



# Cultural Base

Social Platform  
on Cultural Heritage  
and European Identities

**Forms and Levels of  
Participation of  
Citizens and Civil  
Society in Debates on  
European Identity and  
its inclusionary/  
exclusionary aspects  
and the role that  
cultural heritage plays  
within this**

**Vision Document  
(cultural inclusion axis)**

Jean-Louis Fabiani / CEU  
31 March 2016

[info@culturalbase.eu](mailto:info@culturalbase.eu)  
[www.culturalbase.eu](http://www.culturalbase.eu)



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 649454





### **Challenge 1: Citizen participation in a disenchanting Europe**

Before entering the analysis of the debate on how European identity is constructed in civil society, it seems necessary to remind the stake-holders of the broader context of citizens' participation. The last thirty years can be characterized by a conjunction of powerful moves that have shaken the grounds of the post World War II order of things:

- an overwhelming technological change with respect to communication systems (the triumph of Internet, its consequences on the printed world and the irresistible rise of social networks).

- the brutal and largely unexpected collapse of existing socialism.

- the rise of NGOs and the shrinking of the nation-state, at least in its older forms.

- the domination of a knowledge society or expert society that has contributed to restructure intellectual work and the intellectuals' presentation of self in the public sphere.

- the extension of the markets and the generalization of commodification

- the emergence of new powers (soon to be new superpowers) and the changing place of Europe in the world system.

Globalization (whatever the limitations of this catchword) has gone along with the emergence of neo-nationalisms, particularly in Europe: revamped populisms are now significant forces on both sides of the former Iron curtain: if the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic) They seem to be a more powerful agent of the European "homogenization", if one may say, than the very modest attempts to delineate common cultural interests (the European capitals of culture come to mind immediately at this point). New contradictions have emerged, and they now shape economic markets as well as social life. In this landscape, the status of Europe is somewhat unclear: on the one hand, it is still a center of power, in its hard and soft versions. Although the mainstream channels of communication and influence are no longer located in the continent, European technology, taste and lifestyles continue to be a global reference and norm.



On the other hand, Europe appears as the land of disillusion and disenchantment. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. The French journal *Esprit* titled one of its issues at the end of the late 1990s: The cultural falling back of Europe (“le repli culturel de l’Europe”). We, the people of Europe, no longer think of ourselves as the symbolic and normative workshop of the world and we fear that we will be soon turned into the dancing masters of the world, as Marx named the European aristocrats the dancing masters of Europe after the French Revolution, doomed to sell, sometimes at a low price, what Bourdieu called their embodied social and cultural capital. We have become bipolar: on some days we tend to think that technological change will bring about the equalization of conditions through a form of electronic horizontality and that the electronic peace will be perpetual. On gloomy days, we fear that the decline of the welfare state will foster the destruction of our lifestyles, particularly when it comes to cultural habits. Our anxieties do not lead us, however, to struggle to keep the cultural bounties of life available, as if they were not the result of a process, linked to *Offenlichkeit*, to the development of a relatively democratic public sphere, but a gift of God.

This ambivalent position is the key to understand present uncertainties. No European project has emerged as a powerful integrating device that should work at two levels: internal, as producing a relative unity; external, as offering a cohesive vision to migrant workers and family. In spite of some efforts done by European intellectuals in the 1990s to develop a sketch of a European public sphere, the *Offenlichkeit* is still mostly viewed as a bureaucratic and empty category. There is undoubtedly a split between European bureaucracy and the intellectuals, leftist or rightist: a common space has not been created, as national forums remain the main stage for intellectual production. Conservative and populist discourse has proliferated in the last twenty years, fueled by the ongoing economic crisis and the contradictions of post-socialist integration. Although the social networks now play a significant role in social life, they tend to polarize public discourse and to promote hate speech among citizens than to promote mutual understanding.

Our debates on inclusion and exclusion take place in a context plagued by democratic fatigue. The former socialist countries have entered an exhausted world, largely unattractive, and the financial crisis has not improved things. Political apathy, weak forms of rational choice that command not to vote and the consequences of intense lobbying and massive corruption have made our democratic model unappealing. But neither a global alternative nor a series of



limited improvements seem to be envisaged in the near future. A massive disenchantment seems to be at work. How can cultural institutions or citizens' initiative change the situation? Should we be utopian with respect to the integrating powers of culture or should we limit ourselves to find provisional devices to avoid civil war in Europe? Before making proposals, we need to assess the right levels of our ambitions. This task cannot be accomplished either by bureaucratic circles or by academic think tanks. We need a junction with citizens. Cultural Base should delineate the conditions of a possible democratic awakening. Among the possible scenarios, which one would be the most plausible:

### **Scenarios**

1° A growing disenchantment that would lead to a further segmentation of publics and audiences, political non-participation among some categories becoming the most conspicuous form of cultural claim, increasing ethnic, class and generational separation. The generalization of electronic communication produces new forms of segmentation ("tribes", group based on the development economic niches, different forms of social clusters that do not address each other).

2° Transnational movements at a European scale, based on a generalized "prise de parole" (capture of speech, according to Michel de Certeau's useful notion) of emerging categories (young people, ethnic minorities, and the like). Would cultural claims transcend national language boundaries? What types of channel would be the most favorable? Are the popular music festivals that gather huge crowds in the summer likely to be agents of change?

3° The success of a "sustainable" vision of society (and even more, a context of "accepted" de-growth) may encourage a less competitive vision of society, and a more relaxed view on cultural wars. This is for now the most utopian scenario, but we have to take it into account in our reflection. The notion of "common" takes over and citizens' initiative lead to a renewed definition of public interest.



## **Challenge 2 Are our dominant visions of culture an obstacle to the reshuffling of democratic life?**

A contradiction has arisen within cultural public policies between the need to preserve a legitimate culture, totally Eurocentric in character, and the democratization of the criteria recognizing the intrinsic value of a vast array of symbolic products, either “popular” and illegitimate, or of foreign origin. If we consider the question of national heritage, we easily see that the legitimate criteria about what should be preserved have been the subject of diverse extensions. Today, everything can be invested with procedures of heritage preservation: chateaux, but also locomotives and memories of labor, as well as the flimsiest relics of the rural world or popular practice. Chronological limits no longer exist: immediate history is one of the principal domains of protective fervor, and the notion of making everything a place of memory contributes to comfort the most apparently unorthodox decisions. The development of untangible heritage is the last step in the direction on the “heritagization” of everything.

The extension of the objects available for illustrating national memory, or more recently European memory, has been the most striking feature of heritage procedures in various countries. If the nation-state was the first provider of norms of protection and restoration, we are now confronted with the multiplication of agencies devoted to the constitution of heritage lists and to the inexhaustible domains of cultural diversities that multiple territorial, professional and other collectivities represent. The Unesco World Heritage List is a case in point, largely because it is based on diverse forms of campaigning about a place of interest through the accumulation of symbolic capital, that may be close to a traditional definition of heritage or incorporate elements of identity or historical claims. We are witnessing, not always very clearly, the decline of the notion of national history in favor of the diversification of the components of public interest. The partial decentering of procedures of protection, present in various European countries, is the consequence of taking into account the recognition of the multiplicity of viewpoints about national heritage: the state is no longer the only one to speak, even if it still has the last word most of the time.

The result can only be the growing heterogeneity of protected heritage. The multiplication of heritage agencies and agents is undoubtedly a relatively minor matter. More profound is the ambiguity of the message delivered by the new



normative process: the prevailing cultural relativism, which leads to believing that all forms of architectural expression are equal, or more exactly, that they all correspond in their way to a specific legitimate order, can only end up in the convulsive multiplication of related to heritage preservation gestures, never allowing a glimpse of a possibility of establishing coherence. In this, policies on national heritage preservation simply translate one of the dominant forms of contemporary cultural sensitivity based on the apparent de-hierarchization of forms of expression and their generalized equivalence.

For more than forty years we have noticed the flourishing of new initiatives regarding local or minority heritage, whether these are expressed through historiographical devices, collective manifestations (resurrection, readjustment or invention of rituals, diverse expressions of commemorative passion), or through the development of new forms of tourism. Are these bottom up initiatives a sustainable response to the growing fragmentation of cultural landscape? How should cultural institutions encourage them? Would it be preferable on the contrary to leave them apart from cultural institutions and public policies? In this case, would we need new forms of funding agencies closer to popular initiatives?

It is clear that a logic of competition has set in among different types of producers, and the proper functions of sorting and selecting that the different legitimization authorities operate are likely to affect the recognition and the development of objects. Today, heritage represents an essential political object at the local level as well as the European level. How can we get out of the growing confusion about the legitimacy of different forms of heritage, and reduce to an acceptable level the competition for recognition that plagues public life?