



Social Platform  
on Cultural Heritage  
and European Identities

# Instrumentalizing European Cultural Heritage: exclusionary challenges & suggestions for inclusion

Vision Document  
(cultural inclusion axis)

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### Current Context

There cannot be a formal definition of what European culture and European identity are and how these meet so as to generate European heritage, as on the ground there are multiple European cultures, identities and, thus, heritages. **European culture reflects the constant negotiation between different local, national and transnational identities, languages, traditions and memories, multiple sets of values and everyday practices, imaginations, foods, sounds and ideas.** At the same time, far from being linear and progressive, this has been a process embedded in history and, thus, made up from scientific achievements, stories of coexistence and intellectual progress, but also fierce civil, national and colonization wars and legacies of exclusion. This field of battles and alliances produces over time practices and vocabularies that exceed the words or deeds of the individuals, groups and nation-states engaged in it, forming a fluid and contingent sum bigger than its parts and acquiring a life of its own: we should schematically call this 'European culture'.

So, culture works in complex and reciprocal ways. This, however, is at odds with the fact that the very notion of heritage evokes, with its connotation of inheritance, a relationship of ownership and 'historical asset'. Scholar literature has examined in detail the issue of the instrumentalization of national heritage for the construction of national identity that give shape to the 'self' and the 'other'. A plurality of actors have constructed national identities as a sort of 'imagined communities', along with the ways to maintain and reinforce them (Anderson, 1983). The same applies to the construction of the European identity, a top down economic project that had to be translated into a political one following the formation of the European Economic Community in 1958 and its transformation into the European Community after the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. **Transnational, state and semi-state actors, institutions and experts** (and the constituencies they seek to mobilize) have made use of specific kinds of material and non-material cultural practices and values during several decades so as to **construct normative types of 'being European' by referring to a norm of 'European cultural heritage'**: these have unavoidably generated dividing lines among different populations both within and beyond Europe.



This 'imagined' European canon has been gradually related to (among others) the concepts of **liberalism, democracy, secularism, rationalization and individual human rights**. European cultural heritage denotes a cultural rather than a political identity, which embodies processes of modernization, cosmopolitanism, self-reflection and human progress. In parallel with the labour market dynamic under the conditions of welfare state mass democracies, these ideas have been translated in practice through various institutions, policies and discourses into **a culture of education, mobility, and consumption**. To be European means to have gained through history privileges, rights and life patterns that populations in other places do not have and which refer to attending the university and gaining higher education qualifications so as to improve one's intellectual capacity and material status; to be able and willing to move across national and European space effortlessly in search for better job or education opportunities and different life experiences; and to be able to recognize and satisfy one's needs, wants and desires through the consumption of available goods, cultural products and services. People living around Europe are able to live 'a life of their own' materially, spatially, temporally, and socially.

With the development of the 'free wage labourer' of modern capitalism and especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, however, **these values invested in cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and freedom, however, have been gradually transformed into a process of individualization and an exclusionary lifestyle** - stripped off ideas about individual emancipation, solidarity and socialization. At the same time, **inequality** among individuals and groups residing in the continent has not been eradicated, but on the contrary, it is becoming sharper transforming participation in this 'European identity' into a complex and unequal process. The increasingly divisive tendency in European heritage practices, at the national, sub- and supra-national levels, is becoming more acute in the early 21st century given the still unfolding post-GFC economic crisis and the austerity policies imposed upon populations, as well as the challenge of the current refugee crisis in Europe.

### **Challenge 1: European Cultural Heritage as European property: European identity excluding groups and nations beyond Europe**



In terms of everyday life in European nation-states, cultural heritage has been associated with a particular lifestyle and culture of consumption, mobility and individual fulfilment, which is exactly what migrant and refugee populations are striving for when trying to arrive and settle down in Europe. While access to this culture has been (more) difficult for those non- Europeans, during the last few years discrimination becomes gradually acute: political parties, national governments and civil society actors recall the core liberal values of European identity in order not to include and respect, but, instead, to exclude and undervalue those populations wishing to become part of this cultural heritage themselves.

It has become common sense that liberal values, such as equality, respect for diversity and tolerance, have become a norm in contemporary nation-states across Europe enabling not only co-existence among native populations, but also the integration of refugee and migrant groups. Departing from what has been understood as 'European cultural heritage', state and international actors have drafted policies in order to integrate non-European populations and secure social cohesion. Some years ago, though, and while minority populations have been often victims of racial and religious discrimination, official political discourse proclaimed the death of multiculturalism that was followed by a debate around the failures of migrants' integration policies. The challenges posed by ethnic, religious and cultural difference to European societies have become more intense during the last few years: far-right parties gain electoral success and xenophobic rhetoric and racism becomes mainstream in everyday life around Europe. These actors along with populist parties, national governments and media outlets, instrumentalize a so-called 'European cultural heritage' so as to prove that especially Muslim populations and practices cannot be tolerated due to the Enlightenment and Christian legacies and humanistic traditions of Europe: far right discourse is gradually taking a liberal turn to become a 'principled liberal intolerance' (Mouritsen and Olsen, 2013). Cultural racism is advanced against both minority groups already residing in member states and those migrant and refugee populations arriving to Europe. Inequality and exclusion are put forward exactly in the name of European cultural heritage by institutional actors so as to mark borders between European and non-European populations. While some years ago the ways nation-states treated non-European populations significantly differed, the protracted economic crisis and the most recent refugee crisis have transformed



intolerance, and in many cases racism, into a unified everyday political response emerging from the mainstream liberal center of Europe.

### **Challenge 2: European cultural heritage as a privilege of the few: European Identity excluding groups and nations within Europe**

So, the canon of European heritage promotes a normative understanding of what it means to be European which has resulted into an exclusionary lifestyle for those non-European populations. But the culture of mobility, consumption and higher education has not been equally accessible to European populations either- as, for example, to unemployed young people, older generations unable to perform mobility and use the internet, or single mothers struggling to cope with family and work obligations. At the same time, material inequality among individuals and groups residing in the continent is becoming sharper: the severe global economic crisis currently under way has had further impact on the fundamental freedoms and life patterns of European citizens, particularly those in the continent's periphery and those already vulnerable. The under-25 age group is suffering the most from unemployment, while many young graduates are migrating for employment from the South to the North; the number of pensioners receiving primary and minimum pensions has grown, along with poverty rates among older persons; in face of welfare system collapse, all the more undocumented domestic migrant women workers are employed in care services (cleaning, taking care of elderly and children), most often in illegal ways. Several communities across Europe experience important setbacks in social rights traditionally considered as an established European legacy and self-determination becomes all the more difficult for a growing number of people, who, as a result, are not recognized as 'worthy' and are gradually excluded from the so-called 'European cultural heritage'.

At the same time, in the post 1989 liberal world, terms as 'exploitation', 'class', or 'socioeconomic redistribution' have withdrawn and people understand themselves and mobilize under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality (Fraser 1995). State actors and transnational institutions (also) promote this kind of identity politics within which material inequality is not part of the contemporary political imaginary. Youth unemployment or age discrimination are most often attributed to personal failures: it is not governments to blame if



individuals are not capable to cope with the contemporary world. So, while paying lip services to liberal values and European identity, national and European politicians and institutions have done little to control the privatization of education and transportation and the autonomization of market forces. At the same time, when crisis erupted, an intra-European division emerged between the countries of the North and those of the South that allegedly did not rationalize and progress enough so as to become sufficiently developed and truly European. State actors instrumentalized European heritage in more or less direct ways presenting this not as a right of all, but as a quality and privilege of some among the other individuals, groups and nations in Europe. Exclusion, market forces, competition and individualization of those best equipped to deal with the crisis (individuals, groups and nations) were the concepts emerging as European values throughout the crisis.

### **Conclusions and Keys for Change**

According to a genealogy of identities in Europe, the 'canon' of cultural heritage has been constructed in the postwar welfare European democracies around the concepts of progress, tolerance, freedom and cosmopolitanism. Especially in the post-1989 period, the values invested in these alleged foundations of European history have become an exclusionary lifestyle marking boundaries between Europeans and non- Europeans. During the last few years, material inequality has started to rise dramatically within the continent, in terms of income, access to paid work, health care, education, and culture. The ongoing, multifaceted crisis has challenged the already disputable account of an inclusionary European cultural heritage: the legitimacy of state institutions and the liberal political establishment to respect and defend people's rights have been challenged as a growing number of individuals and groups within the continent are unable to 'perform' their European selves; at the same time, European identity is instrumentalized by state actors so as to exclude groups within nation-states, nation-states within Europe and groups and states beyond Europe. Poor families, unemployed youth, Muslims, women, disabled persons or migrant communities cannot feel 'worthy' enough to be included in the European canon. As a result, in many cases, these ongoing tensions, concerns, and fears coalesce in the two competing axes of Europeanism and anti- Europeanism.



On the one hand, we are aware of the power dynamics engaged in the notion and practice of cultural citizenship, especially during the current critical conjuncture and growing social injustice spreading across Europe. At the same time, we cannot ignore that state and non- state actors unavoidably develop a relation of ownership when it comes to the understanding and promotion of the so-called European heritage and tend to establish normative 'canons' that mark boundaries between people 'worthy' and 'non-worthy'.

Departing from these premises, however, and against a logic of economic reductionism, we believe that there is still space for change when it comes to European culture and its inclusionary potentials. For instance, it may be worth starting from the assumption that culture works in subtle and often unpredictable ways and that its ownership is (at least) bi-directional: **we are owned and influenced by 'our' culture as much as we own and influence it.** It is also necessary, if not urgent, to remind ourselves, as stated in the beginning, that there is not a unique cultural heritage, but, a **plurality of European identities and cultures that are incessantly produced, negotiated and reworked in different locations and periods of history giving shape to different, conflicting or complementary heritages.**

Both these premises bring to light culture's emancipatory aspects: a key for change, thus, might be understanding European heritage differently and, thus, posing a different set of questions, as Lamont notes (2012): **What can be done so as to make sure that 'a larger proportion of the members of our society can be (self) defined as valuable? Is there any way that cultural citizenship (being defined as worthy) can influence access to material and symbolic resources?** Addressing these issues will help us realize on the one hand the impact of the prevailing definitions of European cultural heritage and its implications on racism and exclusion, and, on the other, the **reflexive and liberating potentials that culture** may have in practice.

### Key Questions for a Research Agenda

In trying to understand culture and heritage 'in plural' as a way to enhance cultural justice, a two-folded agenda for research seems to emerge:



The first issue would be to trace **the genealogies of the 'canon' of European cultural heritage**: Instead of measuring levels of identification with the idea of Europe or criticizing the exclusionary aspects implicated in this, academic research and cultural practice should unravel the different actors, geographies and power relations engaged in the creation of the identities that form the 'European canon'. Have different European histories produced different kind of cultures? How have governmental policies and institutions affected the formation of a 'European culture' in different moments in postwar Europe? Are there any silenced or ignored traditions, identities, religions, places and communities in Europe that could generate an alternative understanding of culture? How can exclusionary European traditions, such as these of colonialism or racism, be integrated into a broader representation of European cultural heritage? What is understood as Asian, Indian or American culture(s)? Are these different than the so-called 'European culture'? Coming to terms with a past that has never been linear or glorious might enable us reconcile also with a troubled present and, thus, identify what kind of cultural repertoires and institutions foster each time logics of inclusion.

Another way to tackle the same issue is to focus on the present. Instead of theorizing about the definition of European culture, it may be worth deciphering **what kind of identities are currently produced on the ground** through the (re)working of past traditions as mixed with current conditions and future expectations and fears in specific local spaces across Europe: in which ways migrant communities meet with internet technologies in the capitals of Europe; young people from the South settle down in cities of the North forming a new species of 'migrant' communities; female domestic migrant workers take care of old people in apartments across urban Europe creating a different kind of relationships. What kind of culture(s) and heritage(s) is created during these encounters across Europe? How is the past narrated and reproduced?

At the same time, due to the ongoing crisis a two-folded process is emerging: on the one hand, people who were not politicized in the past mobilize, protest and collectively demand their rights to be restored (re)enacting, thus, a tradition of social mobilizations for human dignity, emancipation and freedom by those in the margins. On the other, individuals form self-organized groups to offer material and psychological support to people in need, both to those belonging to national majorities and to the immigrants and refugees arriving in the continent. While the model of the consumer- citizen as holder of rights is collapsing and self-sufficiency





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is retreating, a variety of new social movements, bottom-up initiatives and new ideas on community arise. What kind of identities and heritages are produced and (re)enacted in these spaces of contention and solidarity? European cultural heritage(s) is re-negotiated vividly on the ground giving a different twist to European identity that remains unexplored.