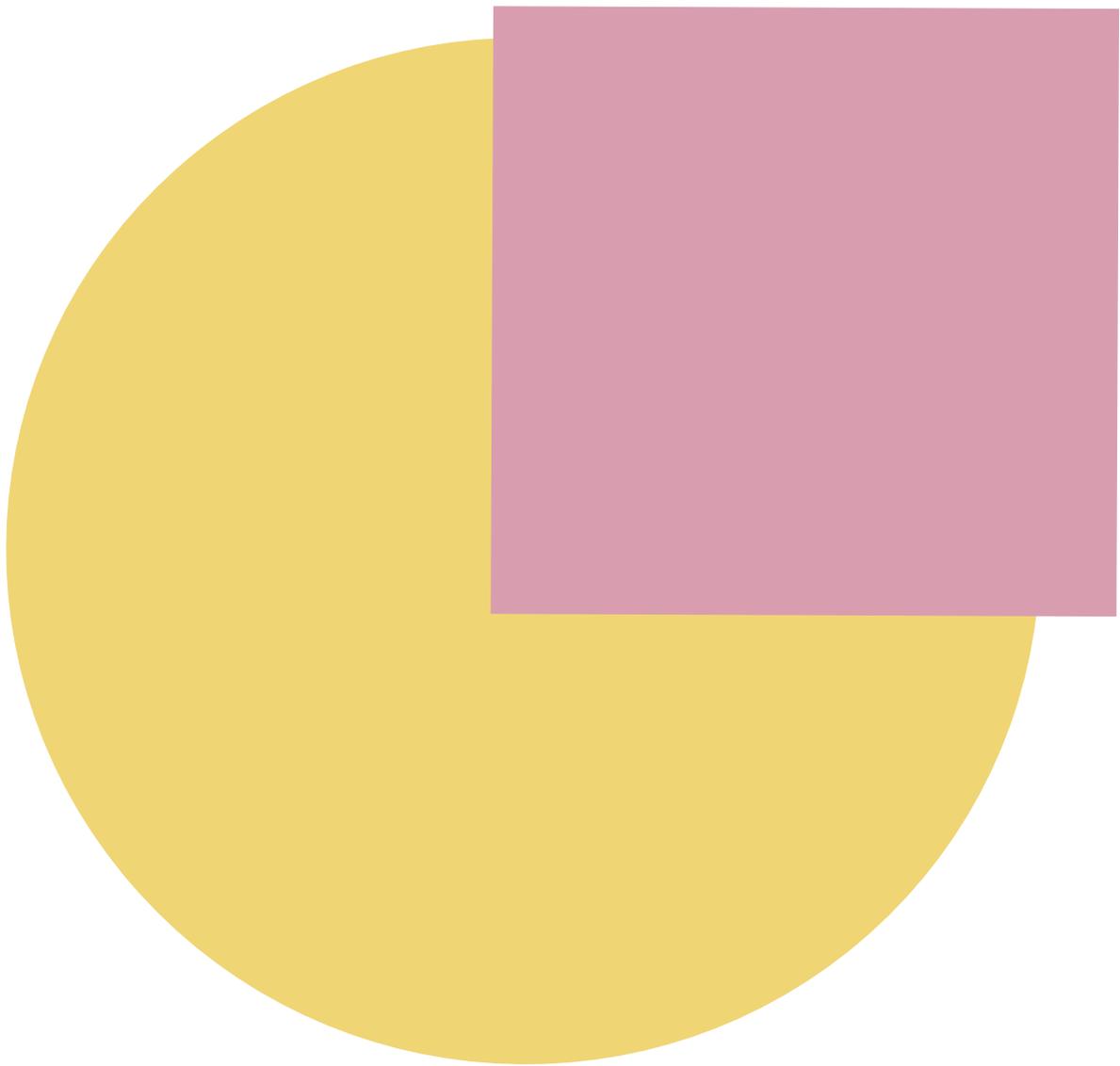


# Seven ideas for a European Cultural Recovery Plan



**Groupe  
d'études  
géopolitiques**

**Groupe d'études  
géopolitiques**

**Seven ideas for a  
European Cultural  
Recovery Plan**

**Author**

Giuliano da Empoli

**Foreword**

Lorenzo Bini Smaghi

45, Rue d'Ulm 75005 Paris  
legrandcontinent.eu  
geg@ens.fr

**To quote the paper**

Giuliano da Empoli, *Seven ideas for a European Cultural Recovery Plan*, Groupe d'études géopolitiques, Policy Paper 2, July 2020.



Lorenzo Bini Smaghi • Président of Société générale

## Foreword

Europe is built in crises, as Jean Monnet reminds us, but the edifice risks remaining fragile if its foundations are not well balanced. The economic devastation caused by the Covid-19 crisis is indeed pushing Europeans to take new steps together economically, politically and institutionally. However, culture, a key piece of the reconstruction process, risks being forgotten. Culture is one of the main victims of the crisis, not only because the isolation caused by the fear of contagion has reduced the space for expression, even more worrying is the reappearance, beneath the surface, of growing destructive tensions all around us.

Images that will remain in the historical memory of this sequence are those we thought were never to be seen again. Not so much the deserted streets of our cities. Perhaps not even the doctors in astronaut suits treating the sick. Rather, it will be the anguished looks of Hong Kong boys beaten by the police and taken away in handcuffs. It will be the desperate cry of George Floyd who could not breathe and the thousands of people kneeling in his memory. It will be the destruction of statues of the great men of the past, because they are no longer great. It will be the images of a museum, like the one of Saint Sophia in Istanbul, transformed into a mosque.

The thread of intolerance, violence, memory loss, encircles us and threatens much more than the virus did. Much more than the economic crisis.

If we do not understand that, at this historic moment, Europe must express its cultural identity, we do not realise that it is the rest of the world that is asking for it.

And yet it is not complicated. Look around you again, at your own history. At the heart of Europe, at the very heart of the very concept of Europe, there is no state, no religion, no political convictions, no military deployment. There is the human being. With his strength, his genius and his suffering. Like those we have just experienced.

At the origin of Europe, there is the testimony of history, from the Middle Ages to the second post-war period of the last century, of how suffering is reborn from suffering. We grow up. We create. And we learn to live together. It is unthinkable to come out of the crisis we have gone through without starting to build again. To do so, it is not enough to pile up, one on top of the other, the different rocks of the economic system. We need the cement of culture. We need much more than in the past. This is what will keep the whole together.

The cultural revival plan shows the way to avoid falling into indifference, which is the prodrome of decadence and violence that surrounds us. Starting with culture, the foundations of the common ground are created.

## Executive Summary

In recent months, the European Union has made a lot of progress in terms of Sense, but not in terms of Sensibility. For feelings are on a par with reason, when it comes to winning the support of the people that determine the outcome of elections. That is why, if we really want to move Europe forwards today and overcome nationalist impulses, we need a Plan for the Cultural Recovery of Europe in addition to a financial Recovery Plan.

The aim of this document is to outline the possible contours of such an initiative. Proposals presented in this paper all share the idea that, beyond the taboo of debt mutualisation, the time has come to break a taboo that is perhaps even more deeply rooted in the European construction: that of identity neutrality, which has led European institutions to neglect cultural policies and systematically reject any symbolic dimension, in favour of a pragmatic approach entirely devoid of emotion.

For years, the only people who have been talking passionately about Europe are its enemies. If pro-Europeans want to be able to fight against their vision, the first thing to do is to stop being boring, by stepping outside the established framework, even if it means risking controversy.

Far from being an exhaustive list, proposals presented in this report are intended first and foremost as incentives to start drawing the outlines of a possible Cultural New Deal for Europe. Multiplying points of view and narratives, apprehending the construction of Europe in a new transgressive manner is the only way to get European debates out of their deadly boredom and to question the cultural hegemony that the national-populists have been building, piece by piece, over the last twenty years.

It is better to choose to put a face on euro banknotes today and put up with all of the controversy which will result from this choice, rather than to continue to fuel the Euro-tedium that is undermining the foundations of the Union.



Giuliani da Empoli • Director of the think tank Volta in Milan and Brussels.

## Seven ideas for a European Cultural Recovery Plan

It is possible that European institutions will emerge strengthened from the Covid-19 crisis, as they have done in the past. The recent Franco-German initiative on the European Recovery Plan has prompted its most enthusiastic commentators to speak of a «Hamiltonian moment» for Europe, which seems to be on the verge of breaking the taboo of debt mutualisation.

From a policy point of view, this is quite possible indeed. But, unfortunately, progress being made in terms of Sense has not been accompanied by progress in terms of Sensibility. On the contrary, once again the virus has revealed the absence of a true European culture rooted in the consciousness of citizens and public decision-makers alike. During the first days of the crisis, the primary reflex of all has been to take refuge in the national dimension, in a generalised «run for your life» movement, from unilateral border closures to blockades of healthcare supplies. During those decisive days, not only the actions but also the speeches of the main political leaders - even the most pro-European - abandoned any European dimension, only to isolate themselves in a strictly national rhetoric.

In view of this situation, all those who believe that the time for a European New Deal has arrived would do well to remember that the original New Deal, that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, consisted not only of economic and social measures, but also of political and cultural actions to change mentalities and win hearts and minds. It was this mix of policy and politics, of substance and symbolism, which, by mobilizing intellectual and creative energies, through the radio and thanks to the most sophisticated marketing techniques of the time, enabled Roosevelt to defeat the national-populists of his time.

That is why, if we really want to move Europe forwards and defeat the anti-European nationalists of today, in addition to the financial Recovery Plan, we need a Cultural Recovery Plan for Europe.

The purpose of this document is to outline the contours that such an initiative could take if the EU decided to take this path. Proposals put forward in this paper are not exhaustive list: many other possible measures exist and there are unlimited avenues that can be explored. However, they all share the idea that, beyond the taboo of debt mutualisation, the time has come to break a taboo that is perhaps even more deeply rooted in the construction of Europe: that of identity neutrality.

According to this principle, culture and identity belong to the nations, while Europe is the place of pure rationality, limited to confronting practical problems by emptying them, as much as possible, of emotional substance<sup>1</sup>. This is the logic of the «de-dramatization» adopted by the founders of the European Community in the aftermath of the Second World War: the idea of reducing conflicts and controversies to a minimum and concentrating on technicalities<sup>2</sup>.

The approach at the root of the success of European integration, insofar as it has allowed the creation of a very dense network of material interconnections between States of the continent has not allowed for the emergence of a true «European demos»: a people united by common values and feelings.

On the contrary, this approach has actively prevented the formation of a people, coating all European issues with a thick layer of tedium, extremely dissuasive for the uninitiated. In politics, it is well known that boredom is the perfect crime. Anyone who manages to make a subject so boring that everyone loses interest in it is free to do as he pleases. That is what happened to Europe until today.

One of the consequences of this approach is that cultural policies have always been the fifth wheel of the Union's wagon. Culture was first introduced as a European competence only in 1992, thirty-five years after the founding of the European Economic Community, and it has been the poor cousin of the Union's policies ever since, as evidenced by the 0.001% that the budget still allocates to this sector today. As Robert Menasse told us in his novel about Brussels, when Eurocrats talk about culture, they do so «in the tone that a Wall Street broker would use to talk about a strange cousin whose hobby is numismatics<sup>3</sup>».

1. Pascal Lamy, *Jalons pour une anthropologie européenne*, Le Grand Continent, 8 janvier 2020.
2. Luuk van Middelaar, *Alarums and Excursions. Improvising Politics on the European Stage*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Agenda, 2019, p.5.
3. Robert Menasse, *La capitale*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2018, p.43.

Another consequence of the identity neutrality taboo is the deliberate rejection of the symbolic dimension, in favour of a pragmatism as deprived as possible of any form of lyricism. From its anthem without words to its banknotes without faces and its capital without monuments, the symbolic deficit of the Union is not the result of chance, or of the mediocrity of supposedly uncultured Eurocrats: on the contrary, it is one of its constituent elements.

The result of the Euro-tedium strategy is now in plain sight: an over-powerful but soulless mechanism which occupies the field of rationality as best it can, but completely abandons the field of emotions and feelings to nations and nationalists.

Today, the only people who speak passionately about Europe are its enemies. The Viktor Orbans who claim to incarnate the true values of Europe against the decadence of the degenerated liberals of the West. The Steve Bannons who dream of training new gladiators of the people in 13th century monasteries. The Philippe de Villiers who reconstruct the history of the Union like a spy novel orchestrated by the CIA<sup>4</sup>.

If pro-Europeans want to be able to fight such visions, the first thing to do is to stop being boring.

That is why European integration is not just a job for politicians, but also for writers, movie directors and video game creators. When Adam Price, the creator of «Borgen», was asked what had prompted him to write a TV series about Danish politics, he replied that he wanted to make a mysterious and very boring process more human and exciting. That is what Europe would need to counter the national-populist backlash: a few more good TV series and a little fewer lectures on multilateralism.

### 1. A self-portrait of 21st century Europe

The first part of a European Cultural New Deal could be borrowed directly from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's original model. Launched in 1935, the Federal Writer's Project was born with the aim of providing financial support for authors during the Great Depression, but also to create a «self-portrait of America» by subsidising the production of guidebooks devoted to the 48 states of the time, essays on ethnography and local history, novels and children's books. In total, it is estimated that about 10,000 writers benefited from the program, which has helped authors like John Steinbeck and Zora Neale Hurston take their first steps.

Far from being an admiring and uncritical representation of the American experience, the Writer's Project

has confronted, sometimes for the first time, some of its most painful points. From the treatment of indigenous populations to the drama of African-American slavery, to which an entire collection, the Slave Narrative Collection, was dedicated, allowing the compilation of more than two thousand personal stories.

In addition to its program dedicated to writers, the Federal Project Number One organized similar policies for the arts, music and drama. Together, cultural actors told the story of the United States, its greatness and its shadow, as never before, and gave a face and a voice, more like thousands of faces and voices, to America in the 1930's.

Why not design a similar programme today for European writers, artists, musicians, film-makers and video-makers? A program which, instead of being neutral in terms of content, would set itself the goal of creating a gigantic, collective self-portrait of our continent?

Of course, it is not difficult to imagine the controversies which could emerge from such an initiative and, above all, those that would develop around some of the works that would result from it: the outraged declarations against European propaganda and the Eurocracy's stranglehold on culture; the inflamed tweets about the funding assigned to one artist rather than another, about the immoral content of this or that artwork.

But this is precisely the question and is probably what Europe needs today: a mobilisation of creative energies which also leads to unexpected synapses. Multiplying points of view and narratives, apprehending the construction of Europe in a new transgressive manner is the only way to get the European debates moving again and to question the cultural hegemony that national-populists have been building, piece by piece, over the last twenty years.

As Dominique Wolton wrote in a recent book on Europe: «The strength of democracy is to speak, to speak about everything, silence generally creates the worst, except for those who benefit from it»<sup>5</sup>.

It is better to choose to put a face on euro banknotes today and put up with all of the controversy which will result from this choice, rather than continuing to fuel the Euro-tedium that is undermining the foundations of the Union.

### 2. A meme factory for Europe

In a speech prepared for the congress on “the Future of the European Spirit” organised by Paul Valéry in 1933, after emphasising the superiority of nationalist propa-

4. Gilles Gressani, Baptiste Roger-Lacan, *J'ai tiré sur le fil du mensonge et tout est venu*, Le Grand Continent, 6 avril 2019.

5. Dominique Wolton, *Vive l'incommunication - La victoire de l'Europe*, Paris, François Bourin, 2020, p.100.

ganda over pro-European propaganda, Stefan Zweig was already right on the button: «If our idea is to be truly effective, we must take it out of the esoteric sphere of intellectual discussions and devote all our energy to making it visible and understandable in broad circles. To this end, words are not enough, let us be certain of that ; we must use all the tools of contemporary propaganda and work to make our ideas spectacular to the masses»<sup>6</sup>.

A century later, the nature of the problem remains the same: how can we ensure that, instead of being relegated to Commissioners' press releases and speeches at conferences, European initiatives reach a wider audience?

The widely held view that the new information ecosystem, based largely on the Internet and on social networks, is intrinsically favourable to the inflammatory tactics of the national-populists does contain certain elements of truth. But this should not be an excuse to give up fighting what EU High Representative for External Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has defined as «the battle of narratives».

In 2015, the Commission took note, for the first time, of the existence of an information war at the global level by creating a task force to fight fake news and disinformation operations targeting Europe. In four years of existence, this structure has played an important but purely defensive role. It is essential that it should now be supplemented by more proactive action to improve the European Union's competitiveness in the battle of the narratives, internally with regards to public opinion on the continent, and at the international level.

If Ursula von der Leyen truly wishes to lead a «Geopolitical Commission», as she announced at the time of her nomination, she must equip herself with the means to make her action visible and understandable in the age of social networks and «Sharp Power». It is not a question of reproducing Russian and Chinese disinformation practices, but rather of developing a communication strategy that will enable European policies and values to become «visible and understandable in wide circles», as Zweig wished.

In this perspective, a first example to be emulated is Taiwan's, which has demonstrated, still very recently, the effectiveness of its own institutional communication networks and its ability to combat disinformation operations from China.

On this front, the Taiwanese government has developed sophisticated tools, but also much simpler tricks. Each ministry, for example, has recruited a small team of

authors and comedians whose mission is to make government communications go viral. They are, in a way, translators who turn the legal and bureaucratic language of public institutions into memes - images, slogans and jokes - capable of catalyzing the attention of social networks and, in turn, of traditional media. These translators are characteristically outspoken and it is not uncommon for them to create controversies with their provocative messages, but the effectiveness of their efforts is demonstrated by the impressive statistics of their diffusion on the web.

Of course, this is only the tip of the iceberg. As we know, today's political campaigns are increasingly based on user profiling, which makes it possible to send tailor-made messages at the right time and with the right arguments. In the «bubble democracy», everyone lives in their own information bubble and the success of a political campaign is measured by its ability to penetrate them one by one.

Contrary to their generally rough appearances, national-populists are masters at using Big Data to expand the impact of their messages. For instance, during the 2016 referendum, Brexit spin-doctors were able to send each category of voters a tailor-made communication: for animalists, a message about EU regulations that infringe on animal rights; for hunters, a message about EU regulations that protect animals ; for libertarians, a message about the burden of Brussels bureaucracy ; and for Statists, a message about resources being taken away from the welfare state and transferred to the EU. Moreover, by measuring the outcomes of all the different versions of these tailor-made messages, specialists were able to fine-tune the most effective ones, from the wording of the text to graphics design. They were thus able to continuously optimise them, based on the number of clicks recorded in real time.

Once again, without falling into the most manipulative techniques of the national-populists, it seems obvious that Europe should be able to communicate directly - and not only via traditional intermediary bodies - with different segments of the European population to convince them with necessarily diversified arguments. This would entail a significant investment in order to achieve what Luca Jahier calls a 21st century «Radio London» for Europe: a structure which would finally start to fight the hegemony that national-populist narratives currently enjoy on social networks and part of traditional media, by putting the most advanced instruments of contemporary communication at the service of the values and objectives of European integration.

### 3. A History for Europe

If one compares the treatment given to Europe today

6. Stefan Zweig, *Pas de défaite pour l'esprit libre - Écrits politiques 1911-1942*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2019, p.230.

by the academic community with that of the eighties and nineties, two elements seem striking. On the one hand, it is clear that since that time, tools for fostering collaboration and exchanges have multiplied exponentially: in just over 20 years, the Bologna Process has revolutionised the sector and given life to a true European area of higher education. But, on the other hand, in the past, there was a fervour around European issues that has now completely disappeared.

As Gilles Pécout, rector of the Paris University, noted: «You just have to open an observatory on such subjects as the Mediterranean or on globalisation and everyone comes to it», whereas this is not the case for centres on the History or Philosophy of Europe<sup>7</sup>.

Gone are the days when top historians were fighting to be the first to write a history of Europe that would not just be an academic work, but the ingredient of a civilizational project. Conceived with the participation of historians from all European countries, the plan drawn-up by George Duby in the mid-1980s called not only for «a major work to be published simultaneously in all languages» but also for «shorter editions intended for middle schools» and «adaptations to other media, especially television». Unfortunately this project, like other similar attempts, never saw the light of day.

It is true that, over the course of time, multiple Franco-German history textbooks have emerged and have been adopted in schools and universities in both countries. In 2017, «Europa: Our History» even made its appearance in German and French bookshops, a sort of editorial mastodon that brought together one thousand four hundred pages, and one hundred and fifty articles, of contributions from historians from all over the world who debated the existence of a common continental memory.

These are encouraging steps, but the challenge of writing a proper European history textbook, laying the foundations for a genuine «European education», remains<sup>8</sup>. This too is a project bound to raise opposition and infinite controversy, in the academic world and beyond. As early as the second half of the 1970s, the Commission proposed a common history textbook as part of a set of ambitious cultural recommendations. If the Council had not rejected that proposal at the time, the existence of a genuine European demos would today be less evanescent and the integration process would have a broader basis, with deeper roots. But it did not happen then and the «European education» lode must now be taken up again, in more difficult circumstances, in a context where nationalist oppositions have strongly re-emerged.

7. Gilles Gressani, Mathéo Malik, *Enseigner l'unité européenne, rencontre avec Gilles Pécout*, *Le Grand Continent*, 11 juin 2018.

8. Baptiste Roger-Lacan, *Europa: notre histoire*, *Le Grand Continent*, 7 octobre 2017.

That's no reason to give up. Two of Europe's most important histories were written during much more difficult times: that of Henri Pirenne when he was a prisoner in a German internment camp, and that of Federico Chabod, based on his university courses, which were interrupted by the fascists as he was forced into hiding. Compared to obstacles of this kind, those that could hinder the hypothetical authors of a new textbook of European history today seem, after all, surmountable.

#### 4. After Erasmus, Odysseus

A few years ago, Umberto Eco described the need for an «Erasmus for taxi drivers, plumbers and builders».

The Erasmus program has indeed been one of the few EU programs capable of producing a deep cultural transformation, sowing the seeds of a truly European generation.

While offering university students the possibility of spending part of their academic programs abroad, Erasmus was built on the intuition that European citizenship is born of experience; that one isn't born European, but becomes European. That there is no better way to feel a part of the European project than having a European experience, by spending a period of study abroad.

The impact of the Erasmus program has, however, remained the advantage of a limited group of young people who were already predisposed to international contact due to their privileged backgrounds and education. The attempts to widen the range of beneficiaries, such as Erasmus+, did produce some positive effects, but within limits. They have not successfully penetrated the collective imagination of young Europeans yet. Nor have they been able to significantly alter their perception of the opportunities at hand.

In 2012, a manifesto in favour of «one year of European civic service open to all» was launched by the sociologist Ulrich Beck and the MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit. They collected the signatures of hundreds of Europe's leading figures from the political and cultural sectors, from Jacques Delors to Rem Koolhaas, various Nobel prize winners, as well as the president of the European Parliament.

From then on, various initiatives and experiments have taken place, including the very promising experience of the «European Solidarity Corps», which is the essential preamble to any further development. These experiences have all been useful, but they haven't gone far enough.

Today, the conditions are ripe for a quantum leap which would lead to the establishment of a voluntary European Civic Service, open to all 18-25 year olds.

It would be a chance for all young Europeans (not just students), to spend between 6 months to 1 year in a European country of their choice, within which they could gain meaningful, hands-on work experience in the social, cultural or environmental sectors. An opportunity for all young people, not just those who are already engaged in the voluntary sector, to improve the world in which they live, as well as establish themselves within society.

The name which could identify this project is Odysseus. Not because it's particularly original (it isn't), but because it signals the level of ambition a program like this one should have. While the Erasmus program was born in 1987, inspired by one of the greatest humanists in European history, Odysseus refers to the character, which, more than any other, has incarnated curiosity and adventure. It symbolizes the voyage of discovery of "the other", of the unknown that causes fear until it is confronted and finally "known".

The main difference between Odysseus and the other existing programs is clear: it would be about going beyond mere transnational cooperation between NGOs, as well as bilateral or multilateral agreements between member States, to create a genuine European Civic Service, aimed at the Union's entire community, based on a stable institutional framework within which member states can cooperate.

The problem today is not to add yet another piece to the infinite mosaic of Community programs. It is a matter of reinventing the European identity starting from the most basic question: what do we have to pass on to an 18-year-old? And, above all, can we imagine that the European integration could be set in motion again by tapping into the curiosity, the sense of adventure and the legitimate desire of the young to find their own place in the world?

## 5. The Capital City

Brussels is a city that one can cross from end to end without even being aware that it is the capital of Europe. In a kaleidoscopic city, a multi-ethnic agglomeration of very heterogeneous communities, the only district that is completely devoid of personality is the one where the headquarters of the Union's institutions are located and where some fifty thousand employees and tens of thousands of lobbyists, journalists and researchers work<sup>9</sup>.

Here there are no grand perspectives, no monuments, no meeting places. Only twenty or so flags facing the harmless curves of the Berlaymont, the seat of the Commission, and the confusedly postmodern building that houses

the European Parliament.

In part, the appearance of the European quarter reflects the fact that Brussels has become the capital of the Union somewhat in secret: it has never been formally recognised as such. Similarly, when the decision was taken to invest three hundred million to build what has in fact become the seat of the European Parliament, still formally based in Strasbourg, it was done on the sly, labelling the massive hemicycle as a «congress hall».

Of course, during this umpteenth semi-clandestine process (it is no coincidence if, in broader terms, Régis Debray was able to speak of a «stealth strategy» for the European construction)<sup>10</sup>, nobody wanted to attract attention by recruiting great architects and designing iconic projects. The end result is what any visitor to the European quarter can see: 85 office blocks which more or less represent the transposition into the real world of the euro banknotes' cognitive framework, aseptically devoid of recognisable faces and monuments.

It is true that this is not the time to launch pharaonic architectural projects to remedy this situation: they would certainly be poorly welcomed, not only by eurosceptics but also by the majority of Europe's defenders. However, softer instruments do exist, such as public space redesign and public art projects, which are capable of transforming the appearance of a neighbourhood and releasing a strong symbolic charge.

A «Eurotopia», a space for meeting, reflection and discussion in which architecture does not create obstacles but breaks them down: the architects of the Traumnovelle collective exhibited their solutions for reinventing the European city district at the Venice Biennale and at the Bozar in Brussels, but many other ideas are possible. Why not launch a major international competition that would mobilise the continent's best architects and artists around an explicit objective: to give a soul to the capital of Europe?

## 6. A network of Europa-café

Rural Europe is the black hole of the continent. This is where the strongest resistance to the integration process is concentrated today, where the rhetoric of sovereignist movements finds its most fertile ground, based on the socio-economic dynamics that are increasingly distancing peripheral territories from urban centres that are benefiting from globalisation. Yet, during the centuries of anarchy and violence which followed the fall of the Roman Empire, it was not in cities but in the countryside that Europe was born, thanks to the network of monasteries that developed all over the continent.

9. Ludovic Lamant, *Bruxelles chantiers. Une critique architecturale de l'Europe*, Lux, 2018.

10. Régis Debray, *L'Europe fantôme*, Paris, Gallimard, p.9.

As Paolo Rumiz wrote in a fascinating book<sup>11</sup>, the Benedictine monks built Europe with the sole force of example, restoring order to a territory that had been abandoned, preserving and passing on the classics of antiquity, creating islands of civilisation and solidarity in the midst of chaos. But let us not imagine a process that is too austere. As Rumiz remarks, the geography of the historic vineyards in Europe largely overlaps with that of the monasteries: monks also conquered Europe with wine and beer, of which they remain among the best producers.

Today, it is clear that, for Europe, the ability to reconquer the countryside depends first and foremost on economic and social policies that would reduce the distance between the centre and the periphery. No one can imagine that cultural initiatives alone can reverse the trend towards greater polarisation which has been going on for decades. But this does not mean that culture has no role to play.

The European Commission has had programmes for several years to preserve traditions and promote new cultural initiatives in the countryside ; but, again, a Cultural New Deal should have the capacity to think outside established frameworks.

If, as George Steiner said, cafés are the basis of European culture, why not take up on a continental scale the initiative «1000 cafés to revitalise the countryside» launched by the French NGO “S.O.S.” with the support of the French government ? As its name indicates, it is a public call for tenders addressed to municipalities of less than 3500 inhabitants that will allow the opening of one thousand cafés. The only condition for access to funding is that the town does not already have a café. In addition to functioning as a café, these places will also have other functions (bread and grocery store with local products, post office relay) and will make computers available to reduce the digital divide.

If an initiative of this kind was to be extended on a continental scale, one could imagine that this network of «Europa cafés» could also play the role of cultural catalyst, creating places of aggregation and debate on the basis of tried and tested formats. One such model is that of the «Democracy Cafés», created by the British NGO «My Life, My Say», which took up the tradition of the 17th century English coffeehouse to involve thousands of young people in discussions about their future in Britain after Brexit. Developed with the explicit aim of bridging the generational and territorial divides exacerbated by Brexit, Democracy Cafés are held regularly in hundreds of localities, particularly outside major cities. Each time they bring together groups of 30-40 young people with the aim of offering a form of expression to the frustrations of

a generation which voted overwhelmingly against leaving the European Union and is now looking anxiously to its future. In 2018, the Democracy Cafés won the «Changemaker of the Year» award at the National Democracy Awards presented by the UK government.

## 7. A Babel project for voice translation

The enormous apparatus that ensures the translation of the European Parliament’s proceedings into all the languages of the Union is often the subject of mockery and polemics. It is, in fact, a structure which mobilises impressive resources, more than a thousand people, including more than 600 translators, and sometimes produces quite comedic effects.

Few people know, however, that in recent years the European Parliament’s database has become the most important source for artificial intelligence companies working on the development of voice translation systems. Where else can one find an archive of simultaneous translations in 24 languages, publicly available and produced with the highest standards of professionalism ?

Once again, the rule according to which public investment produces unexpected benefits for innovation in the private sector is confirmed. Why not take a step forward and focus, as Jean-Noël Tronc suggests, on a research project which (like the human genome one which has mobilized scientists from all over the world), would aim to produce, say within five years, a mobile device consisting in a wireless headset, for direct and verbal translation enabling two speakers of different languages to speak and listen to one another naturally, in their respective languages ? “The Commission, says Tronc, has proposed allocating 5.5 billion euros per year to a «capacity» fund for common defence ; let’s allocate 500 million euros to a Babel project whose political effect will be decisive for the European Union and will ensure huge productivity gains in all areas of its activity»<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusion

Far from being exhaustive, the proposals put forward in this report are intended as incentives to start drawing the outlines of a possible Cultural New Deal for Europe.

It is clear that the future of the Union will depend on the solutions that it is able to provide to the immense economic and social challenges of our time, starting with the dramatic rise in inequality.

However, as Paul David Henson, better known by his stage name Bono, says, the future of Europe will also de-

11. Paolo Rumiz, *Il filo infinito*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2019.

12. Jean-Noël Tronc, *Et si on recommençait par la culture? Plaidoyer pour la souveraineté européenne*, Paris, Seuil, 2019.

pend on its ability to move from the state of an «idea» to that of a «feeling». Because in politics feelings tend to take over ideas, and leaving them to nations and nationalists alone is a risk we can no longer afford to take.

Certainly, there are policies that have the capacity to transform themselves into elements of identity. This has been the case with the NHS - National Health Service, the UK's healthcare system which has become one of the main sources of pride for British citizens (and was weaponized by the Brexit campaign).

The two main guidelines presented by President von der Leyen at the beginning of her mandate - digitalisation and the environment - have the potential to become fundamental components of the new European identity.

First, the ability to impose principles which form the basis of civil coexistence in the real life of our continent, in the digital sphere. So that, rather than giving the Commissioner responsible for migration policies the title of Commissioner for "Protecting the European Way of Life", the Commissioner in charge digitalisation might better deserve it.

Second, facing the colossal challenge of rethinking our economy and society, taking into account the constraints imposed by sustainable development, with the aim of setting a global benchmark.

However, for Europe to become a feeling, technical choices, while necessary, will not be sufficient.

Boredom has done a lot for Europe, but it is no longer enough. Directives on marmalade and recreational fishing will always be useful, but we need more than that. The European Union is the first attempt in history to create a supranational whole in times of peace, without weapons and without threats, on the basis of the free adhesion of its people. No political project is more exhilarating than this one: nothing more extensive or more beautiful has been achieved in the recent history of mankind.

Today, any one of us can walk down the street, get behind the wheel and drive to Tallinn without showing his or her passport even once. Euro-tedium has presented this as a commonplace assumption, while it is, in fact, a fabulous event.

For a time to be revolutionary, someone has to realise that it is so. In recent decades, the pro-European has become a creature of caution instead of conquest, which has allowed his opponents to usurp change, when all they are offering is a pernicious step backwards.

The Covid-19 crisis may have been a setback for national-populist movements throughout Europe, but it would

be an illusion to think that this trend is destined to last. European construction must provide answers to the aspirations of its citizens: at a material level, of course, but also at an emotional level.

Only the naïve underestimate the weight of ideals and passions. Realists, on the contrary, have always known their power and know that no lasting change is possible without them.