

Interview:

Raymond Georis

By Dee O'Sullivan

The year 2014 marked the celebration of major milestones for two groundbreaking European cultural institutions: the 60th anniversary of the Amsterdam-based European Cultural Foundation (ECF) and the 25th birthday of the Brussels-based European Foundation Centre (EFC). Raymond Georis, former ECF director and secretary general, who also founded the Foundation Centre to help strengthen European philanthropic funding, reflects on their contribution to enabling an 'open, democratic, creative and inclusive Europe'¹ and the changing context of Europe's place in the world, then and now.

The Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, a multi-purpose concert, art and theatre space, designed by one of Belgium's leading architects, Victor Horta, provides a fitting backdrop to a discussion about the vital importance of culture in cementing our identity, solidarity and values as Europeans. An ambition that is as passionately upheld today by Raymond Georis as when he first started working to promote it in the 1960s.

Fifty years on, he displays the same mixture of charm, sense of purpose and pragmatism, tempered by an appreciation of the restrictions – and virtues – that time imposes on all aspects of life. Whether in diplomacy, cultural exchanges or in his beloved garden, he can attest that worthwhile and long-lasting results only come about if the ground is well prepared and the endeavour is given the necessary resources and time to grow and develop.

Culture has been at the heart of your life and work for over 50 years. What is culture in your view and what role does it play?

Culture is not just external manifestations of creativity – art, architecture, books, education, music, science, theatre and so on – vital as they are - it is also intrinsic to how we frame ourselves as human beings and how we value each other.

It is never static and has to be constantly nurtured. In Europe, it has taken centuries to develop democracy, the recognition of human rights and freedoms, social protections and so on, based on Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian principles and later infused with Celtic, Arabic, Slavic, Germanic and other traditions. In the aftermath of World War II, the Swiss philosopher Denis de Rougemont (and ECF founder) saw culture as 'a particular valuing of mankind' and a vehicle for social renewal. I believe that still holds true today.

Culture is also a vehicle for going beyond boundaries and challenging our perceptions of ourselves and our world. This is visible in the spread of the styles and ideas from earliest times through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and now the modern digital revolution.

We have to continuously rediscover and reconnect with the basis of culture: that it combines all these elements and all play an essential part. We must also remind ourselves that it is an ongoing process: what we start today might not bear positive results for 20 years or more.

As the longest-serving European Cultural Foundation director (23 years) and founder of the European Foundation Center, what strikes you most looking back at both organisations?

Each director has his or her own way of building the institution and all have contributed invaluablely to its development and outcomes.

Denis de Rougemont, the founder of the European Cultural Foundation, had the original vision to use culture as a way to renew and reunite Europe after the war. My immediate predecessor, George Sluizer, launched the visionary 'Plan Europe 2000' in 1968, a Europe-wide research programme to examine four critical, but little-explored, themes concerning the future of Europe: education in the 21st century; industrial change; urbanism; and agriculture and the environment, which I then developed², and my successor, Rüdiger Stephan, consolidated. Gottfried Wagner then refocused on what the arts and cultural perspective could do for Europe.

² Institutes and Centres created by the European Cultural Foundation during Raymond Georis's tenure include: the European Institute of Education and Social Policy (1975); Institute for European Environment Policy (1976); Institute for International Cooperation (1977); European Cooperation Fund (1977); and European Centre for Work and Society (1979)

The current director, Katherine Watson, is now driving the very necessary process of reconnecting culture, communities and democracy. By engaging citizens at grassroots and local level to participate in and run cultural activities so they can again become actively involved in the big issues facing all of us in society – employment, health, social solidarity, environmental protection, education and cultural creativity.

I established the European Foundation Centre (EFC) in 1989 as a way to bring foundations together to collaborate more effectively, initially with seven members. Now I am delighted to see how the EFC has developed, thanks to John Richardson, its first Chief Executive and, for the last decade almost, Gerry Salole. It now has over 200 members and affiliates working across 13 thematic networks, from children and youth to family farming and sustainable cities.

Setting up the Foundation Centre also taught me a very important lesson – to balance vision with an awareness of limitations. I was over-ambitious in setting up too large a network of national committees that became unmanageable with the resources we had at that time. My successors have thankfully ensured that they have the necessary capacity to build upon!

Which factors do you think were most critical to the success of both the European Cultural Foundation and the European Foundation Centre?

In the beginning, establishing a sound financial basis was crucial, but this had to be coupled with having a long-term strategic vision in order to achieve any successful outcomes.

This was not always the case. The European Cultural Foundation started by organising congresses on youth and Europe and other topics, which brought together hundreds of people initially, but had no real continuity of purpose.

The foundation vehicle was necessary to attract financial support and grants and it was only when the European Cultural Foundation moved to the Netherlands that it was really able to attract and access funds. The ever pragmatic Dutch understood that a strong and sustainable financial basis was essential if anything was to be achieved. Since then, with the support of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, it has always received Dutch national lottery funding, as well as from other sources.

You also have to look well beyond the present day to be really effective and that is the role of both the European Cultural Foundation and the European Foundation Centre. Katherine Watson and Gerry Salole know this and that's why I'm confident that both organisations are on the right track.

In your final Annual Report as ECF director in 1994³ you were encouraged to note “the growth of a European consciousness ... an awareness of a common cultural heritage, the seeking of ways and means of cooperating, the willingness to work together on all levels...” Do you think this still holds true today?

I would not say that today. It was a more optimistic age. The fall of communism across Eastern Europe was still a very recent phenomenon and their populations were enthusiastically embracing democracy. There was also greater willingness then among

³ Quoted in 'Raymond Georis: A Quiet European Gardener' (p.101)

politicians at European and national level to engage with each other and their citizens and to drive through their vision to the end.

But the warning in the second part of that quote is, unfortunately, still relevant: "...the willingness to work together on all levels is our safeguard against a future of war, petty nationalism and collapse into chaos..."

Europe is heading in the wrong direction at the moment. Citizens are not happy today as politicians talk but don't deliver or see through the implementation of policy initiatives.

As a counterweight, the aims of the European Cultural Foundation: empowering and engaging people through arts and culture; linking cultural policy and practice; and connecting sources of knowledge for the future, are as important and relevant today as when I took over as director in 1973.

A lot of the challenges that existed in your day are still with us today. How and where do you see the differences?

This is true, of course, but nevertheless the challenges are becoming more acute. The real impact of climate change, for example, was a far less pressing issue in the 1970s than today. The word 'environment' in French (*environnement*), for example, didn't even have an ecological meaning at that time. It was used more to refer to your personal or professional space. This was why we set up the Institute for European Environment Policy in Bonn in 1974.

Rising prosperity after World War II and the terrible memories of its destructive impact helped foster a sense of social solidarity, but that is now fracturing again under the stress of economic pressures. The results are clearly visible in the rise of nationalism, protectionism and conflict between Russia and Ukraine and tensions also within the EU.

There is not enough forward-thinking in Europe. Today's politicians seem to have lost the art of pragmatism and compromise which, coupled with a long-term vision and the determination to carry it to realisation, is the only way we will ever find solutions to Europe's problems.

However, we must not get carried away by nostalgia. We talk of the 'Golden 60s' but the flip side was a society too busy enjoying prosperity and stability to spend time looking forward to how they could sustain it. Sluizer was one of the first to raise the flag with his *Plan Europe 2000* to draw attention to the issues Europe would be facing in 30 years' time. This has given me the impetus to always look forwards: what will be the problems of tomorrow, not just those of today.

Now we are in more troubled economic times again, we are in a sense going back to the necessity of de Rougemont's original vision. Life is circular, as the Ancient Greeks pointed out!

But the human capacity to change and develop also throws up new opportunities. Jeremy Rifkin's recent book⁴ on new societal models, for example, highlights how new technologies are radically changing the way we will live and organise our lives at the personal and local level. He predicts most employment will go to culture, the arts, health and social care. Care and solidarity at the local level is where the trends are heading.

⁴ *The Third Industrial Revolution*, <http://www.thethirdindustrialrevolution.com/>

‘Pragmatism’ is a word that keeps coming up in our conversation. Why is it so important to you?

Pragmatism is essential in order to get things done, but it must be matched with vision if it is to serve any real purpose. The EU’s ERASMUS programme⁵ is a case in point: a recognised success with an estimated 3 million students who have benefited from the opportunity to study in another EU Member State since it was formally launched in 1987. It has since been expanded and its alumni are now influencing Europe’s future. For example, the EU’s new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, is a former ERASMUS student.

However, before the European Cultural Foundation was asked by the European Commission to run the ERASMUS programme in 1987 (until 1995; using the expertise of its partner organisation, the European Institute of Education and Social Policy, on student mobility), I had learned from the fruitless discussions at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in the early 1970s on trying to get intergovernmental agreement on harmonising Member States’ degrees and diplomas.

The way forward in the end was to bypass that route and use the network of European universities, to cut the Gordian knot of harmonisation and just let students participate in exchange programmes at low cost to study for a time in other Member States. But, crucially, they return to their home country and have their degree or diploma validated there. This was the simple idea behind the visionary ERASMUS and other EU education programmes which go from strength to strength today.

To use the Dutch as an example again, to get round cultural and religious objections to gambling, the national lottery was allowed to be established only on condition that its revenues went to good causes - to the lasting benefit of the European Cultural Foundation. The Chinese are another pragmatic people. When they built a new centre for EU-Chinese relations at the College of Europe in Bruges, the only way they could get around visa restrictions for their workers to come and do the installation was to grant them temporary diplomatic status!

We’re going to need more and more of this approach in Europe.

Do you have any advice for today’s EU leaders?

As Aristotle said, to be efficient in a small community the boundaries of that community should not extend beyond the audience’s capacity to hear the speakers’ voices - the size of the original agora. Today’s EU has forgotten this principle, hence its citizens’ feelings of disconnectedness.

Technology can help to connect and reach people but there must be much better two-way communication between the centre and the national, regional and local levels. This is not a new observation, of course.

The German philosopher Karl Jaspers warned after World War II that Europe was facing a choice between *Balkanisation* (conflicts and hostilities) and *Helvetisation* (building a common federal political entity on the Swiss model to recreate a space for civic participation). A Europe made up at its root of small units which, like the Swiss cantons, administer and address concrete local problems: schools, environment, transport, urban development... Europe should become a “Europe of Regions”, built not from above but

⁵ Now the ERASMUS+ programme: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/index_en.htm

rather from below, around networks of functional units with variable dimensions. To do that we need to completely change our values and goals! This is why we are still grappling with that choice – 70 years later.

The cycle never stops. This year's Raymond Georis Lecture⁶ was given by Prof Jacques Rupnik, Director of Research at CERI and a professor at Sciences Po in Paris, on the closing down of space for civil society in Ukraine and Hungary. Western ideals of liberal democracy are being challenged by Russia, Hungary, Turkey and others who see them as a threat to stability. Their 'democracy' allows media to be controlled by an 'objective' committee and no-one reacts in the EU to Hungary's restrictions on press freedoms.

So, federalism is the only way to save Europe – the Swiss model – I'm convinced of that. But the big obstacles are the national governments, and I understand: why should they surrender their power? Or surrender their national interest? No-one cares about Europe as a political entity. I don't see any solution now if we don't find ways to bypass some of the gridlock at Council of Ministers level - but that is now European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's problem!

Democracy is becoming decadent in that it is allowing a state of moral decline to take root. Confidence in governments and politicians has plummeted across Europe. We can all see at every level that rules, rights and responsibilities not being adhered to or enforced.

But we can give hope. De Rougemont described himself as "an active pessimist". If we let things continue to go the way they are in Europe today, we are heading towards catastrophe. And what happens after total catastrophe? Tyranny. We are on that road now and nobody seems to be facing up to this. Everyone seems to think that democracy will be there forever. It won't be if we just take it for granted. So I am a pessimist in recognising this but I'm active in trying to see what I myself can do to prevent us going down this path: how to engage in a bottom-up approach to decision-making.

What kind of action is necessary to prevent this catastrophe? This is what Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz [President of the European Parliament] and the others have to address. If they don't, Juncker could well be the last European Commission President.

Finally, the motto of the 60th anniversary of the European Cultural Foundation is 'Europe powered by culture'. Do you have any comments on that?

Culture is at the heart of who we are and what we achieve. I believe Katherine Watson is so right to focus on using local partners to get citizens involved at a local level to promote democratic participation. This for me is a very important start of the correction to the way Europe is going now. But it will be a long process and that's what we need to do and what the Foundation needs to do - plan today for better outcomes in 20+ years' time.

Nature shows the way: you plant a tree for the benefit of the next generation, not your own. In the words of former French President François Mitterrand: "Il faut laisser du temps au temps" (You have to give Time time).

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⁶ http://www.efc.be/programmes_services/resources/Documents/25th%20anniversary%20programme.pdf