

Looking for Europe in Mexico City

'These are interesting times for Europeans,' I thought as I leafed through a Mexican morning newspaper. I was far away from home and this only made the old mother continent more and more exotic. One tends to get a bit anxious when feeling one is European. I was sitting in a café in Mexico City's Coyoacán neighbourhood where artists like Frida Kahlo and the young communist Leon Trotsky found refuge. But the people around me were busier enjoying their mole pollo and tequila, than talking about art or politics. Europe for them was a faraway place with tourism, job opportunities, absurdly low crime rates and a lot of old people. With all of the restaurants surrounding me, the area has a European sensibility not easily found anymore in such places as Place Vendôme in Paris or Koninginnegalerij in Brussels. This atmosphere eased my Euro-worries a bit, and the late afternoon breeze made the distressing news even more tolerable. And actually I had just finished my lunch, so there was no real need to stress. One needs to relax a bit after good food. A newspaper will do. I read the article twice, just to make sure I was not missing the point: several European leaders couldn't agree on a monetary policy. What I understood with my knowledge of Spanish was that Europe was on the brink of collapse. It's déjà vu all over again. Europe: a proclamation of unity amid a field of lonely fools.

Fifty years after the start of the European project – a project that was founded on, as I learned in school, the rubble of collapsed economies and societies – it appeared that we were gearing up for a new free fall. The errors of the past are easily forgotten. Economics has no memory, let alone morality. A euro is a euro is a euro... But I was not in the mood for moralism: the coffee was too good and the sun too bright. My mind began to wander... Perhaps I could become a European refugee in Mexico City. That would surely add to my literary mystique. I could write postcards home depicting Zócalo square and Indian women. Have servants. Compose poems a la Kafavy.

A couple of months earlier, while trying to understand the subtle intricacies of the financial collapse, I reached out for the lessons of the past. Between two periods of writing, I like to read history – the fine art of knowing things better and explaining them well. *Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke the World* is an enthralling book, written by the Indian-American banker Liaquat Ahamed, about the lead up to the Great Depression. It tells of how the individual leaders of the National Banks of England, France, Germany and

the United States all pursued their own national interests while trying to find some economic equilibrium. In this way they failed to create a common ground. This absence of a global vision disrupted any form of financial stability and worsened the economic climate in Europe considerably. The outcome was: the big crisis of 1929, the collapse of Germany, Hitler, Holocaust. To understand something better, it's sometimes necessary to summarise. The overall lesson of the book was that each rooster may want to wake up the world but he also keeps a close eye on his hens. Economics is just like literature in that they are both universal and totally provincial at the same time. The German measures the worth of his euro with sausages, the Frenchman with cheese. It will be like this forever. But inflation doesn't know borders; unemployment has the habit to inflict other nationalities too. Behaving provincial feels like a suicide attempt.

Fast forward to 2011. Mexico City on a sunny afternoon. Time for a stroll. I walked into the first official home of Cortez, the conqueror of the Americas. Here the rape of the Americas began – as the Uruguayan writer and champion of anti-globalism Eduardo Galeano would surely agree. Large-scale rape needs oblivion, but also an administration and a building. Once counted, sins are sins no more. The Catholic Church knows this very well. The total administration of all good deeds is called heaven – and the debts can all go to hell. More and more, our lives are being re-cast as if they are dividable into profit or debt, with interest-rates becoming the thermometer of our human condition. We feel vulnerable because the stocks are not holding their grounds. Baudelaire's spleen et idéal and adagium, has turned into recession and credit crunch. For the rich this is not a big issue, since they are used to counting their blessings. And adding up their fortunes. But for the masses who are seen as numbers and who at the same time see their leaders wrestling with numbers, it's all too distressing. Underneath this confusion, anger is boiling up. The writer understands that without catharsis there can be no novel or work of art. Everything he makes has to, in one way or another, work to liberate. The nervous system cannot handle too much anxiety. European leaders seem oblivious of this. Not bringing problems to a fair and conclusive solution creates a space of fear, loathing and anger.

I sat in the thin shadow of the courtyard and felt time go through my veins. Thousands of years of history are contained in this courtyard. Europe is never far away in this part of the world. It's a small courtyard with a fountain that reminded me of older ones I had seen in Andalucía, and yet older ones I had seen in Fez and Rabat in Morocco. Architecture is the only grammar that cuts



through time and space without the need to change its rules to make it understandable.

Europe looks at itself as a house divided. Divided by long-running prejudices, France and Germany still rekindle the fierce hatred of old times, while at the same time trying to build a shared roof that won't collapse under the pressure. Meanwhile anger is slowly waking from its sleep...

Abdelkader Benali

ABDELKADER BENALI has been described as one of Netherland's leading writers. His debut novel Bruiloft aan zee (Wedding at Sea, 1996), which was translated into many languages, was a huge critical and commercial success. He received the prestigious Libris prize for literature for his second novel, De Langverwachte (The Long-Awaited, 2002). Besides novels and plays, Benali has published essays and reviews in respected Dutch newspapers and magazines, including De Volkskrant, Vrij Nederland and De Groene Amsterdammer.