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## Responsibility, not Fantasy

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CULTURE REPORT  
EUNIC YEARBOOK  
2017/2018

# CULTURE REPORT

## EUNIC YEARBOOK 2017/2018



With Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, the world has changed. And so have the parameters for Europe's external relations. It is time to reconsider the continent's role in the world. How can it respond to isolationism and populism, but at the same time to wars in Syria and the Ukraine, the refugee crisis and climate change? What answers can Europe find to these challenges, while still defending its own democratic structures and the core values of human rights, multilateralism and international solidarity? How is it possible to bridge the divide within European societies and prevent the rise of populist movements and nationalism, xenophobia and extremism? What role can culture play in finding solutions to these problems? 30 contributors from 25 different countries seek answers to these and other questions.

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*European Life* is the name of the series of photographs by Berlin-based photographer Edgar Zippel that is featured in this edition. Zippel travelled around Europe capturing people as they went about their daily lives, unfurling Europe from its easternmost edges. The people appear strangely disconnected, fragile, turned in upon themselves. The scenery is rather sad, seldom glamorous. As we look at the photos, we ask ourselves “What’s worse, their mood or their situation?” They seem to be far removed from the vibrant continent that is Europe.

## In search of lost meaning

**T**he European Union is suffering a severe crisis of confidence. All over Europe, populist and Eurosceptic movements are attracting support. Fear of terrorism and social decline go hand-in-hand with nationalism, xenophobia and mistrust of elites, established parties and the media. European institutions have always been perceived as remote, so they are particularly affected by this. Europe is not currently in a position to shape its future in a constructive way. What is holding Europe together? Can culture help to breathe new life into the concept of a European community of values? Do we need a new narrative that offers an explanatory context and sheds light on the meaning of Europe? Or perhaps it's not that bad and Timothy Garton Ash is right when, in a variation on Winston Churchill's famous quote, he says that this is the worst possible Europe, 'apart from all the other Europes that have been tried from time to time.' Garton Ash is one of the contributors to this edition of the EUNIC Yearbook who takes a sceptical view of the argument that democracy is in crisis. After all, the continent of Europe has never been home to so many liberal democracies. Political scientist Mai'a Davis Cross from the United States agrees that the ideal of democratic governance has also become widely accepted internationally, especially at the United Nations.

And yet the division between those who welcome global economic, political and cultural interdependence and those who resist change is growing to such an extent that authors such as Jochen Hippler and Fatemeh Kamali Chirani even speak of a 'cultural civil war': 'This war is not being fought violently and with weapons, but in the minds of people. This war is not fought for territory but for cultural hegemony. It is about defining who we are, what kind

of societies we are living in, and who our enemies are.' Political scientist Claus Leggewie sees European culture as being in resistance mode, and Slovenian philosopher Slavoy Žižek gets straight to the point when he says: 'The trouble with defending European civilisation against the immigrant threat is that the ferocity of the defence is more of a threat to "civilisation" than any number of Muslims'. Journalist Heribert Prantl warns that political extremism may not be a natural event like a volcanic eruption, but it is certainly spreading around the world like wildfire. Most of our contributors agree that the populist rhetoric of the nationalists is systematically exploiting two areas of weakness: the EU's remoteness from its citizens, and the crisis of representation in its Member States. It disseminates nationalist narratives and fuels people's emotions and fears. Refugees and Muslims are portrayed as invaders, a threat – with the help of outlandish conspiracy theories and talk of 'population replacement' and 'saving the West'. Our political culture is being systematically undermined. Parties, media, governments, courts, in short, the pillars of the political system, are constantly being accused of conspiring against their own people. Social media serves as an echo chamber that reinforces our existing views and promotes radicalisation.

But when it comes to developing suitable counter-strategies, the only thing our authors agree upon is that appeasement and waiting for the nationalists to be found out is not an option. They also criticise the arrogance of the elites for rushing to call disagreeable opponents

populists and for denigrating people who have lost out because of globalisation. According to migration expert Jagoda Marinić, it is the job of culture to remind citizens of the 'higher purpose' that the EU should be serving. 'We will not see Europe catapulted back into the Middle Ages', and watch culture even being used as an argument for reverting to nationalism. Freelance writer François Materasso, stresses that: 'Europe is not a place. It is not a government or administration.' It is a place of encounter, and if culture is only diverse and tolerant enough, it can help to heal divisions. Leggewie adds that this means works that move, fascinate and may inspire people to change their lives.

Can the European Union's lost context be restored with the help of a narrative? Or is it a forlorn hope that we can once again create a public sphere for everyone, in which democratic society is in a better position to deal with fake news and attention-seeking? The idea of 'storytelling' is very much in fashion, and the advertising industry also uses it to trigger emotions in consumers. The style of objectivity that Europe has consciously cultivated for so long – originally without the symbolism of flags, anthems and parades – is now considered a hindrance: 'You don't fall in love with a single market'. The term 'narrative' goes back to the French philosopher François Lyotard, whose idea of the Grands Récits to describe basic historical and political concepts such as the Enlightenment and the West was translated into English as 'narrative'. But his readers may struggle with the idea that a single concept that originally served to deconstruct general basic assumptions should now contribute to establishing a context or overcoming a crisis of legitimacy. By exposing an unquestioned context as 'narrative', Lyotard was trying to call its credibility into question. However, as May'a Cross points out: 'If the other side sees culture as a weapon in war, there's no choice

but to see cultural diplomacy on some level as a form of resistance.' She believes that network propaganda has become a serious problem, with right-wing thought leaders such as Andrew Breitbart and Stephen Bannon speaking openly of weaponising the narrative.

Just as we find ourselves in a time of existential crisis, the European Union has been working on new strategic proposals for international cultural relations. Will it provide urgently needed answers to the problems threatening the Union's cohesion? If Europe wants to hang on to what is left of its credibility, it will have to bear more responsibility for tackling global challenges. What chance does the proposed concerted approach have in the face of growing nationalist tendencies?

2017 proved to be a decisive year for EUNIC. By signing the administrative agreement with the European External Action Service and the European Commission, the network has taken a major step forward and created the basis for developing and implementing joint pilot projects between EUNIC clusters and EU delegations. The articles in this Yearbook reveal the importance of the task that faces culture. I hope you will find it an inspiring read, and would like to thank the contributors, translators and everyone who has been involved in producing this Yearbook. I would also like to express my appreciation to the Robert Bosch Stiftung for its valued support.



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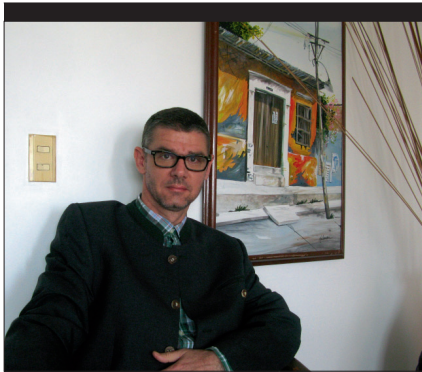




**Chapter 1:  
Global challenges  
Trump, Putin, Erdoğan:  
Europe faces many  
challenges. What role can  
culture play in overcoming  
xenophobia, hate, anger  
and anxiety? How should  
Europe deal with post-truth  
populism, nationalism and  
Twitter democracy? And  
can culture be one of the  
keys to restoring Europe's  
lost confidence and brea-  
thing new life into European  
values?**



Responsibility not fantasy How can we overcome the hate-filled division of society into urban elites and opponents of globalisation? The author believes a unified European culture, let alone a world culture, cannot and should not be the solution. He argues that local culture is the only way out of the crisis, and that the political engagement it generates will provide the basis for a credible representative democracy. *By Bernd Reiter*



It appears, at least to this observer, that a global divide has taken shape over the past decades: the divide among people who define themselves as progressive and modern – and those who stand against change, or at least its pace, which they perceive as being too fast. At the forefront is a political division, which we can witness every time new elections take place, no matter where they are held. In the United States, a black president who legalised gay marriage and enacted a broad health care reform for all was, for some, too much too soon. They stand against what they perceive as ‘special’ rights for minorities and find the

debate about transgender people using the bathroom of their choice an abomination.

In Europe, every EU Member State and those who are lined up to join have their own, similar, ‘anti’ movements. People are mobilising and organising against the EU, immigration, and asylum seekers. In the UK, this protest has led to Brexit, whatever the economic consequences might be. The fact that it was mostly older people who voted for Brexit points to the conservatism and backlash character of these movements.

Beyond Europe, we have witnessed people marching for equal rights, democracy and modern lives in such countries as Iran, Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya – even if many of these protests were quickly subdued by those who are against change because they have something to lose from it. It may not be comfortable, but seen from this perspective, the difference between ISIS, right-wing anti-immigration activists and Erdoğan’s AK party is merely one of quantity and means – not of quality – as they all stand against change.

In most countries, the majority of people are facing each other along a divide that is

mostly cultural in nature. Some embrace modern lifestyles while others fear them; some embrace change, while others seek to avoid it. The dividing line seems so deep that one camp is unwilling, or unable, to even listen, let alone consider the positions and opinions of others. Look no further than the United States, where democrats are mostly disgusted by the Trump administration, while Trump supporters in turn view democrats and liberals with contempt and disdain. The level of distrust and hate is far beyond political disagreement, which, after all, could be solved with a minimum level of tolerance and willingness to compromise.

What we face instead in the USA, but also in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, France, Poland, Hungary, the UK, Turkey, Iran and everywhere else, is a profound cultural division that goes far beyond the possibilities of political pragmatism. Stereotypes abound on both sides. For self-declared 'progressives', in the United States the Trump camp is made up of 'deplorables', (to quote Hillary Clinton), that is to say, stupid, hateful chauvinists. For those supporting Donald Trump in the US, Marine Le Pen in France, Frauke Petry in Germany, Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria, Victor Orban in Hungary, and so many others, the 'progressives' are arrogant, cowards, sell-outs, and traitors. The level of mutual distrust and lack of understanding is so profound that the only possible way to understand it is through a cultural lens that is a division of very basic outlooks on the world

In the United States, a black president who legalised gay marriage and enacted a broad health care reform for all was, for some, too much too soon.

and life. The fact that culture is the cause of such division is further evidenced by the fact that both sides have long ago lost any coherent political programme. Much of what the left argues is in fact traditionally right-wing (such as anti-globalisation).

The right has similarly embraced non-coherent and even contradictory ideological and political positions, arguing for strong government on military matters and reproductive issues, while advocating weak government on most economic matters. To most people on both left and right, politics has deteriorated into a culturally infused lifestyle performance. As such, it seems to be determined by the way we dress, consume, and live. In this way, insiders display that they belong to different, culturally defined communities and signal 'I don't want to talk to you or listen to you.'

### *Culturally infused lifestyle performance*

While this conflict plays out in the political arena in most countries in the contemporary world, in this essay I argue that what lies at the heart of this divide is indeed culture, not politics. Most cultural anthropologists define culture as a symbolic system that humans use to make sense of the world in which they live. In essence, culture is therefore an established and broadly accepted way of making sense and giving meaning. Change thus inevitably threatens our ability to understand our world, make sense of it, and find meaning in

## Global challenges

it. One solution to this problem of potentially sense-eroding change is religion, as religion can absorb meaning and deflect it away from the material world towards a divine, eternal, and never-changing symbolic world, where salvation, and hence orientation, has a clearly prescribed path. Another perceived solution is ethnic nationalism, which promises, at its core, to allow people to remain among those perceived as essential equals and thus better withstand the maelstrom of change and modernity. The fact that ethnic nationalism is embraced by so many these days clearly points to the core threat that lies within modernisation and change: otherness. It seems that many people feel threatened by the presence of unfamiliar others – people they do not know and who they perceive as fundamentally different and hence ‘unknowable’.

### *Culture requires community*

Culture is a group effort, and one person cannot create and sustain a culture. As such, culture requires community. Culture thus requires a minimum number of participants, but it also seems to have upper limits, probably imposed by our own, very human, cognitive limitations to processing complexity. A ‘world culture’ or even ‘European culture’ might be forever out of reach and we might never be able to fully identify and feel solidarity with people and groups whose language we do not understand and whose ways of making sense of their worlds and surroundings are different from ours.

It is also far from evident that having something like a ‘European’ culture is a good thing to begin with, as it raises the question, ‘which culture will it be?’ There is good reason to fear that a broadly encompassing European culture will be a slightly modified German or French culture, thus bringing back a situation similar to the one pursued by the Nazis who sought to ‘heal the world with German culture’ (*Am Deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen*). A unified European culture, let alone a world culture cannot, and should not be the solution to the ongoing and potentially sense-eroding process of change and modernity.

What then? The humble position of this writer is that the only way to find and renew the ability to find and make meaning and sense out of a changing world is in local culture, firmly anchored in local communities. Here, then, also lies the problem we face today and the root cause of the cultural divide I have described above. Over the past 200 years, we have all witnessed a massive and ever-accelerating destruction of local communities, mostly done for the sake of profit – that is to say, the profit of the few to the detriment of the many. Whether it is under direct colonial rule, as during the first half of these short 200 years, or during the latter phases of post-colonial Western and Northern dominance (in the case of former colonies) or simply during late capitalism (among the former colonisers) – capitalist ‘development’ has meant, almost everywhere and with very few exceptions, the destruction of local communities and with it their ability to provide meaningful cultural frameworks in which local people can

find meaning and orientation.

### *Losing face-to-face interactions*

To put it strongly: if and to the extent that we become individualised consumers of mass culture and lose our face-to-face interactions with our neighbours and friends, we lose those bonds that give meaning, sense, and direction to our lives. As we are, by our very constitution, profoundly social beings, what happens next is all too familiar from experience: we seek to replace the loss of genuine connection and friendship with secondary and artificially-created bonds. For some this might mean churches, mosques and synagogues; for others it may be yoga, consumerism, travelling to ever-more-exotic places, and other institutions that seem to offer sense and meaning once it has been lost. All these efforts, however, are either incapable of providing sense, orientation, and meaning (such as yoga, consumerism and travel), or they come with severe and potentially undesirable side-effects (like religion, which can easily be transformed from an effort to care for others into an effort to hate and fear non-believers).

Local community is, however, the proper place to find meaning, sense, and orientati-

Change inevitably threatens our ability to understand our world, make sense of it, and find meaning in it. One solution to this problem of potentially sense-eroding change is religion, as religion can absorb meaning and deflect it away from the material world towards a divine, eternal, and never-changing symbolic world.

on through friendship, love, care, commitment, and shared responsibility. If and when we become active members of a local community, then we do not need to seek sense and meaning elsewhere. The Greek-American-Turkish cultural anthropologist Dorothy Lee (1905-1975) has provided one of my favourite explanations of how culture, local community and freedom interact: 'Yet actually it is in connection with the highest personal autonomy that we often find the most intricately developed structure; and it is this structure that makes autonomy possible in a group situation.' (See her book *Freedom and Culture*. Long Grove: Waveland Press 1987).

Lee found in her research among different native societies of the Americas and the Pacific that being strongly anchored in a local culture, often called 'tribal' in the Anglo tradition, provides not only a firm framework for understanding one's place in the world but also creates the conditions to be free and autonomous as a person. The idea that local culture has to be restrictive and limiting is true only when the freedom sought is egoistic. As long as personal freedom overlaps strongly with the freedom of others in the same community, the local community is the guarantor and enforcer of personal freedom – alongside the freedom of the whole community.

The key to this possibility of finding personal freedom and autonomy in a strong and meaningful local community is, to the best of my understanding, grounded in responsibility and duty towards that same community. Only when people are actively involved

## Global challenges

in their communities can there be an active process of confronting change together and responding to it in ways that make sense to the community as a whole as well as its members.

What 200 years of capitalist development have instead brought us is massive individualisation; the destruction of local communities; the dilution of responsibilities and civic duties; and a world of utterly disconnected individuals, who feel lost.

While the problem of the current polarisation of the world seems cultural in its roots, the way to overcome such deep division and mutual mistrust is political. This is because culture, while persistent and at times resistant, is also changeable and malleable in that it can adapt to new circumstances and challenges. A culture of mutual trust and cooperation has limits – cognitive and logistic – but it can survive and thrive if people become active citizens in their local communities, taking on responsibilities and duties.

### *Living in a fantasy world*

This is however, precisely what our currently dominant systems of liberal, capitalist, representative democracies undermine. Instead of taking on responsibilities and organising ourselves, we delegate our roles of citizens to elected officials who act for us, supposedly on our behalf. The more they do so, the less chance we have to interact with our fellow community members and the more isolated we become. Instead of learning, and practising with whom we can achieve common goals, we end up relying on stereotypes

and fears about different ‘others’ who cannot be trusted. We end up living in a fantasy world, nurtured by fears, fed by isolation, and fertilised by a lack of actually doing things together – particularly those things that should matter most to all of us: how to live and what to do in our own, local communities.

### *Mutual cooperation*

It is indeed only possible to think that someone is a potential friend only because he or she has the same skin colour, nationality, religion, or political orientation as long as this belief is not based in practice. Once we actually work together with others, we quickly come to realise that skin colour, nationality, religion – even a shared language – are no guarantors for getting along. It is only in the practice of mutual cooperation that we can find out that a different-looking fellow can still be a fellow and is indeed not so different after all; that someone with a different religion is still adhering to the same moral principles; that someone with a different sexual orientation can still be trusted and become a good and reliable friend.

The only solution to the problems of increased mutual suspicion, misunderstanding, division, and terror is rooted in mutual cooperation, where mutual cooperation can best be done in local communities – even if this is not the only place and scope for it. It cannot flourish under conditions of exploitation, which is why there cannot be a genuine cooperation with those whom we exploit and use. Colonialism and postcolonial paternalism have thus undermined the very conditions of genuine cooperation across different communities of the coloniser/colonised divide. Capitalist exploitation has done the same among the colonisers, dividing them

into haves and have-nots.

Representative democracy, the system that colonialism and Western hegemony has produced and sought to spread and propagate across the globe, has undermined even the very possibility of genuine active community participation everywhere because it has undermined political participation and transformed active citizens who take their destinies into their own hands and mould their own futures into passive consumers of politics. As such we consume politics along with all the other things we do not need, that make us sick, and that further undermine the very possibility of fulfilling our destinies as political beings, able and willing to make and give direction to our own lives.

Cultural division can only be overcome in the practice of mutual responsibility and engagement, working together to achieve shared goals. The best place, even if it is not the only one, is in vibrant, open, local communities. Capitalism, colonialism and the exploitation that structures them both have undermined mutual cooperation. Political representation, a system where politics becomes something average people watch and consume, has undermined mutual responsibilities and duties, stripping average citizens of the very essence of what being a citizen actually means. The good news is the solution lies in mutual cooperation and working together and in political participation in general. To achieve this, we need fewer professional politicians and more avenues for direct citizen involvement and participation.

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Forthcoming book on the same topic: <http://www.rowmaninternational.com/blog/the-crisis-of-liberal-democracy/>

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