisfied with minor adjustments. This is not good enough. European societies are in crisis, starting to stagnate, and rotten. Not just because Europe and the West are falling behind in global terms, but also the economy, education, and systems of governance are slowly eroding. The job of intellectuals should be to brutally and self-critically analyse the causes of decay, and then come up with creative and bold ideas for major reform. We need a vision for this, and only intellectuals can develop this. We as intellectuals are not just failing, we are not even trying. The result is a lack of orientation, a general confusion,

and an intellectual vacuum, which leaves the field wide open to demagoguery and right-wing populism.

The battle against the self-barbarisation of the West has begun. It is a struggle for the Western soul and identity. To succeed, the EU has to recognise its causes and the fact that the cultural insurgency is the result of the crisis of a political and, to some degree, economic system. It is a self-inflicted wound. Today, it is pressingly urgent to overcome the decay and to build a functioning strategy to create a better future for the affected societies, not just for the top ten percent. Intellectuals have the duty to devise and popularise a vision to achieve this, a vision that is both workable and provides meaning. With these two elements in place, the demagoguery and ideological idiocy we are exposed to today can be pushed back into the gutter. If Europe fails to do this, the battle will be lost. Not today, not tomorrow, but incrementally, over the next one or two generations. We can't let this happen.

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