

# Reflections on Intangible Heritage: The Mistrust of Cultural Diversity in Europe

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This article emphasises the need to rescue Europe from the yawning chasm of today's reality by reconsidering common cultural heritage, a latent concept that was completely disregarded in the creation process of the European Union. Nevertheless, this mission entails the overcoming of significant obstacles, such as the existence of a dual complex based on existential fears: an inward fear defined by the threat of cultural diversity, which implies cultural hegemony in Gramsci's terms, and, at the same time, an outward fear based on the shame over the colonising past.

European economic integration seems to have found its limits, and even more so in a time of tense uncertainty experienced today by Europe as a result of recent events, such as the triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom. Thus, some analysts have begun to think about whether the fact of having overlooked culture prevents greater cohesion; that integration and construction of a real European identity that increasingly seems more necessary. In this context, intangible cultural heritage emerges as an element, no less indispensable despite its familiarity, which helps shape our lives while being made up by collective creations in which each community is represented more faithfully than in any other expression.

Its recognition by UNESCO, through the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and other successive declarations, has meant, at least on paper, a legal acknowledgement of an anthropological

reality: that of a shared culture in progress beyond nationalist officialisms and nostalgic localisms. It has also meant the promotion of a cultural diversity of Europe itself which, for the first time, would begin to be seen and recognised as a source of strength and resources rather than with the suspicion or apprehension that it awoke among the “founding fathers” of the EU, when the burden of the shadow of World War II meant that, on many occasions, the different cultural identities were still seen as the cause of the disappearance of that happy “world of yesterday” (Zweig, 2002).

Hence, after the conference “Beyond Cities and Nations”, we must ask the following question about national and citizen identities – recognised or recognisable – from inside or outside: can intangible cultural heritage, the intangible heritage that makes us human in a certain way, still be a key instrument in European construction? This is the question that

has underpinned this conference of analysis of intangible cultural heritage in Europe.<sup>1</sup> This is no surprise because, in the current circumstances, looking at this heritage appears as a distinct viewpoint on an old and new path, as familiar as it is rarely trodden. The path that remains to be taken, crossing through “today’s fears” (Díaz Viana, 2017).

But, when doing this, it is also worth asking about the underlying reasons for the European refusal to acknowledge diversity itself and also about the difficulty that still exists for the anthropological concept of culture to penetrate the different fields, particularly those of creativity, art and knowledge. In these fields, it seems that the excluding vision of culture as “high culture” should still prevail, however much it is besieged by relativism and the “philosophy of decolonisation” (Finkelkraut, 1988: 89).

### The Constrictions of an Elitist Conception of Culture

Thus, in Europe very often only what some historians call “high culture” is identified as culture, and the human capacity to create that exists in each individual is limited to the exclusive and apparently exquisite creations of a few artists as geniuses and unique beings.

Special mention should be made of the precarious situation of anthropology (as a scientific discipline) in countries such as Spain – but not in the Anglo-Saxon or Nordic world –, where it was established late and is perpetually harassed by the pseudo-sciences surrounding it: theosophists, para-psychologists and other pseudo-professionals of rarity or the picturesque strove

to present themselves to the administrations and society as “experts” in subjects that fall under the anthropological discipline. And, even worse, the term itself is replaced by that of “ethnography”, which continues to be the method and set of techniques with which anthropological work is undertaken, and is not in itself a science nor encompasses everything that anthropology can and must embrace.

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Something similar happens with the replacement of the term and concept of “culture” – anthropologically understood – with that of “tradition”, which cannot aspire to be its main object of study but just an aspect of interest insofar as it is the means or the way in which cultures are conveyed and transformed. And this happens when dealing with “high” and “low” culture, “popular cultures” “culture of the cultivated”; and regardless of the delivery of knowledge made through what anthropologists such as Redfield called “Big” and “Small Tradition”. Thus, perhaps because “ethnography” and “tradition” are words that inhabit a rather greyer and semantically more neutral area than “anthropology” and “culture”, they have been used and abused until replacing – in given non-academic fields – these others.

It should not be like this and anthropology should not continue to be confused with a science only interested in the primitive or

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1. The conference “Beyond Cities and Nations” (Valladolid, 10 and 11 October 2018) included the second edition of the Jean Monnet module of the Instituto Universitario, Universidad de Valladolid, entitled “European Integration and Intangible Cultural Heritage”.



UNESCO's Headquarters.

exotic when, as some important anthropologists from the last century already pointed out, far from dealing with “measuring brains” and “handling pieces of junk” (Kluckhohn, 1983: 20), it focuses its aims on understanding what is human through cultures; and serves, among other things and even as its ultimate goal, to carry out diagnoses of what is happening in our own society and how “hybridism and complexity” work (García Canclini, 2001). It may also be that, as mentioned above, mistaking the concept and object has entailed errors of diagnosis among even the most lucid minds. A paradigmatic case is that of Jean Monnet himself.

When he compared the goals of the American federal nation project with the difficulties that still beset the European project, he did not seem to be aware of the cultural deficit in the construction of the EU, not so much divided by “its traditions, languages or ways of life” as “by the national rivalries and their attempts at domination,” which he also

emphasised (Monnet, 2008). Understanding mainly the “minor” cultural traditions as a source of conflict is a mistake from which we are still suffering as Europeans. Because, in any case, the urgency of a cultural union was systematically relegated and when it was finally incorporated into the panorama of the integration of our nations it was almost always encumbered by constraints and ties that would explain this initial deficit of culture in the overall EU construction plan.

All this has meant that when, somewhat late, European programmes on culture were established, they avoided the search for common substrates and copied models such as the French one, anchored in a hegemonically elitist view of the cultural – that of this “culture of the cultivated” – and its later reconversion into industry: networks of museums, archives, declarations and awards that meant the consecration of artists or monumental settings or cities would be in the list of these programmes’ priority objectives.

## A Twofold Complex: The Fear of Seeming Colonialist Again and Dividing Europe based on Cultural Differences

This idea of culture is still closely linked to what Gramsci called “hegemonic culture”, which does not admit or incorporate into its dimension of national culture cultural or linguistic diversities that clash with the “official conceptions of the world” (Gramsci, 1988: 488). However, and somewhat paradoxically, when cultural programmes try to exchange the obsolete “development assistance plans” in developing countries with an updated terminology they will turn to the supposed panacea or amulet under the label of “cultural diversity” to ward off possible post-colonial criticisms. Or to dissimulate, in this way, the arrogance with which for centuries European oligarchies would treat both their “savages from within” – the country people – and their “savages from outside” – the natives of the colonies (Díaz Viana, 1991: 9-20).

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Both complexes were widely translated and embodied in a lily-livered attitude towards the possible European construction on its diverse identities – within a common identity – or in the feeling of guilt faced with policies which, indeed, were often real pillaging strategies beneath the civilising aim with which they were introduced. Because the approaches to cultural planning would be burdened with a somewhat fearful attitude in the “inward” viewpoint and a somewhat shameful feeling in the “outward” perspective.

Fear of awakening old conflicts by looking at and recognising the communities that, with their diverse languages and cultures, make up

not only Europe but the countries of the Union; shame over creating beyond the European field the suspicions and mistrust of all kinds that the colonialist expansion left in so many remote latitudes. A kind of domination that was complemented with the “construction of the colonial subject” and the implacable contempt for other cultures and polytheistic beliefs, which will be considered little more than a “demonology” (Spivak, 2010: 42)

Both syndromes must be overcome as soon as possible to face a future in which the European countries form a block of the scale and level of those that now have more importance in the world, because without real and powerful cultural cohesion the integration of a united Europe will never be feasible.

## Let's Take Cultural Heritage Seriously as an Anthropological Cohesive Foundation and Resource in European Integration

Whether Jean Monnet wrote the following lines – apocryphally attributed to him by some – they could well have been assumed by him in his capacity as father or ideologue of the European Union: “If we had to start the construction of Europe now, we would begin with culture.” In any case, the acceptance by many of the truth concealed in this sentence that was never said, does suggest recognition of a necessary rectification by the architects of the European Union in terms of what perhaps should have been the priorities of that process of integration of the different countries and legislations. But another declaration by Jean Monnet which summarises the founders’ real intention in the European dream does seem authentic: “We are not forming coalitions of states, we are uniting men.”

However, not even the states have united or reunited beyond the laudable agreements

or cooperation treaties, because this above all has been done by the market, economics and finance. Only they, as well as the regulatory policies and directives in close relation with (if not in servitude to) them, seem to have really become community issues – and not always for the wellbeing of the citizens. The urgency to develop at the same time a certain awareness of the need for a reunification in the cultural was being systematically relegated. And when, in the end, this idea was incorporated in the panorama of the integration of our nations in the process, it did so, almost always, encumbered by certain constraints and tics that would explain that initial deficit of culture in the general EU construction plan. This is worth recalling in this European Year of Cultural Heritage in order to reflect rigorously on what has been done in cultural affairs in Europe and to identify the challenges we are facing. Because cultural identity does exist, however much one believes otherwise (Jullien, 2017).

The incorporation of a renewed and more anthropological concept of culture, such as that included in the concept of intangible heritage and in the policies, programmes and directives promoted by UNESCO, which fundamentally derive from its declarations, has come late to the agreement of the plans and actions of European integration. And it will not be very effective if it is reduced, as is sometimes happening, to inventorying and promoting the most decorative, striking or typical. Such a re-approach has to be a real anthropological shift in the treatment of culture or it will be nothing. At most, this development of names and institutions will come to form part of that now long and familiar deterioration of concepts related to non-dominant or “subordinate” cultures that end up in old labels and marked by negative connotations: “folklore”, “traditional culture”, “popular traditions”, “ethnographic heritage”... (Prat, 1999: 87-109). Terminological erosion that is not resolved with the

ipso facto reconversion of that industry of the picturesque into supposed anthropology of the autochthonous overnight, without academic training or theoretical reflection or without having changed slanted and banal approaches to culture.

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On the contrary, it is crucial, on the one hand, to seek out the common substratum of European culture – which is no other than that of *Romanitas* and the Greco-Latin legacy – in its popular cultural expressions, as the discourses of national cultures have so far only studied the differences between peoples or regions in depth. On the other hand, it is becoming necessary to vindicate – beyond the shadows, which do exist, of European history – what Western thought has contributed to the design and advancement of humanity as a whole in our progress from “animals to gods” (Harari, 2014). Its humanistic and anthropological story.

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