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Understanding otherness through the prism of EU cultural policy: a case study

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1. Introduction

In our contemporary societies, "understanding otherness" is not merely a moral or normative principle as it also embodies a deeply pragmatic necessity that comes from living in an increasingly multicultural and pluralistic society. The fear of the otherness, such as different religions or cultures, is the most serious obstacle to becoming aware of this reality. In many ways, institutions often generate fear in order to manipulate people's attitudes and behaviour. As "institutional fear" is a form of "disciplinary power" (Foucault 1977), "politics of fear" have been increasingly successful in entrenching new social divides (Wodak 2015).

My reflection concerns the other side of the coin, namely how institutions try to prevent the fear of otherness by using culture as a strategic tool. More specifically, I will focus on the emerging European Union (EU) cultural policy and the contradictions regarding its presuppositions and practices. The aim of this paper is to analyze an empirical case, the Festival of Europe (*Festival d'Europa*) in Florence, which deals with the fear of the otherness using various aesthetic and cultural tools. Organized by institutional actors with the involvement of civil society, the Festival of Europe is a complex macro-event, which takes place in Florence during the month of May every two years. The first Festival of Europe was held in 2011 and during each of its biennial editions it has hosted seminars, workshops, conferences as well as cultural events such as concerts, exhibitions and theatrical performances etc.[1].

By carrying out this case study, I have attempted to analyze what occurs when Europe and culture meet at local level. In particular, I focus on two topics: the origins of the Festival of Europe and the ideas of culture performed by local actors during the 2015 edition of the Festival. I intend to discuss how the EU and local institutions have directly or indirectly moulded the idea of culture from a top-down perspective. This analysis is complemented by a bottom-up perspective that analyses whether and in what way cultural actors have, consciously or unconsciously, recycled institutional discourses or developed new strategies of representing the issue of "understanding otherness" through the prisms of Europe and culture.

[1] More specifically, 51 cultural events (concerts, exhibitions, theatrical performances, etc.), 52 cognitive events (conferences, seminars, workshops) and 8 ritual-like events (such as commemorative ceremonies) were organized during the 2015 edition of the Festival.

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2. Key concepts on "Europe of culture"

Before dealing with these issues, I would first like to briefly examine some of the key concepts of EU cultural policy and explain my conceptual framework.

EU cultural policy represents a complex case of Europeanization. Ever since the EU gained formal legal competence in the cultural sector with the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), there has been an increase in the ambiguities related to the multiple usages of the word 'culture' at EU level (Gordon 2010). I intend to reconstruct two key concepts of EU cultural policy, "heritage" and "diversity" and discuss how they imply various ways of handling the relationship with otherness. In my opinion, the EU's approach to this issue has three main forms — essentialist, transnational, and cosmopolitan — which are currently intertwined in EU discourses on culture.

An essentialist approach characterized the first attempts to develop a European cultural policy. From the 1970s onwards, the functionalist frame of integration did not appear to be capable of stemming the progressive thinning of the so-called "permissive consensus". In the context of the legitimacy crisis, EU politicians believed that it was essential to encourage the gradual emergence of a sense of community. Culture and other concepts from the cultural field such as identity, heritage, symbols, were increasingly invoked in order to enhance popular support for European integration (Laffan 2001). The guiding idea was to bring to light the traits of a European cultural identity based on common cultural roots and heritage. The Europeanization of cultural heritage is materially achieved by subsuming national high-cultural artefacts — architectural heritage is the most commonly used example — under the label of European cultural heritage (Calligaro 2013). In this way, "heritage is colonized by the EU" (Lähdesmäki 2012a: 72) with the aim of stressing the unity/distinctiveness of Europe at cultural level. Here essentialism is clearly unfolding. Ultimately, this Eurocentric position represents European cultural identity as a superior civilization compared to others (Delanty 1995; Shore 1996). Under the label of "common cultural heritage", we find an essentialist position characterizing EU cultural policy at least in official discourses, which fails to take account of the issues posed by the growing cultural heterogeneity of European countries.

Due to profound sociopolitical changes, since the 1990s the EU discourse on culture has partially shifted away from an essentialist position. The current mainstream of EU cultural policy focuses mainly on the concept of diversity, or rather on trying to hold unity and diversity together as implied in the official motto of the EU "unity in diversity". In the name of diversity, EU discourses and programmes have embraced a more flexible concept of culture even if its meaning remains ambiguous and divergent.

In my opinion, there are two new directions in EU cultural policy regarding how to conceive the issue of cultural diversity, which I refer to as the "transnational"

and "cosmopolitan" approaches. As suggested by Victor Roudometof (2005), we must clearly distinguish cosmopolitanism from transnationalism. The term transnationalism has not only been used in relation to migratory and diasporic phenomena, but also to indicate the formation of networks that cross national boundaries (Mau 2010). More generally, according to Ulrich Beck (2000), transnationalism involves life forms and actions whose internal logic takes no account of distance. In this vein, experiences such as sampling ethnic food or visiting foreign countries may be defined as transnational. However, transnational experiences are not cosmopolitan in themselves. Cosmopolitanism is a very different concept because it implies a reflexive effort. Scholars agree that reflexivity is essential for defining a 'cosmopolitanism subjectivity'. As Gerard Delanty (2011: 634) states, cosmopolitan experiences include reflexively "the perspective of others [...] into one's own identity, interests or orientation in the world". Transnational experiences do not necessarily produce cosmopolitan/reflexive involvement, in fact they could be limited to a superficial contact with otherness. I consider this conceptual distinction between transnationalism and cosmopolitanism useful for analyzing EU cultural policy and the ways it implicitly addresses the fear of otherness.

Through the concept of transnationalism, it is possible to categorize some trends in EU cultural policy, such as those concerning the commodification and the celebration of cultural diversity. At EU level, cultural diversity has become synonymous with "richness since it concerns available cultural 'goods', whether they are high art masterpieces or popular 'hits'", in a "more aesthetic sense" (Sassatelli 2008: 232). In a post-modern vein, cultural diversities become commodified products, according to a conceptualization that makes them gravitate towards economic objectives. From this perspective, the humanistic concept of diversity is not immune to the constraints exercised by the "paradigm of creativity", on which EU market-oriented cultural policies (art industries, audiovisual sector etc.) are increasingly based (García Leiva 2011). The tendency to celebrate cultural diversity among European people as if they were fixed entities is complementary to this form of instrumentalization. It is a form of rhetoric regarding an unproblematic condition, which does not account for the fact that cultural identities are changing and conflicting. This can lead to the "leisurization of cultural diversity" of which the "Mini-Europe" case is a clear example (Lähdesmäki 2012b).

However, EU institutions have not remained unaffected by the prospect of an inclusive concept of diversity, through which an approach that I call "cosmopolitan" is based. There are clear elements that show how issues regarding migration and ethnic and religious diversity, that were largely overlooked in the previous programmes, have become areas of EU interest and action in the cultural field (Barrett 2013; Calligaro 2014). This is true especially after 2008, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Intercultural dialogue is conceived as a tool to implement European values and citizenship (CEC 2009), and as a priority in order

to face the increasing internal European diversity resulting from international migration. However, the effectiveness of this more inclusive/cosmopolitan[2] direction of EU cultural policy is difficult to evaluate due to differences in the interpretations of the concept of cultural diversity among the Member States (Meinhof, Triandafyllidou 2006). Moreover, the continuing EU crises (economic, financial, migration, etc.) have led to the revival of nationalism penetrating cultural policy-making, for which the current EU cultural policy regarding intercultural dialogue appears to be increasingly "ill-equipped" (Vidmar-Horvat 2012: 41).

Using the concepts of "essentialism", "transnationalism" and "cosmopolitanism", I intend to analyze the cultural performances of the 2015 Festival edition. However beforehand I would like to discuss some of the general characteristics of the Festival which show how the idea of a "Europe of culture" is put into practice at local level.

3. The origins of the Festival of Europe

When and how did the Festival originate? This point can be summarized in a sentence uttered by an institutional actor I interviewed: "The Festival is the brainchild of the European University Institute, created in order to frame the State of the Union conference" (institutional actor)[3].

The European University Institute (EUI) was the driving force behind the realization of the Festival. Founded in 1972, the EUI is an international organization based in Fiesole, Florence, which is linked to European institutions yet remains independent. In 2011, the EUI designed and organized the first "State of the Union", an annual three-day conference involving national and European institutions. It was while this political conference was being organized that the idea for the Festival of Europe was born.

[2] I consider the intercultural perspective as part of a cosmopolitan approach which can be found in EU cultural policies.

[3] In order to reconstruct the origins of the Festival, I interviewed four institutional organizers (one representative from the Tuscan Region, two representatives from the Fondazione Sistema Toscana, and a representative from the Europe Direct Office). As regards the cultural actors' strategies of representing Europe-culture nexus, I used project schedules of each event and semi-structured interviews. Detailed project schedules of each event consist in the project proposal forms that civil society organizations filled in to put forward their candidacy for participating in the 2015 Festival edition. I also carried out fourteen semi-structured interviews with the organizers of single cultural events, six of whom were representatives of public entities (museums, public agencies, etc.), five represented non-profit associations and three were private subjects (art galleries, individual exhibitors etc.). I used a 'content analysis card' (Losito 1993) for project schedules in order to classify the cultural events of the Festival according to type (exhibition, guided tour, etc.), the actors involved, how culture is conceived (entertainment, diversity, heritage, etc.; high/popular). All of the interviews held with institutional organizers and cultural actors were subjected to thematic analysis. The coding of data was based on pre-set codes or open coding. Pre-set codes were used for the interviews held with institutional actors in order to classify and compare the information concerning the origins of the Festival. Open coding was used for the interviews with the cultural actors which enabled us to gain insights on the emerging nuances of meaning attributed to the Europe-culture nexus by local actors. Some parts of the research here presented are also in Verderame (2017).

During the first edition of the Festival (2011), the EUI presented itself as its sole creator and promoter, but it was mainly financed by a "Management Partnership" composed of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM), the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP), whose representatives took part in the organizing Committee supporting the EUI. Management partnerships are tools created by the EC to facilitate the co-financing of information and communication measures for the general public (CEC 2004). Proposed during a particularly difficult period of the EU's political legitimacy characterized by uncertainties related to the approval of the Constitutional Treaty, Management partnerships are flexible instruments created to improve communication regarding the EU. Through the cooperation of Member States that chose to use this tool voluntarily, the European Commission's strategy was to encourage the "indirect centralised management" of communication activities, by "adapting communication to local circumstances and linking it to national political agendas" (CEC 2007: 14). In 2008 the Italian government, as well as the EC and EP, subscribed to the Management Partnership called "Communicating EU in Italy" (*Insieme per comunicare l'Unione Europea in Italia*). It was this partnership that funded the first edition of the Festival. It is reasonable to say that the Festival originated from an institutional strategy aimed at communicating Europe. But why create just a festival? Two institutional actors (from Fondazione Sistema Toscana and Europe Direct Office) clarify this point.

> During all three editions [2011, 2013 and 2015] we attempted to combine leisure time with serious themes; culture, reflection and political thinking. This is a way to bring Europe closer to the people rather than to boring, staid professors.
>
> We must be aware that some of the people who attend are unfortunately poorly and ill-informed. Therefore, the best way to attract their attention is not to stupefy them with an overly academic approach, but to amuse and entertain them.

In my opinion, a clear instrumental approach to culture is here unfolding. Among the multiple instrumentalities of which culture can become the subject, it is not new to promote consensus by hosting spectacular or ludic events (Philo, Kearns 1993). Today this old (and still current) way of instrumentalizing culture blends with other forms of cultural governmentality that mould the urban landscape of postmodern societies, where entertainment has become the core of widespread festivalization and aestheticized capitalist-driven commodification of life (Harvey 1990). The not-so-hidden strategy behind the realization of the Festival as a whole was to "popularize Europe", by simply "attaching" culture to a political event (the State of the Union conference) in order to create a legitimate social image.

The tendency to treat culture as a synonym for leisure has been a constant in all editions of the Festival. In my opinion, this also reflects the difficulties that

both institutional organizers and local actors met in representing Europe in cultural terms. Regarding the decisions made by the Festival's organizers, it is important to note the substantial lack of consistency of the cultural programs. In short, in all Festival editions, the organizers chose not to steer cultural events towards specific ways of understanding the Europe-culture nexus, but to give wide freedom of choice to the local actors concerning the contents of their performances. This is proven by the highly indefinite formula with which the applications for participation were collected. In the 2013 and 2015 editions, the participants submitted their proposals for cultural and other events by filling in an online form, in which the local actors had to indicate the recipients, budget, location and equipment required as well as a description of the events they proposed. In the online form, the Festival organizers did not expect local actors to specify the relationship between the event and Europe. As regards to the cultural events, it was the Festival "per se" that counted rather than its content. The Festival has functioned as a simple container of everything proposed from below.

4. Festival cultural performances between essentialism, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism

The lack of more specific directions — an oversight of the institutional organizers — for implementing the Europe-culture nexus further enhanced the ludic/recreational nature of the Festival's cultural events. It can be argued that the very idea of creating a festival has guided the type of performance proposed by local actors. As the organizer of one of the musical events stated "when we decided to take part in the Festival this is what we had in mind: to play our music and entertain people". In fact, the idea itself of a "festival" is to offer recreation and entertainment. Many of the cultural events held in the 2015 Festival were entertaining performances (21/51, 41%) of both popular and high-culture genres.

However, in the Festival's staged performances, culture was not only considered as being synonymous with leisure. As reported in Tab. 1, two core themes emerge as regards to the actors' performances: culture in terms of local heritage and culture as diversity.

Staging local heritage depended on how local actors — especially public cultural institutions (museums, libraries) and private entities (art galleries) —

Culture as	Number of events
Leisure (high or popular)	21
Diversity	17
Local heritage	9
Other (e.g. environmental education)	4
Total	51

Table 1: The Festival's cultural events subdivided according to the concept of culture.

considered the concept of culture, using it as a tool for promoting the city's identity in the broadest sense. In my view, an essentialist vision of culture characterized these events based on local cultural heritage. A civilizing mission, similar to the mission that the EU claims for Europe on the basis of its cultural heritage, emerges from the words of a cultural actor when he states that "Florence remains the great Capital of Culture for Italy and Europe". Some of the events have assumed this essentialist-celebratory nature, by highlighting the "centrality" of Florence and its great artists for European and universal culture. Moreover, there have also been events in which local cultural heritage has been commodified. Cultural objects, such as a historic buildings or private collections, have been commercially exploited by organizing paid visits. From this perspective, cultural heritage represents a strategic tool for «selling places» (Philo, Kearns 1993) when it comes to attracting tourists and marketing the authenticity of cultural sites. However, a common characteristic of all types of Festival events centered on cultural heritage is that they aimed to promote high culture, top class clothing to show/sell to well-educated people.

As regards to the strategies of representing cultural diversity, local actors have shifted away from the concept of a high-elitist culture by conceiving it as a "way of life", namely as values, customs, everyday cultural objects and practices etc. It was mainly non-profit organizations that promoted performances centered on culture as diversity. They have assumed two forms which indirectly follow the two main configurations of the EU discourse on diversity: transnational and cosmopolitan.

The transnational configuration has this basic feature: relationship with diversity is embodied in cultural objects that are part of people's lives and that mediate (real or imagined) cross-border relationships. Food is definitely one of the most sensitive things to aesthetic and cultural differences in the life world. Some of the events of the Festival were centered on the celebration of culinary diversity with regard to Europe and the rest of the world: from Greek to Andalusian cuisine as well as Jewish dishes. Cultural diversity was represented through "the tasting of ethnic foods" or by staging "cooking competitions to offer the public the best Andalusian traditional recipe" etc. It is a celebratory style for approaching cultural diversity. By focusing on the celebration of culinary traditions, this representation of cultural diversity reproduced the same weaknesses of the EU rhetoric at local level. This style of representation is suitable for creating experiences in which diversity is merely sampled. Viewed from a critical perspective, these cultural performances depoliticize the difference (Karaca 2009) by hiding more important political issues, like the contrast between a homogenizing EU food policy and the preservation of local culinary traditions.

Through a series of very different performances, local actors strayed away from this celebratory style, and adopted a more cosmopolitan approach to

culture. The event called "Bundesallee 133" had a "paradigmatic" significance for its modes of approaching diversity and its proposed forms of aesthetic involvement. Organized by the cultural association Attodue, "Bundesallee 133" staged the burning of the books in Berlin (similar events also took place in many other German cities) which occurred on the 10th of March 1933, during the Nazi rise to power. What would have been of us Europeans if the Nazis had succeeded in destroying the masterpieces written by Proust, Joyce, Thomas Mann and many others? "Bundesallee 133" gave a magnificent representation. In one of the rooms of the Oblate Library where the event was held, actors wearing white hazmat suits and gas masks roamed between unusually empty shelves in order to represent a sort of "day after", as if all the books in the world had disappeared forever. In another totally dark room, dozens of dimly illuminated books were stacked haphazardly on tables as if they were on a funeral pyre, while in the background a voice called out the names of the authors and the titles of the books banned by the Nazi regime. In yet another room, motionless and grim-faced actors on pedestals, came slowly back to life and began to read passages from the burned books as the spectators passed by. The point is that diversity was dramatized rather than merely celebrated in Bundesallee 133. Cultural diversity, embodied in the variety of the burned books, was subsumed into a broader concept: "good" as opposed to the "radical evil" embodied by Nazism. In Bundesallee 133, various aesthetic performances staged the good/evil dichotomy thus transmitting a highly generalizable message to the audience. Other Festival events also embraced a cosmopolitan script. Examples include a documentary on mental hardship and social intolerance in Chiapas (Mexico), a photo exhibition dedicated to the women from the poorest parts of the world, and a walking tour to various places of worship in the city (mosques, synagogues) organized in order to promote interreligious knowledge and dialogue. However, in all of the various cosmopolitan performances, "Europeanness" was not directly thematized. Paradoxically, the more local actors attempted to modulate the concept of culture in cosmopolitan terms, the more they neglected Europe as a reference horizon.

5. Concluding remarks

By carrying out a case study on EU cultural policy, the paper aimed to explore the ways used for addressing and supposedly solving diversity-fear problems using the strategic tool of culture. The case study on the Festival of Europe revealed a number of critical issues concerning the relationship between Europe and culture when put into practice at local level.

The overriding strategy that inspired the Festival's cultural programmes was paradoxically the deliberate decision "not to act". As Bachrach and Baratz (1962) suggested some time ago, "non-decision making" represents the other "face of power" which manifests itself when controversial matters — for example European culture — are prevented from developing into issues which call for

decisions. As regards to cultural events, the Festival organizers considered them as tools for lightening, through entertainment, the far too institutional approach in communicating EU, which was the main reason behind the Festival. However, this conception of culture as leisure was not directly imposed.

According to my analysis, local cultural actors have seldom used their freedom of choice in order to develop new strategies for representing a cultural Europe and the relationship with otherness. Interestingly, without formal constraints, cultural actors have reproduced some of the EU rhetoric on culture and its weaknesses at local level, such as an essentialist and high-culture conception of heritage, the tendency to commodify cultural objects and to celebrate cultural diversity without problematizing it. A sort of isomorphism has matured between EU discourse and local civil society regarding the way of conceiving culture and the relationship with otherness. I have tried to show three exemplary modes that frame this relationship: essentialism, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism, which are three paradigmatic approaches for dealing with the fear of "otherness" in our contemporary society.

The first essentialist approach relegates otherness to a subordinate position. It can be said that "essentialism" is still the main lacuna of the EU discourse on culture. I do not want to argue that the EU policy on cultural heritage is essentialist in nature. However, we must be aware of the risk of "essentializing culture", which occurs when it is conceived as an object with certain fixed boundaries. The problem does not lie in admitting the existence of a "European culture", but in conceiving it as a "coherent whole" which is "uncontaminated" and has no external influences.

The second approach, which I call "transnational", consists in depoliticizing and commodifying cultural diversity. In this case, the problem of fear is simply neutralized or immunized, through a leisurization of the relationship with otherness.

Finally, I have highlighted the presence of a third approach that is more "cosmopolitan" in nature. It consisted in performances regarding "hot" issues, such as memory wars or migrant social exclusion, that were capable of arousing thoughtful involvement. Although few in the Festival context, these performances showed a different way of managing the diversity-fear issue, whose essential feature is a reflexive effort.

It is hoped that cultural policy at both EU institutional and local levels will evolve towards a cosmopolitan configuration which is essential for preventing the decline of the European project and the revival of nationalisms and the particularities of all sorts that characterize these hard times.

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