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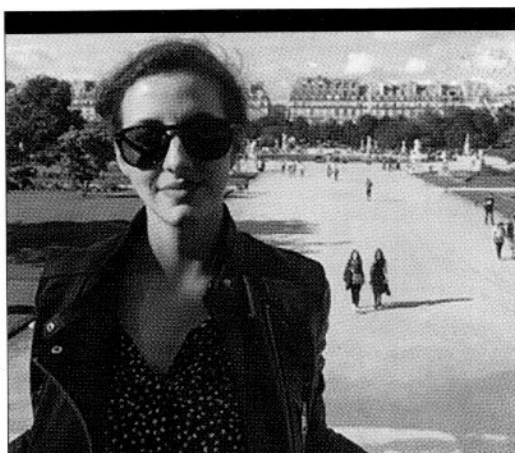
# Cultures of We?

Europe and  
the search for a  
new narrative

ifa | Steidl

**An answer to populism** How can the cultural sector respond to the factors that explain the rise of support for populist, Eurosceptic, radical parties in Europe? The author argues that such a reaction must consider the networked manner in which such inward-looking forces organise themselves, which is why cultural actors should also work in a coordinated manner.

*By Mafalda Dâmaso*



Europe is increasingly divided. Around the continent, one witnesses increasing political radicalisation: in some countries, voters have to choose between Eurosceptics and global free trade – as was the case in the 2017 French presidential election. In others, centre parties and politicians are losing public support in favour of more radical ideas. At the same time, populist rhetoric is thriving in the western world. Across the Atlantic, criticism of President Trump’s policies is regularly derided either as fake news or as reflective of the supposedly privileged values of a global liberal elite – a trend that is crossing over to the European continent.

Although the cultural sector is independent from political discussions in a strict sense, a context in which narratives about the world

are characterised by a dualistic simplification of reality (an ideological and rhetorical characteristic that Eurosceptic, radical and populist parties and groups share) is detrimental to the sector in several ways. By definition, artists need freedom to experiment not only formally but also symbolically, that is, to appropriate and recombine images and codes. Within illiberal democracies, the freedom to do so is strongly curtailed. On a broader scale, it is impossible to imagine a European Union in which several of these inward-looking formations take power; rather, the Union would likely disintegrate. This would have direct negative consequences for the increasingly transnational work of artists, which depends on the freedom of movement of persons, services, goods and capital. At the same time, the end of the Union would weaken the legal status of the fundamental values contained in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights), which protect the work of artists and cultural producers.

In short, a social and political context that is characterised by the circulation of narratives

that oppose, in a seemingly dualistic manner, a reductive understanding of 'us' (the people, the supposedly non-morally corrupt individuals, the French/English/German...) to 'them' (the elites, the supposedly morally corrupt groups, the foreigners) is an environment that is not prone to artistic creation. Populist, radical, and/or Eurosceptic forces put the freedoms enjoyed by the cultural sector at risk; as such, it is only fitting that the sector should attempt to respond to the factors that explain the success of such forces.

### *Prone to inward-looking formations*

In this direction, I have written a report for ifa's *Culture and Foreign Policy edition* that argues that such a response should be both evidence-based and networked. I make this argument after reviewing the scholarly evidence on the variables that explain the success of inward-looking parties and formations, which highlight the need to design a multidimensional, long-term response. By this I mean that the cultural sector should consider and address the reasons why individuals become more prone to inward-looking formations (the micro level); the strategies used by these movements to embed themselves locally and nationally (the mezzo level); and, finally, the rhetorical strategies employed by them, i.e. their ideologies (the macro level). I also argue that the networked ways in which those political formations collaborate and act, which make them highly responsive to social and cultural changes, should be replicated by the cultural sector.

In the report, I discuss the model of the ecology of culture, proposed by cultural writer John Holden in 2016, and explain its relevance in this context. In this piece, I will focus on three case studies that can be seen as models for such a multidimensional, structured approach. This will be followed by some suggestions on the type of relationships that should be fostered by the cultural sector to respond to the context identified above, and how the Union's institutions can support such work.

In *The Ecology of Culture* (2016) Holden proposes viewing the sector as a network composed of nomads, platforms, connections and guardians. In this model, cultural actors can operate in several roles simultaneously; however, one of them tends to be dominant. The strength of this model is often seen as residing in its identification of the actors that are key to maintaining an active network of cultural production, dissemination and consumption while also rejecting traditional distinctions such as public versus private. However, I believe that the nomenclature is also relevant in this context. This is because the identification of cultural actors based on their position within the production, circulation and filtering of cultural content can also be understood, albeit indirectly, as providing the guidelines for an integrated response by the cultural sector to the process of the circulation of 'us versus them' narratives, the institutionalisation of actors that advocate such discourses and, finally, the growth of individual support for those ideas.

The following case studies exemplify how this typology can contribute to the

development of targeted – and, I must stress, evidence-based – strategies to counter the increasing success of inward-looking formations around Europe.

The first element in this model is the nomad, that is to say the visitor who consumes culture, as well as producers, artists and technicians, i.e. those who make art and/or perform, enjoy it and/or collect it. Second, and what interests me in this context, platforms are organisations that host cultural content, such as galleries, pubs and community halls. They include spaces that are available for hire and that programme public events to showcase commissioned work or the work of others, as well as websites that allow users to upload their work.

An example of a platform is Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, on the outskirts of Paris. Founded in 1993, it occupies a 900-square-metre, former metallurgy factory in a working-class community where it is estimated that 39 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Since 2013, its current directors (Alexandra Baudclot, Dora García and Mathilde Villeneuve) have used the space to nurture artistic experimentation and support artistic practices that foster active forms of citizenship and coexistence.

Indeed, rather than seeing art as an independent field, the programme of Les Laboratoires is structured around social and political questions. The space organises exhibitions, reading groups, workshops and

public meetings that bring together artists, researchers and the local community. The result is a platform for not only cross-sectoral and collaborative work but also community and network-building, that is, for the development of long-term relationships with local groups and individuals, whom it brings together to work in partnership with the artists (and, occasionally, with cultural, social or scientific institutions) on specific projects and commissions.

The directors of Les Laboratoires describe its programme as a collective process of sharing, learning and experiencing in which art and the social context are equal partners. Additionally, Les Laboratoires are part of several European collectives and networks connected by the goal to develop at local scale new forms of knowledge production and distribution within and around art.

### *Nomads and connectors*

As Les Laboratoires suggests, platforms may counter division in Europe by developing long-term collaborative work that responds to the specificities (and hence the anxieties) of specific communities and individuals. Platforms can understand individual frustrations and sense of unease; they can also provide a site for community organisation, hence validating those voices and aspirations. As such, they can provide a response to some of the factors that may explain support for such inward-looking movements (micro level). Additionally, the strong connection of platforms to their local context allows them to address the processes

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of institutionalisation that are required for those actors to organise, become visible, and be further legitimised locally and regionally (mezzo level).

Third, connectors are actors and organisations that transform ideas into reality, and 'have an intimate knowledge of the micro-operations of their field' and 'put people and resources together, and move energy around the ecology' (Holden, 2016). Connectors include producers, arts administrators, critics, bloggers and curators as well as publicly funded centres that function as lively cultural platforms in cities and regions.

An example of a cultural connector is Hands Off Our Revolution [HOUR], a global coalition of artists, curators, theoreticians and cultural producers affirming the radical nature of art formed in 2017. Its mission statement proposes that 'art can help counter the rising rhetoric of right-wing populism, fascism and the increasingly stark expressions of xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia and unapologetic intolerance [...]. As artists [...] it is our role and our opportunity, using our own particular forms, private and public spaces, to engage people in thinking together and debating ideas, with clarity, openness and resilience' (HOUR website, 2017). In this context, HOUR organises workshops that establish links between actors in the cultural world, grassroots activists and other not-for-profit organisations so that such actors can identify the shape of cultural resistance to populism. HOUR also plans to organise art exhibitions and public actions that bring

into public view debates and proposals regarding future models of social and community organisation.

HOUR exemplifies the potential of connectors to respond at the mezzo and macro levels. Indeed, by establishing links among specialists and disseminating knowledge among its network, HOUR provides what policymakers would describe as an informal forum of capacity-building (which could be formalised or accompanied by more formal programmes) on how cultural actors may break linkages among inward-looking actors and preempt their local institutionalisation (mezzo level). Additionally, HOUR's rejection of top-down hierarchies allows it to be organised while also remaining flexible enough to respond quickly to changes in the strategies that are used by inward-looking movements. Finally, its future exhibitions and art projects can be interpreted as places for experimentation on the most effective artistic responses to the circulation of such ideologies (macro level).

Fourth and finally, guardians are actors and/or organisations that are responsible for collecting, taking care of and displaying cultural assets – e.g. archives, museums, libraries and heritage bodies but also heritage scholars.

An example of a cultural guardian is Tate Modern – one of the most recognised art brands in the world. Its building hosts Tate Exchange, an annual programme that connects international artists, more than 50 organisations that work with and beyond the arts, developing a conversation around what art can do to society and to people's lives. It

does so by organising performances and workshops, which lead to short-term exhibitions. One of the projects organised in this context was *Who Are We?*, a 6-day event in March 2017 ‘designed to facilitate the co-creation, co-production, and exchange of knowledges among artists, academics, activists, and diverse publics around the multiple crises of identity and belonging in Europe and the UK’. The project explored the meaning of civic behaviour and, crucially, aimed at ‘creating a space for encounters between people and communities often kept apart by binaries: artists versus audiences, academics versus artists, migrants versus “natives”, and activists versus publics’ (from the project’s website).

Although Tate Exchange could be seen as a platform within a guardian, what is key is the way this case study reveals the potential of guardians to lend their brand’s legitimacy to cultural conversations around identity, citizenship and belonging. Indeed, cultural workers know that guardians are often as innovative as smaller organisations; however, as Holden notes in his report, audiences tend to recognise such institutions or individuals as keepers of historical and disciplinary narratives, which such institutions filter. If a specific question is included in a museum’s exhibition, non-specialist visitors will tend to deduce that such a question is a valid view among experts. An integrated response from the cultural sector to the success of inward-looking formations would borrow this perceived legitimacy, a key factor recognised by scholars as explaining the institutionalisation of far-right narratives (which are increasingly perceived by voters as legitimate due to their circulation in mass media TV channels, for example). Additionally, projects supported by guardian cultural institutions, whose brands are highly recognisable, could circulate around the institutions’ countries, collecting stories that show-

case citizenship and belonging as a complex process in collaboration with cultural grassroots organisations, and the result of such a process could be regularly shown in prime time on public TV channels. In this way, guardians would respond to the circulation of inward-looking ideologies (macro level).

### *At EU level*

Although these case studies provide examples of the shape of such an ecological response to division within the European continent, the answer provided by the cultural sector can only be successful if it is evidence-based, structured and at least broadly coordinated. This is why, first, it is crucial to recognise the multi-dimensional character of support for inward-looking movements. Second, it is crucial to change the focus to the long-term impact of culture rather than evaluating its projects based on audience numbers and the economic value of the sector. Over recent years, the cultural sector has often struggled for funding. This has often left it no time for the development of long-term projects that engage with local communities. Third, one should prioritise dedicating resources, support and capacity-building efforts to grassroots organisations who work in close relationship with their communities. Although some form of coordination is needed, this work shouldn’t be organised in a top-down manner – as such, the possibility of co-management, uniting experts to cultural and grassroots organisations

## European angst

with equal rights and resources, should be evaluated. Fourth, it is crucial that such a structured response incorporates continuing monitoring and knowledge sharing processes. By this I mean that quick sharing and responsive learning should be embedded within the network of cultural actors that develop work in response to social and political division. At the same time, it is important that there are clear definitions, that methods are harmonised, and that there are quality criteria and indicators of what constitutes effective action against division.

This would also have consequences at the level of EU cultural strategies and policies. Indeed, and fifth, I must highlight the EU's responsibility for supporting cultural work that reiterates its fundamental values (while, of course, respecting the principle of subsidiarity).

Sixth, policymakers must recognise that culture is a site of processes and relations, and privilege actors and projects that understand it as such. Although there is evidence that this view is increasingly prevalent among policymakers, it still remains rare overall. As such, what is required is a change in paradigm within European institutions to fully recognise the potential impact of culture on social cohesion and inclusiveness, not to mention on the enactment of the fundamental values of the Union. Seventh, cultural work should stress the fact that the European Union is characterised by a criss-crossing of identities, as is evident in the motto 'United in Diversity'. A common assumption of different inward-looking groups is the idea of identities as stables and zero sum; work that opposes them must place cultural diversity at its centre, i.e. celebrate it. At the same time, such work must acknowledge and respond to the fact that the individuals who are the most likely to support these inward-looking narratives and groups are often afraid of a world in transition. As such, it is crucial that such

celebration of cultural diversity is conveyed as a form of individual empowerment. Eighth and finally, it is key that the EU supports interdisciplinary research and cross-sectoral work, as well as convergences and synergies between EU programmes, policy tools and instruments. It is only possible for such cultural work to effectively address some of the root causes of support for inward-looking movements (such as social disengagement and weak community links) in an integrated manner.

This said, while the cultural sector can indeed develop extremely important work in response to the micro, mezzo and macro levels of support for inward-looking formations (as the three case studies demonstrate), it cannot be expected, by itself, to resolve the context of widespread social division.

**Mafalda Dâmaso** is a researcher whose work focuses on the intersection of culture and international affairs. She is an expert in Culture and Foreign Policy for ifa, in whose context she organised a conference and wrote a research report on how the cultural sector can respond to political division in Europe. Mafalda earned her Ph.D. in visual culture from Goldsmiths, University of London, where she has lectured. She has also been a guest lecturer in Switzerland and has worked in the cultural sector and in the creative industries in several other European countries.