



## Re-thinking Realities Europe as an Agora of Interactions

### ORGANISATION

Cidob Barcelona / University Ghent (UGent, CICI - Center for Intercultural Communication and Interaction) / University Brussels (VUB, Cosmopolis - City, Culture and Society) / Hungarian Academy of Sciences Budapest - ISES Kőszeg / Europe of Cultures Forum

**Ghent Symposium, November 18, 2010**  
**Official Eu-iconography vs contemporary realities.**  
**Urbanity and diversity as a condition.**



### TRANSVERSAL LINES

Ine Pisters (CICI, UGent)

#### 1. Cultural constructions, images and signifiers

*'Symbols have been used for centuries in the processes of nation-building and state-building, and their binding force can be potent.'* (Michael Wintle, *The Image of Europe*: 436.)

During the second half of the 20th century, and especially after 1972, the period of the oil crises, the expanding EU developed a communication programme to influence the public opinion, to promote European citizenship and a feeling of 'europeanness'. The idea of a European identity functioned as a cultural legitimization of the European construction, which was basically an integration of a few nation states in an economic and political union. All kind of gadgets and memorabilia were distributed, a flag and an anthem symbolized the new 'European community' as if it was a state, while furthermore statues and imposing buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg had to symbolize the power. From 2000 on a common currency was adopted. 'It was deemed necessary to try to generate a broad political will in support of the economic and political unification process.' (Wintle: 435)

What does this official iconography refer to? Does it make sense to contemporary Europeans? Is it related to the contemporary European reality? The answers of the EU Trail were negative. The existing iconography is judged as stereotyping Europe in images of Eurocentric triumphalistic and rather arrogant propaganda. The style and symbols from a 19th century colonial empire, in fact. Not adapted to, not translating the postmodern contemporary reality of the EU.

But what is this postmodern contemporary reality? How could a different (visual) discourse be developed? For the different communities, in the social sciences debate, in political contexts, in the media...

One of the shared basic assumptions of the EUTrail positions is the idea that the nation states are not fitted as a frame anymore to think about local or global realities, nor is the nation state suited to function as a model to think about Europe. Europe as a (new) super nation state would only imitate and perpetuate a 19<sup>th</sup> century type of construction, based essentially on power, territoriality and commonness. In the words of Rik Pinxten: ‘Does being European equal possessing power? Should EU imitate the Vatican, should Brussels imitate Washington?’

The official imagery doesn’t work, the communication of the European project is seen generally as a failure. So, the contemporary reality and the future projects of Europe ask for other models and images.

*‘We should create an image relating people to each other, not on the basis of commonality, of sameness, but on the basis of exchange and difference. In this way we can start to define a society from the point of view of hybridity, „impurity” in a certain way, as opposed to trying to define commonness, „cleaning up” difference. I don’t think commonality is a good starting point to create a contemporary image of Europe – we should image hybridity, and hybridity related to a process of universalisation.’ (ERIC CORIJN)*

Leaving territorial thinking behind, we should shift towards thinking about networks and create ‘post-national’ images and signifiers. Inspiration can be found in the Enlightenment ideas about humanity as a whole, and in the pre-modern urbanization processes: the urban trade networks and the invention of citizenship in the late medieval European cities, where citizens acted semi-independent from state power. In the view of Eric Corijn, the postmodern reality is in a way joining again this pre-modern model, of which the nation state interrupted the further development.

*‘A new Europeanization of Europeans needs to begin. Either old structures (iconographic and institutional) transform, become more open and embracing, adapting to and reflecting demographic and migrational trends, or they lose their relevance, become obsolete and are replaced.’ (JODY JENSEN)*

*‘Does Europe have a inclusive answer for the new Europeans?’ (YOLANDA ONGHENA)*

One of the reasons of the failure of the EU communication seems to be its top-down character, creating a communication without communicative value (Jody Jensen). However, from a non-essentialist point of view, and because the EU is a cultural construct anyhow, it is possible to adapt the imaging to the actual and changing reality. How to grasp this new reality in a better way, and how we can secure a positive future by promoting a new view on Europe and its citizens? For actualization is needed, especially to address the new generation, and the newcomers. The white, male, national, Eurocentric – ‘it is not just about Euro-centrism, but Euro-arrogance’ (Jody Jensen) – style should be abandoned.

*‘Often contemporary European iconography lacks reflection of the many ways and levels in which European societies, cultures and citizens have and are continually changing. It does not, I believe, reflect this dynamic and creative diversity. Particularly, its imagery does not resonate with its young people or mainstream citizens (...) EU symbolism reproduces much of the western, white, male national symbolisms, which are not only devoid of contemporary meaning for many people in Europe today, but also actually promote alienation and disengagement from the European project.’ (JODY JENSEN)*

We need a new vocabulary and a new grammar, a sort of update of the concepts.

*‘The dramatic, some call paradigm shift, some call world system change, some call new Axial Age, requires rethinking, in terms of forms and contents, the concepts we have formerly taken for granted, like nation states, markets, civil societies, citizenship. Not only re-conceptualization is needed in the new global context, but new vocabularies, including*

*iconographic and symbolic forms, which make a better attempt to not just capture today's realities, but provide positive visions for the future.'* (JODY JENSEN)

Nevertheless, differences, diversity: traditionally these concepts are part of European thought. The linguistic diversity is related to cultural diversity and vice versa. This also explains the difficulty to communicate to all Europeans about Europe.

*'The reality is that the world's biggest transnational community connected politically, institutionally, economically and even socially and culturally, has no common transnational media of reference for the whole European citizenship. European media all over the world and all over Europe are still made from a national perspective.'* (CARME COLOMINA)

Moreover, not only the communication about European issues remains national, the 'monocultural' interpretation of Europe and European society is problematic as well. It is directed implicitly against the Other: 'WE are what THEY are not' (Yolanda Onghena). Symbols and collective imagination are important to achieve social cohesion, but should not be blind for differences.

So inclusion and pluralism should be the rule in the communication, in the European culture, integrating the Other, promoting the feeling of belonging, and de-dramatizing the concept of 'identity'. The fact that there is no outlined fixed European identity has the advantage that a new concept can be developed, including the notion of multiple identities and new identifications (Yolanda Onghena, Franc Rottiers). Unfortunately, the antipathy for strangers is part of a long tradition in the West (see Hellas – barbarians). It is important to develop an alternative 'direct' communication, based on 'feelings', and directed on the future, to prevent the acaparament by rightist parties.

*'Do we really need a European identity? Is there any discourse in favor of building Europe that possesses a similar communicative power by connecting directly with our feelings?'* (YOLANDA ONGHENA)

The idea of Europe has to be broadened with new narratives of re-interpretation and meanings of other generations. Meanings from outside of Europe as multiple connections and crossovers between subjects with their view of European history, but also one voice defending 'European' values outside of Europe. We could also include meanings of generations with a shared present but not a shared past: Europeans by birth, but with a dual sense of belonging – one subjected to discrimination, while the other, never considered as part of a collective choice or a collective action.

We should concentrate on processes and grassroots dynamics, and no longer think Europe as a structure, in order to better understand what citizenship really means. A pragmatic approach can offer new interpretations and actions. (Rik Pinxten)

In the daily life practices, ideas and ideals get articulated, although the informal level where they are expressed implicates that these ideas don't become visible on a national level. However, this symbolic level, in between the personal and the state level, is resonating in communities and also Europe. (Franc Rottiers) The creation of images about Europe is from this point of view not a mere top-down issue.

*'Refugees' claims for protection can and do contribute to the idea of Europe.'* (FRANC ROTTIERS)

In the debate about the image of Europe, and the integration of the many differences, solidarity and the analysis of the social must be of considerable concern. The EU-Trail debate is indeed about images, about politics, about the social. All together a critique of the management- and nationalism-narrowness of mind.

## **2. The social. Solidarity and citizenship**

*'In a reflection about Europe and European citizenship, the discussion about social security and solidarity should occupy a very important place. How will we organize solidarity, and what are the EU's initiatives? The perspective of a flag, a theatre, a museum building or whatever, that's fine. But from my perspective, talking about Europe is also talking about the social. We need a grass-roots thinking about what "community", "citizenship" and "solidarity" really means.'* (GHISLAIN VERSTRAETE)

Solidarity can be organized on different levels. There are spontaneous forms of solidarity in informal networks of families and friends. On the level of communities and states, public solidarity is organized with public funds. This concerns more structural support on the existential fields of housing, health etc. Today we witness however a tendency of governments to roll off the responsibility as a so-called consequence of the financial crisis. How can the social security system be maintained? Is it possible to organize a social security beyond or without the frame of the nation state? Is charity the alternative? (Ghislain Verstraete) Should we fall back to pre-modern systems, where migrating people kept the security system from their place of origin until the moment they had accumulated economic rights in the place of arrival? (Eric Corijn)

Solidarity is not only about the social security. A social Europe has been a significant part of the EU's mission. Michael Wintle sees a constructive development until the expansion of the EU towards eastern Europe – negotiating with 25 member-nations is not simple indeed. Nevertheless, there are European institutions promoting and bringing into practice different forms of solidarity on a European scale: the European Court, the Security Council, the organization of the workers' rights protection, etc. But isn't the EU not primarily characterized by economic dynamics and interests?

*'Today, we also witness the question of the financial solidarity between the EU members. We share a common currency. Is this the only solidarity the EU really cares about these days?'* (CARME COLOMINA)

The EU is indeed in the first place an economic community, and established to prevent political and military conflicts. In the official mission, solidarity and citizenship, and hence the development of it in a post-national dimension, is of secondary importance. European citizenship is considered as complementary to national citizenship. The citizen is in the first place a worker and a consumer. In the field of education, the nation state is still the corner-stone. (Corentin Lorand) However, parallel with the shift to a greater attention towards 'active citizenship', the image of the European society as a 'knowledge economy' is advancing. The socio-cultural dimension of citizenship is getting recognized. The image and the political discourse are changing.

*'There is a constant insistence in the EU texts, on forcing and enabling the development of the worker-citizen. Edith Cresson says clearly that learning to be an active citizen – active citizenship – is being active to build Europe as the champion of the knowledge economy. But it this is less, far less, imposed by the EU than the economical view. I think a good illustration of this is the constant insistence on the idea that European citizenship is complementary to national citizenship.'* (CORENTIN LORAND)

In the image of citizenship, and in the vision on society today, the military Bismarck model is still very influential: control and discipline dominate, instead of developing the citizens' capacities. (Rik Pinxten) This is also applied to schools, organized on national scale and structures. On the other hand, in contemporary society there is a lot of creativity, and all kinds of projects and people, continuously re-inventing democracy, formulating and living emerging, new models of surviving, living together.

### **3. Perspectives on politics, politicians and political EU-discourse.**

Politics: not the world of 'la politique' but the world of 'le politique'.

It is important that a 'cultural view' on the contemporary dynamics doesn't remain sterile, but that it leads to, that it is clear that it implicates, a position on politics, a view on the way we see society, how we think about citizenship, in Europe today – urbanized, in a global world, an interdependent network-world (the description being itself already a political statement). 'Culture' as public communicative culture.

In politic discourse, national thinking seems to remain the rule, and right wing nationalistic ideas are even (expanding). Although Europe has in the more bureaucratic iconography a xenophobe nationalist style, following the national propaganda logic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century states' communication, Europe as a project could be a positive argument against monoculturalism and contemporary nationalist ideologies. In national politics we see the EU sometimes staged as 'the Other'. National interests are said to be threatened by 'Brussels'. In a discourse about fear – 'fear of the crisis, fear of losing identity, fear of the "others"' (Carne Colomina) – anti-European feelings find a place easily. The French Front National is a good example (Yolanda Onghena). In its advertisement for the European electoral campaign 2009, the message was direct: 'Europe hurts':

*'Marianne, the symbol of a "free" authentic France – with nostalgia for the past – is hit in the eye by a "European" enemy, hurting her as if it were a case of domestic violence – symbolizing the supposed insecure present.'* (YOLANDA ONGHENA)

In their communication about EU matters, the national media still focus on their 'own' representatives. Grass-root ideas and projects, the personal level should find a platform, a communication outside the 'instrumentalized realm of the social, that is the nation state'. (Franc Rottiers)

*'This instrumentalization takes the form of controlling the realm where one can say "yes" or "no" by fixating it as incontournable and by clearly delineating what precisely falls within the realm of saying "yes" or "no".'* (FRANC ROTTIERS)

From the *Treaty of Maastricht* on, the EU has nevertheless tried to promote the idea of European citizenship – being citizen of the European community, alongside being 'ressortissant' of a national state. Being European citizen implies that people from the member states can freely live and work in any country of the Union, and participate in local elections of the place where they live. The EU offers at least a few possibilities. Daniel Cohn-Bendit has been elected in France and in Germany. Another example: the 'citizen's initiatives', in which people can propose changes or projects (with 1 million signatures). The European Parliament is more active than the public supposes. In this way,

*'European citizenship is a reality.'* (GABRIEL FRAGNIERE)

This European citizenship is in the discourse of the EU complementary to the national citizenship, and a distinction is made between the socio-cultural and the economic dimension. In matters of law and civil rights there are differences as well. So what is advanced as characteristic for European citizenship? In most of the texts the notion of a 'common basis' appears. But more and more, especially in the context of programmes as 'learning active citizenship', being European is considered as an identity 'under construction'. They no longer insist on the supposed 'common heritage' as a basis for European citizenship.

*'The nation-state thinking now is not the same as thirty years ago. The multicultural society is in every political discourse. But in the case of Europe, there is actually a problem, because Europe doesn't have the means to build this common background. Everything is build on the nation. Politics is left to the nation. I am doubtful about the future, considering the way the nation state deals with multiculturalism, integration, the idea of citizenship, and open citizenship. Look at France, for example.'* (CORENTIN LORAND)

Re-interpreting, activating and broadening the concept of 'European citizenship', and expanding the presence of the EU in media, in society, in law, is part of a solution, but the risk still is the dominant tendency to reduce citizenship to its economic aspects. So, thinking in terms of, and developing the notion of 'urban citizenship' could be a better solution, than insisting on a possible common Europeanness of citizenship.

The reality of most of today's citizens is an urban reality, indeed. This context allows all kinds of experiments regarding our model of living together, and these realities and cultural dynamics we have to examine, and bring them into (pragmatic) politics.

*'Urbanity and diversity is the contemporary condition.'* (RIK PINXTEN)

*'It is important to re-imagine citizenship, in a global way, not territory-linked anymore.'*  
(ERIC CORIJN)

We have to deconstruct the homogenous way in which the nation states have organized their territory. (Eric Corijn) The notion of 'territory', linked to the nation-state, still seems important. We should multiply the spatial notions – people relate and belong anyhow in one way or another to 'space'. There should be a 'common space' to negotiate, about what is or could be 'common' in the EU. It is important to de-center. People should for example have the opportunity to vote for candidates from all the EU countries. Democracy isn't an abstract notion, the Europeans are acting and interacting citizens, not an ontological category. Shouldn't we try to negotiate a 'commonality based on difference'?

To create or promote a true negotiation, to enhance the diversification of society, schools, etc., we need to tackle the privileged positions.

*'When you take the European system to enhance diversification, you also need to think about negotiation. If you want to become aware of your own privileges you have to take into account what Rancière calls "the presupposition of the quality of intelligences". He takes up the position that all intelligences are equal: everybody is able to observe what he sees. Everybody is able to analyze what he or she has observed, and from this analysis to choose particular items that can be negotiated.'* (FRANC ROTTIERS)

In this negotiation amongst citizens, we should 'give differences a voice'. (Jody Jensen) All kinds of organizations and networks can get involved. This negotiation embodies the idea of the multiple society, the network society, divergent dimensions and 'somewheres', relational individuals. To become 'one people' is not the question.

### **Good government?**

*'Politicians that govern the nation state do not care about ideals any more. They act as narcissistic technicians, only caring about controlling their citizens. As such collective decision-making has devolved into "following rules".'* (FRANC ROTTIERS)

And what about the so-called social contract, a concept that takes a prominent place in the European democratic tradition? Democracy today is in crisis. Politicians, as well as on the level of the nation state, as on the European level, seem to have lost their sense of responsibility.

*'Politicians ran out of ideas. In Hungary, and I think in many other countries as well, the social contract between the state and its citizens has been fractured, if not completely broken. (...) Given the crisis of democracy, democracy also needs to be redefined in these new contexts. And not just on the nation state level, but on the European level as well. If we could open the social contract as a European question, I think that would give more meaning to European citizenship and I think it is a really critical area where our part of Europe is extremely weak. Politicians ran out of ideas.'* (JODY JENSEN)

Since 9/11 the role of and the control by the nation states has become a much debated issue. With terror as its newest common enemy, states seem to reinforce their impact on the lives of their citizens. The more their power weakens, the more the states focus on real or supposed 'common thread' – and on vulnerable minorities. A social contract should again be edited. Instead of victimizing them, people without voice should be heard about their vision on society.

*'What about religions? We are against them, but will we anyhow tolerate them? Do we need less community, more society? What about governance? Should we restrict it to representative democracy?'* (ERIC CORIJN)

The recent statements of politicians about 'the failure of the multicultural model' reflects a fear of losing power. The identity discussion hides the real problems: unemployment, for example. The economical integration programmes don't work, the multicultural character of contemporary society is not the problem.

It is important to realize that in the debate on 'culture' and society, culture is referring to much more than to the arts. It is about traditions, interpretations, constructions, ways of living and making sense etc. The many differences do not necessarily pose a problem. When do they matter? There are choices to be made when problems arise in the public space. Public behavior has to be organized. (Eric Corijn). 'Community' and 'culture' need their freedom and space to exist, but always subordinated to Human Rights, and from a cosmopolitan, in a non-eurocentric sense, perspective.

*'What I notice, is that the positions are too much ethical positions, moral positions. The real question is not: what is the alternative, and then answer that question with an ethical position. Who's going to organize it? The real question is: what is happening? Because people are moving. What we have to think are transitions and we have to see where to position ourselves within transitional movements and to be at the right place at the cross roads.'* (ERIC CORIJN)

*'But there is also a moral argument: what society is it we want to build? What school do we want to build? And today, in the Belgian and European political view on education, it's quite poor actually. There is no society build. And I think the crisis of the nation state is related to this. We had a certain kind of political system, and today it doesn't work anymore. Now, there is that economical, whatever it is, taking the lead. And this is quite dangerous.'* (CORENTIN LORAND)

In Europe, a project in process, dynamic ideals are still being formulated. We should listen to these ideals of 'local' citizens, referring to collective decision making.

*'People give voice or enact their ideals by taking up roles that challenge the rules we are supposed to follow according to our nationalist politicians. (...) What people do is take part in a complexity that cannot and can never be grasped in the articulations advanced by "good government".'* (FRANC ROTTIERS)



GHENT, HET PAND UGENT  
18 NOVEMBER 2010

## Programme

- 9.00: registration, coffee
- 9.25: welcome speech **Rik Pinxten**
  
- 9.30: *keynote lecture* **Michael Wintle** (historian / European Studies, Universiteit Amsterdam),  
**'The EU and its symbols. Encouraging a European identity by means of visual symbols and icons of Europe'**
  
- 10.00-11.00: four *respondents*:
  - \* **Eric Corijn** (VUB, Brussels)
  - \* **Jody Jensen** (Institute of Political Science, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest and ISES - Institute for Social and European Studies, Köszeg)
  - \* **Yolanda Onghena** (Cidob, Barcelona)
  - \* **Rik Pinxten** (UGent)
  
- 11.00: coffee break
- 11.15-12.30: *discussion*
  
- 12.30-14.00: lunch time
  
- 14.00-15.00: six *contributions*:
  - \* **Ilse Joliet** (SIC - Sound Image Culture, Ghent-Brussels) presents a short film by **Tine Guns**, 'My memory of what happened is not what happened'
  
  - \* **Carme Colomina** (Cidob, Barcelona)  
'Communication in the European project'
  
  - \* **Ghislain Verstraete** (UGent)  
'Social Security and Citizenship'
  
  - \* **Corentin Lorand** (Cosmopolis - City Culture Society, VUB, Brussels)  
'Citizenship and education'
  
  - \* **Léonardo Clérici** (Skriptura Foundation, Brussels)  
'Rahim, liberal arts as a Gnostic space'
  
  - \* **Franc Rottiers** (UGent)  
'Europe, a place where ideas can still be articulated'
  
- 15.00: coffee break
- 15.20-16.50: general *discussion* – interventions from the public
  
- 17.00-18.30: *reception* at the Town Hall of Ghent, offered by the City of Ghent

### OPTIONAL

- 19.30 lecture by **Charles Landry**, 'The Art of City Making', at Auditorium Quetelet of the Faculty Economy, Tweekerkenstraat. An initiative of the City of Ghent, Gent BC and Vlaams Wetenschappelijk Economisch Congres (Faculteit Economie en Bedrijfskunde Universiteit Gent).