

## Has Europe lost the plot?

### Europe's search for a new narrative imagination

What is Europe's narrative? Even opposite views often seem to reach similar conclusions: some say there is no European narrative, some say there are too many and, therefore, by this very diversity, they still amount to no shared meaning, solidarity, or identity. Especially since the start of the current Euro-crisis the public debate is dominated by those who argue that a fundamental lack of solidarity, well hidden perhaps during times of economic growth, has now been exposed, bursting like one of those financial bubbles that brought us here (although, not only us Europeans). There are many ways to submit this simple economic story to critical analysis, and authoritative voices have brought different conclusions to the debate.<sup>1</sup> Despite the amount of energy that has been devoted to the study of European identity, the main questions remain open and their premises unchallenged. Is diversity something to 'deal with' – as implied in the idea that many narratives are equal to no story – in the sense of mitigating, alleviating, *tolerating*, in narrative as well as in concrete social terms? Are the homogenising forces of globalization – but is this the only direction? – necessarily in contrast with 'preserving' identities that are specific and, therefore, particularistic? And is there still a clearly identifiable and corresponding distinction between the cosmopolitanism of elites and the localism of people (Castells 1997), that clearly places European narratives on the intellectualised, elite side of the spectrum, speaking only to the brain and not to the heart? Is this especially the case when narratives emanate out of the EU, a technocratic project pushed too far too fast, as the current economic and political crisis encourages many observers to argue? Perhaps what we need to understand first of all is this focus on narratives, to understand narratives; then, by looking at the concrete and evolving institutional narratives of Europe – as one of the possible viewpoints to be taken – we may start questioning how conclusions are commonly drawn as well as their premises, and suggest alternative ones.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the debate around the Euro-crisis on the pages of *Eurozine*, with the passionate if critical defences of Beck and Habermas among others: [www.eurozine.com/comp/focalpoints/eurocrisis.html](http://www.eurozine.com/comp/focalpoints/eurocrisis.html).

## Narrative turns

The emphasis on Europe finding its ‘story’ (see Wolfram Kaiser’s contribution ‘Narrating contemporary European history’) which animates the current public debate can be linked more broadly to shifts in how identities are conceptualised. In sociology, and in the social sciences, there has been a well documented ‘narrative turn’ (as well as a ‘cultural turn’ or ‘linguistic turn’), towards a focus on meanings and their dependency on contexts, rather than on structural (‘factual’) aspects in social life.<sup>2</sup> Identity, in particular, is seen as a narrative. That is, having realised that the concept of identity has essentialist overtones, and that when speaking of identities it is easy to forget that they are constructs based on self-understanding drawing from cultural repertoires and narratives available to people, the focus has shifted to the latter, to the narratives. So to the fact that identities have first of all to make sense. However, making sense is something very different from being rational or ‘logical’ (non contradictory in philosophical terms). Indeed a focus on identities as narratives shows how people’s identities are multifaceted constructs holding together aspects that could otherwise be contradictory. What holds identities together is ultimately a matter of selection and choice. As one of the fathers of the narrative turn in history, Hayden White, reminds us, ‘narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events [...] but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications’ (White 1987, ix).

Meaning making is mainly a retrospective process: narratives – academic, political, personal – are stories. They are more about making sense of the past than at finding predictive rules to guide the future. If that would be asking too much, as is sometimes done (especially by those that set out to ‘debunk’ certain narratives), then often we ask too little: to make sense narratives cannot be *just* narratives, juxtapositions of elements in a sequence. They need to be ‘emplotted’, they need a plot. As narrative

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<sup>2</sup> This is linked to a number of factors, both developments in the social sciences themselves and historical changes: from the questioning of structural/functional/economic explanations, to the exposure of previous grand narratives, to a greater role of culture, and media and culture industries in particular, in everyday life. For a good review see Nash (2001).

analysis insists, stories are complex artefacts. It is useful to distinguish at least three components: an appropriately selective series of past events and forces, a temporal sequence and, more importantly, an 'emplotment' that establishes causal links and communicates, possibly, moral lessons. It is by providing a plot that a narrative structure emerges where a mere succession of events or juxtaposition of elements existed (White 1987, 1-25; Czarniawska 2004, 17-32). With a plot, a narrative becomes a (hi)story.

The apparent contradiction of the opposite critique of lack or excess of European narratives may find a solution here: Europe has several narratives indeed, but what about its story(ies)? Is it lacking in emplotted stories or – equally importantly, as social research is starting to show (I shall return to this later on) – dedicated storytellers and public spheres? The current economic crisis can be equally emplotted in a story of necessary further European integration, or, as the media have indeed tended to stress, especially in the UK, of the 'dangers of renouncing national sovereignty'. As many observe, European institutions – that congerie of organisations originally qualified by other specifications (from 'Coal and Steel' to more broadly 'Economic') until they successfully appropriated the term European itself – at the very least *had* a plot. This was a story of centuries of European wars put to a definitive end by increased collaboration and co-dependency. Both the narrative and the economic strategy of the evolving EC institutions have been driven by this plot. It has been so successful in this that it has made that task seem redundant and new generations less sensitive to it. European public intellectuals keep referring to it, whilst acknowledging that it may no longer be what can hold Europe together. Umberto Eco, for instance, declared that the 'shallow' European identity that was sufficient for the founding fathers thanks to that shared objective may not be so anymore: "Their Europe reacted to war and they shared resources to build peace. Now we must work towards building a more profound identity".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Umberto Eco: 'It's culture, not war, that cements European identity'", *The Guardian*, 26 January 2012 (Interview by Gianni Liotta). This article is again another instance of the current efforts to collect – and create – narratives of Europe: "The Guardian is teaming up with five leading European newspapers in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland to explore the benefits and drawbacks of the European project. In a series of articles over two days, journalists from the EU's six biggest countries will delve into the biggest crisis in the European Union's history and seek answers to two critical questions: what is the EU for? And where does it go from here?", a project including serious and semi-serious pieces, such as an interactive test "How European are you?" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/series/europa>).

Today, it appears, Europe is in search of a new story to tell, first and foremost to itself: an identity, that is. Especially recently, Europe really seems to have lost the plot, as they say. This common saying revealingly captures that technical distinction between narrative, plot and story recalled above. This distinction can help us if not in finding definitive answers then at least in posing the problem with greater clarity, in challenging the rarely questioned premise of the plurality and heterogeneity of European stories (and their attendant intellectual fascination but practical inconsequence) say, whilst we look for the plot of European institutional narratives.

### **Brussels' story of Europe**

Needless to say we can look in several directions for European narratives, as a selection of 'past events and forces' in a sequence that can illustrate Europe. However, contemporary Europe, whilst certainly not limited to the process of European integration, cannot ignore it: this institutional context is also that of more comprehensive or cultural ideas of 'Europeanness'. Not surprising, in fact, the interminable media debates on the current Euro-crisis often end with vague references to a broader, more cultural, European identity, generally to denounce its lack. Looking at European organisations, the EU and Council of Europe in particular, the image of a fragmented narrative becomes less tenable, as it is not too difficult, and there is a general agreement amongst analysts, as to what the dominant narrative of Europe at institutional level is.

The main institutional narrative about Europe's culture and identity today is that of 'unity in diversity'. Because of the need to incorporate the diversity of nations, especially at the level of culture and belongings, and because the painstaking process of imagining the Community and then Union has always been under everyone's eyes, they have elaborated a complex rhetoric, which can be synthesised in the well-known formula 'unity in diversity'. This is seen as a solution to the need of accommodating multiple allegiances and the plurality of national or local cultures (that is, of the much more powerful and established respective institutions). It is possible to follow step by step how the Council of Europe and EU in particular have reached that narrative, and

we find it embodied in key texts.<sup>4</sup> Its earliest incarnation is probably in the Council of Europe's 1949 statute ('Diversity lies at the heart of Europe's cultural richness, which is our common heritage and the basis of our unity'). But it is only in the 1990s that it started to be operationalised at EC/EU level. The 1992 EU treaty article on culture states that the Community should promote 'the flowering of the cultures of the member States, while respecting their national and regional *diversity* and at the same time bringing the *common cultural heritage* to the fore' (TEU, art. 151; emphasis added). At the same time, interestingly, European citizenship was also introduced. Making sense of Europe's diversity – creating a narrative structure that integrates diversity without subsuming it, and progressively reframing it not as an obstacle or a lesser evil but as a resource and a strength – has been the European institutional strategy.

This has been much criticised as contrived and the result of compromise rather than vision. It is a solution that many dismiss as empty rhetoric, as a cosmetic treatment to hide either irrelevance or a hidden hegemonic agenda (Shore 2000 is often quoted in this respect). Indeed, identity-building technologies as the nation-state elaborated them are still in the hands of nation states (education, media, but also welfare, military service). So self-proclaimed European institutions have to be very cautious when they try to emplot their narratives of European culture. Too much emphasis on unity or too much detail on the actual content of the 'common cultural heritage' and they will provoke criticism from right and left, too much emphasis on diversity and they will simply provide arguments for those who say that actually there is no story to tell at all.

Still, 'unity in diversity' is translated in actual initiatives and policies too. Although these are many and diverse, they have a similar style: they mainly stimulate local, direct action, bestowing the title of 'European' to local agents, that therefore then act as European, and thereby provide a content for that empty idea of 'unity in diversity'. Unity in diversity as narrative thus 'decentralises' the selection of the narrative elements, whilst promoting a common frame – one that can be conceptualised as a 'plot', a specific way of connecting and justifying the coexistence of those narrative elements, a narrative structure. As we have noted, some believe that such an 'empty' narrative can only avoid dissolving – either by being appropriated in too

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller version of the development of academic and institutional narratives of Europe see my book *Becoming Europeans* (Sassatelli 2009).

many different ways, or not appropriated at all – in combination with some stronger narrative structures, such as the one of the post-WWII peace projects. Here however, we may start seeing not only the opportunities, but also the limitations of concentrating on narratives only, with the risk of losing sight of who is telling the story.

## Who tells the story

For social scientists in particular, and for anyone wanting to understand social processes, a narrative perspective has its dangers too. In fact, we can see two main, and opposing, ones. On the one hand, one considers it as a ‘text’ only, investigating its meaning and patterns, as something relatively autonomous; on the other hand, one considers only the ‘act of narrating’, treating meaning as emerging from the contingencies of individual and collective action, analysing cultural patterns as reflections of power and material interests.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it is important to look at how narratives are enacted: we need to understand how narratives are performed, again remembering that to be effective a narrative does not necessarily need ‘logic’ or ‘rationality’, but being meaningful, a plot that works – as well as actors to play it and a scene to perform on.

The institutional narrative of Europe may be quite formulaic by now, but that narrative will be performed not only by the institutions themselves but also by people in contact with those institutions, particularly so because of the policy style recalled above. Scholars and ‘public intellectuals’ will participate certainly, but also recipients of the policies that translate the narrative into practice. The example I would like to refer to, on the basis of previous research (Sassatelli 2008) is the European Capital of Culture (ECOC). There we see how the local recipients of this initiative perform that narrative of unity in diversity. That is where we realise that, interestingly, the interpretation of ‘diversity’ has become broader and broader. The official mission is, not surprisingly, to celebrate ‘the richness and diversity of European cultures and the features they share’. But what can be found on the ground is that this narrative structure is indeed appropriated, but redefined, not necessarily according to default institutional intentions and

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<sup>5</sup> The sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2004) discusses this distinction between structuralist and pragmatist theories, proposing an integration with his ‘cultural pragmatics’.

interpretations. Its ambiguity is used to actually far exceed what was in the EU's intentions – which arguably is just about the combination of national and regional diversity within Europe – and towards something more like a cosmopolitan allegiance. For instance, most cities holding the ECOC title had in their programmes a significant number of projects dealing with non-European cultures. The notion of culture itself has expanded progressively, from high art in the first years to a much more encompassing one – this in a programme which began with Athens and Florence celebrating their contribution to the great European heritage.

Textually, 'unity in diversity' may well be a weak, un-original,<sup>6</sup> plot barely covering the juxtaposition of disparate narrative elements, but its meaning depends to a great extent on how it is appropriated. We need to grant some theoretical scope for conceptualising this distinction, as much as we need empirical research to provide specific answers as to which (and whose) narratives of Europe find in it a successful plot. Much is lost if one concentrates exclusively on the critique of official rhetoric. The way in which cultural Europeanization is normally envisaged as a top-down policy process, criticized for elitism and ineffectiveness, misses the transformations taking place, as these contain polyvocal, bottom-up, unofficial processes, promoted by this policy style that encourages networking and diversity (a style itself made necessary by the networked and diverse conditions under which these policies have been established).

These are practical forms of cultural Europeanization that often escape analysis because of their 'banality'. However, there is a key difference between banal Europeanism and banal nationalism, for which the expression was first coined and that more or less consciously we still refer to. If banal nationalism is very much based on forgetting difference and complexity, so that its stereotypical identity as reiterated in public discourse stresses homogeneity, banal Europeanism's public discourse has a different frame or plot that stresses 'unity in diversity'. Europe and the nation are imagined, naturalised and made banal differently, the nation stressing (or imposing) homogeneity, commonality and single, exclusive identification, Europe – partly as a reaction and because the first option is already taken and unavailable – opting for an opposite solution that claims to be based on plurality, diversity and multiple allegiances. Whether or not this is seen as creating a society depends, among other things, on how normative our view

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<sup>6</sup> As noted by Isar (2002) the EU is not even the only or first entity to use it as a motto.

of what a cultural unit and identity should look like is, and whether we are willing to consider and have the analytical instruments to appreciate forms of 'banal Europeanization'. The official rhetoric may well be just a superficial celebration of regional or national differences, but it is difference in a much broader and deeper range of meaning that could find space within this frame. That could be the story that narratives of Europe, beyond Brussels and Strasbourg, are trying to tell.

The apparent heterogeneity of European stories mentioned at the outset, so rarely challenged and so puzzling is usefully refracted through the prism of narrative and performative analysis. Both similarity and heterogeneity are true, at different levels. In terms of available plots, it actually is not all that heterogeneous. Perhaps, then, we really should challenge the premise of the heterogeneity of European stories: there may be many narratives or narrative elements, differently selected etc, but in terms of an actual story – of a narrative structure interpreting the past and legitimating the future – we find more similarity than diversity. My analysis here overlaps with those that – from a different perspective and with different methods – have also found similarity. Juan Diez Medrano, in particular, building on his large-scale survey research on European public spheres has concluded that, no matter how many variants of European stories the national, written, high-cultural sphere may contain, surveys at the level of public actors and citizens making up the public sphere 'portray the European Union and European integration process and imagine the future of the European Union in very similar ways [...] from the public sphere's and the citizen's perspective, the most relevant story to be told about the European Union is one of similarity' (Medrano 2010, 316). A story that can also be shown to basically emanate, top-down, from European institutions and political elites, and one that, according to Medrano might well have reached its limits. However – this is where my analysis differs from Medrano's, thus my conclusions too – what is to be accounted for is also that Europe's story is *about* diversity and as such, contains a plurality of narratives. Europe's frames are indeed recurrent and common, top-down if you like, but they allow and even need to be performed differently by different actors, in different contexts. What is relevant is both the fact that the institutional narrative frame is maintained, and that what makes it possible – as European institutions struggling to find a balance have progressively discovered – is that it is a capacious one which the diversity of voices and public spheres can appropriate and fill with narrative elements. The shift to diversity as a resource, whether introduced as mere rhetorical gimmick or not, is fundamental. This is a case – seen within wider debates on



cultural citizenship and the permeability of public spheres to cultural diversity – where ‘The content of culture recedes in importance as the *usefulness of the claim to difference* as a warrant gains legitimacy’ (Yudice 2003, 23, emphasis in original). This trade-off has been the condition of possibility of European stories.

## Conclusion

Not all narrative structures are equal in the way they frame reality. The narrative frame is indeed not a content – as critics of the ‘empty European rhetoric’ remind us – but we should not forget, back to White (1987) the ‘content of the form’, the fact that the way we narrate is not neutral or inconsequential either. The nation was imagined as culturally homogeneous and as a result often enforcing homogenisation. That is, the national plot was – with degrees of variation in space and time – about imagining a community, a homogeneous, fraternal community based on similarity; as a categorical form of identification it could not be based on concrete ties spanning diversity, and it could only tolerate modest amounts of diversity, because both the ideological and practical requirements of national democracies relied on similarity and centralization. Europe, instead, is imagined as ‘unity in diversity’, and this is another way of imagining a community. It is not a matter of being rhetorically ‘inclusive’: stories are, by definition, exclusive, they weave in certain narrative elements and exclude others. No story is the story of everyone, which is precisely why there are many. Notions of ‘inclusiveness’, indeed often invoked by intellectuals and politicians alike about Europe, can be misleading. But equally so notions of exclusion. European identity is a poor categorical identity, it struggles with defining both internal similarities and external differences, whilst the inverted combinations (internal differences, and external similarities) seem almost more appealing and, indeed, more European. The European story is not (all-)inclusive. It is, on the basis of how I’ve seen the institutional narrative being hijacked on the ground, open: anyone can become European. But not everyone has, or will.

As long as European stories continue following other plots (e.g. the national one) or thinking that existing narrative structures used so far as model are the only possible ones, the European story may not work. It will continue to *sound* contrived and fake. Verisimilitude (not *verity*), we all know, is the key in stories, but we tend to forget that it is an evolving concept. Contemporary

stories needn't be based on a naïve realism, the European story may be able to sacrifice much less diversity to the coherence or homogeneity of the whole story than that required by other, apparently similar, accounts of large-scale collective identities. It may, in fact, promote itself precisely as a space of what Martha Nussbaum (1997, 11) calls, at the individual level, 'narrative imagination', as one of the fundamental abilities of an 'educated world citizen': 'the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story'.

Out of necessity rather than virtue – but isn't that mostly the case in history, or at least a hopeful indication that things may actually (have to) work out? – Europe has to find resources (the plot) for telling a new type of story about identity, diversity, solidarity. The times are ripe to show that different narratives need not be divisive. Finding the plot is, as always, a matter of choice rather than destiny: a matter of responsibility, for the European institutions to provide the spaces, for Europeans to tell their stories.

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