

## A Heart for Europe

Dick Pels

We are Europeans, for better or for worse. If we talk about art, architecture, literature, landscape, football, music or travel, we all seem to love Europe in our own particular way. In his book *Made in Europe*, subtitled *The Art that Ties our Continent Together* (2014), Dutch journalist Pieter Steinz has collected a wealth of pan-European assets we may proudly call our own, ranging from Asterix to Swan Lake, from the fado to the femme fatale, from Bach to The Beatles and from Kafka to Monty Python. In this brilliant pointillistic tableau, the Greek tragedy and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony enjoy equal rank with 'total' football, Harry Potter and Mary Quant's miniskirt. Steinz' collection suggests an unmistakable coherence, without claiming a monumental, cast-iron unity. European culture is a supermarket for all tastes, whose casual togetherness aptly illustrates the Union's motto *in varietate concordia*: unity in diversity. Everything is within reach. Everything is 'our own'. Each of us has some knowledge about it and feels attached to it with various shades of intensity. What person of my generation did not fall a little in love with Marcello Mastroianni or have a crush on Sophia Loren or Catherine Deneuve?

But as soon as we mention the European Union: the market, the mint or the might of Brussels, such love is suddenly far away. At present, the 'idea of Europe' seems more dead than alive. Few are still bold enough to say: 'Europa, wir lieben dich!' – as Matthias Strolz, leader of the left-liberal Austrian NEOS party, recently did. The mood of European citizens has increasingly become one of concern, distrust and anxiety. At best, they share the pragmatism of the current British Minister for Europe, who was asked if his compatriots might one day come to love Europe: 'I don't think we will ever will feel emotional involvement. Love for Europe as an idea, no. But a pragmatic attachment, yes' (*NRC Handelsblad* 13.12.13). A spokesman for the Dutch conservative liberal party was similarly standoffish: 'Europe is not an ideal but a means to an end. A means to make money. The VVD does not feel any love for Europe' (*NRC Handelsblad* 26.5.12).

Moreover, during 2014 and 2015 four great crises have intervened, which have put the European idea(l) in even greater jeopardy. An acute security crisis has erupted around the Russian annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine. The eurocrisis has culminated in nerve-breaking negotiations between the 'Institutions' (formerly the Troika) and the Greek government. Islamist terrorists have executed brutal attacks in Paris and other European cities. And last but not least: an unprecedented stream of refugees has been fleeing from the Syrian war (which has also become a Russian and European war) and other regional conflicts. Piling up on top of each other, these overlapping challenges have dramatically exposed Europe's moral and political weakness: its lack of mutual solidarity, political force and value cohesion. Together they have undermined the optimism of even the most passionate pro-Europeans, such as Joschka Fischer, Guy Verhofstadt or Frans Timmermans, who all worry whether Europe will be able to brave this 'perfect storm'.

Yet there is a paradox involved. Never before have ordinary citizens read so much about Europe in their newspapers, seen so much Europe on tv, or felt its presence so acutely in their personal and professional lives. More than ever, European politics have become domestic politics. National elections, referenda and changes of government in other countries have become in some degree 'ours', generating unprecedented levels of Europe-wide interest. In

2013, as elsewhere in Europe, most Dutch citizens were relieved when bunga-bunga Berlusconi finally left the Italian political stage. Incidents such as the Buttiglione affair in 2004, the Danish cartoon crisis in 2006, the court case against Pussy Riot in 2012 and the savage attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan in Paris triggered pan-European debates about family values and gay rights, the freedom of speech and religion, the open lifestyle, and other core European values. This chronic self-inquiry into our national and European identities has made us all of us a little more European. The euro crisis, the border wars in Ukraine and Syria, the Islamist attacks in Paris and elsewhere and the humanitarian crisis caused by the refugee stream have all strengthened our sense of participating in a European community of fate.

But this growing sense of ‘being in it together’ has simultaneously called forth an opposite, defensive reflex, which has deepened existing political and cultural divisions and elicited a groundswell of nationalist sentiment. The refugee crisis has opened up a sharp cultural rift between East and West, which has complemented and aggravated the already virulent economic one between North and South. Both have been rendered more acute by a growing political divide, both within nations and on the European level, between mainstream parties and national-populist parties of the right and the left. Polarization around the European project has grown stronger across the entire EU, pitting those who feel that such huge problems cannot be solved by supposedly ‘sovereign’ nations singlehandedly, against those who want to keep these problems out by erecting fences, closing national borders and sending migrants and refugees back to where they came from. In proclaiming that the refugee stream is ‘not a European but a German problem’, populist leaders such as Hungary’s prime minister Victor Orbán, while being a part of it, openly refuse to share in this European community of fate.

In all European countries there exist considerable minorities, and in some countries even majorities, which adopt a suspicious and dismissive attitude to further European integration. And indeed, there is a lot to be sceptical about. The euromarket and the Brussels bureaucracy are in urgent need of further regulation and democratization. The neoliberal politics of austerity has progressively undermined economic and social protection for many European citizens. European summits and negotiations between the EU and its member states are usually not a pretty sight, and tend to produce weak agreements which are ignored by the strong with little impunity. So far, European leaders have not been capable of finding durable solutions to the epochal challenges of migration, collective safety, economic stability, democratic accountability, energy security and climate change.

But Europe is much more than a bundle of deficits. Throughout the centuries, Europe has also represented a cultural ideal, an idea of civilization, the promise of a good life of liberty, security, well-being, tolerance and happiness. Throughout its history, Europe has also represented much more than the sum of its individual nations, which are woven together by innumerable historical, cultural and political threads, in a common fate, in good times and bad, in war and peace. Against all odds, Europe still holds out the promise of an open, welcoming, hospitable society which protects individual and social rights, supports a plurality of lifestyles and accommodates those who flee to it from violence, oppression and destitution. It is this normative horizon which glimmers behind our quotidian, often semi-conscious love for Europe as a warehouse of culture.

### **A Politics of the Heart**

The tragedy of today’s debate about Europe is that champions of closer integration tend to use rational, economic and pragmatic arguments, out of weariness of grand narratives and perhaps

also the impotence to tell them, while Eurosceptics and nationalists first of all tell emotional stories. They do offer a grand narrative, even though it is about finding freedom, identity and pride in the nation, making strangers go away and scaling down the EU or even abolishing it altogether. In this respect, the populists may teach us an important lesson. Austrian liberal Matthias Strolz has already learned it from compatriots such as Haider and Strache: 'Politics must be conducted from the heart. Voters first of all follow emotions, then personalities and only after that rational arguments' (*NRC Handelsblad* 6.1.14). Facing the Brexit referendum, Caroline Lucas, the British MP and former MEP, likewise pleads that we need to make the emotional case for Europe. Economic arguments alone will not do the job. They must be complemented with 'a more positive emotional value-based proposition that speaks to people's sense of identity, about who we think we are'. In order to counter the Eurosceptic narrative, we should not so much rely on facts and figures but instead tell inspiring stories: 'People want to feel inspired by the EU as something positive, exciting, dynamic, open-minded and gregarious' (*The Guardian*, 27.1.16).

Ceding the terrain of emotion-shaping to antiliberal forces, philosopher Martha Nussbaum concurs, is to give them a huge advantage in the hearts of the people. The traditional liberal fear of emotion is mistaken, and we should instead try to cultivate something like an emotional liberalism: 'All political principles need emotional support to ensure their stability over time, and all decent societies need to guard against divisions and hierarchy by cultivating appropriate sentiments of sympathy and love' (Nussbaum 2013: 2-3). These public emotions should support and sustain liberal principles and just institutions, and help people to think larger thoughts and commit themselves to a larger common good. They may goad people out of their selfishness and narrowness towards a common effort, play down fear and envy and limit the urge to shame and stigmatize others.

However, we need to reckon with a significant asymmetry: emotions have much more power to affect reason than reason does to affect emotions – particularly the emotion of fear (Gore, 2007: 23-24). Fear is the most powerful enemy of reason, and is easily manipulated and exploited by populist 'merchants of fear' (Mak 2005). Populist leaders tend to support people's prejudices and weaknesses and to magnify public anxieties for their own political gain. True moral leadership, on the other hand, consists in helping people to manage their fears, to pluck up courage and have faith. Powerful storytellers may turn around people's anxieties and cultivate hope and optimism. Raw emotions also usually inspire an all-or-nothing attitude. The true quality and calling of leadership is to moderate them and articulate them into values and ideals which may lift up people to their 'better (European) selves'. Let us therefore bet on a politics of the heart: while the underbelly is raised to 'heart level', reason must in turn be 'lowered' towards it. In this way, the education of political sentiments will feed an intelligent politics of passion.

### **Ringling for the Soul of Europe**

How can we stir up political passion for Europe rather than against it? For this, a new 'idea of Europe' is required: a vivid narrative which appeals to the imagination and adds new inspiration to the European project. 'Europe must acquire a soul', founding father Robert Schuman already said. His motto was adopted by the programme A Soul for Europe, which started in 2004 in Berlin, with the purpose of activating European citizenship through the strategic vehicle of culture. Speaking at its first conference, then Commission President José Manuel Barroso argued that 'The EU has reached a stage of its history where its cultural dimension can no longer be ignored... Europe is not only about markets, it is also about values

and culture. If the economy is a necessity for our lives, culture is really what makes our life worth living.’

In this regard, a great battle is currently being waged about what constitutes the soul of Europe. As is suggested by the abbreviation Pegida (which stands for ‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident’), one side of this conflict is made up of those who wed a strong sense of Europe’s Christian identity and heritage to an equally strong rejection of Islam. They defend national sovereignty and national pride against further European integration, and value cultural and ethnic homogeneity over and above cultural diversity and ethnic mixture (cf. Victor Orbán’s phrase: ‘We would like Europe to remain the continent of Europeans’). On the other side stand those who emphasize Europe’s secular, pluralist and individualistic values, and who anticipate a more united political future in which Europe has made a concerted effort to surmount its multiple existential problems. In the latter view, Europe exists in order to protect the rights of individuals rather than the sovereignty of nations, and will continue to offer hospitality, even if migrants bring along cultures and values which sit uneasily with the core principles on which the Union was founded. It imagines a better, more generous and more protective Europe, which offers a bigger feeling of home and a bigger pride than can be furnished by the nations.

How can we construct a distinctive Europeanness? How can we reimagine Europe as ‘Our Country?’ Nussbaum thinks that generous and uplifting civic sentiments might be usefully directed at the nation (the American one, in her case). She accordingly defends a humane, aspirational and ‘critical’ patriotism against more aggressive, exclusive and warlike versions. The nation, in her view, is able to grab people’s hearts and imaginations, because it can be construed as ‘us’ and ‘ours’. However, both American politics and crisis-ridden Europe currently face the rise of an exclusivist and aggressive nationalism, which prefers to distinguish between us and them in the narrowest provincial terms. How can this narrowness be overcome? How can we cultivate a spirit of civic love for Europe?

If Europe is indeed make-believe, it is ours for the making. Contrary to what nationalists claim, political integration has in many cases preceded and stimulated cultural integration. Nation-building and political institutionalization have often acted as preconditions for the formation of the European peoples, their cultures and even their languages. Following the Italian unification of 1861 Massimo d’Azeglio, author and former prime minister of Piedmont, far-sightedly declared: ‘We have made Italy, now we must make Italians’. Polish historian Bronisław Geremek coined the variant which Delors or Schuman would also have embraced: ‘We have made Europe, now we must make Europeans’.

Currently, the term patriotism is monopolized by nationalists such as Le Pen, Wilders or the Pegida marchers, who defend a chimerical sovereignty for their peoples and nations against an encroaching and threatening external world. In this book I envisage a different variety, which is closer to the critical and generous spirit of Nussbaum. It requires that the harsh, exclusive emotion which nationalists claim for their respective homelands is stripped of its all-or-nothing character and applied to the higher and lighter level of Europe. Both for our individual nations and for Europe, we need a more sober, non-inclusive and (self)critical form of patriotism which, while appealing to public emotions and the public spirit, does not fall prey to the intoxications of nationalism and xenophobia. Europe does not demand a crushing family loyalty which excludes and mistrusts everything which is not ‘our own’. It favours lighter, more promiscuous, friendlier attachments: those of a *family*, ‘travelling light’. Such a

lighter patriotism (or a ‘weakness’ for your nation) can agreeably be combined with a similar soft spot for Europe.

The political challenge of national populism teaches us that a new narrative about Europe must be emotionally literate, but should simultaneously adopt a lighter touch and tone, allowing for self-relativization and for cultivating multiple loyalties to multiple homes. Citizenship is layered, not singular and exclusive. Love of region and ‘city chauvinism’ often trump love of the nation, particularly for migrants. This diversity agrees with current sociological analyses which suggest that (big) cities constitute a new element of dynamism in Europe (cf. Barber 2013). Cities are often guardians of a new superdiversity, drivers of creativity and sources of identification and pride. Their new transnational role fits the image of a multi-tiered cultural geography of Europe, which flexibly combines communal, regional, national and supranational attachments and identities.

Strictly speaking, pessimists who claim that ‘the cosmopolitan citizen’ does not exist (cf. Cuperus 2009) are right. But so are those who retort that ‘the (national) people’ does not exist either (cf. Lefort 1989; Rosanvallon 2008; Pels 2011). European patriotism is an effort to clear a middle way between earthly but narrow nationalism and exalted but abstract cosmopolitanism. Love for a generalized ‘humanity’ is bound to be weaker than love for a concrete place, which includes familiar landscapes, persons of renown, shared historical experiences and a common idiom. The space of Europe is sufficiently bounded to provide citizens with a sense of identity and home, but it is also large enough to transcend petty nationalisms. The four great crises of 2014-15 have overwhelmingly demonstrated that they cannot be mastered by the European nation-states on their own, but also that Europe will only be able to survive if it becomes more like a country: a finite political and cultural space which exists within a common boundary which must be more closely monitored and protected.

### **The Seduction of Europe**

The battle for Europe’s soul also ranges two conceptions of power against each other: the masculine power of the strong hand versus the feminine power of seduction, or the ‘power of weakness’. Athenian leader Pericles already knew that the greatest strength of a democratic society resided in its relative openness and gentleness of manners. His panegyric to Athens as a freedom-loving, tolerant and relaxed society underscored its superiority over the militarism of Sparta: ‘While others emphasize masculine bravery in the education of their youth... we, with our more relaxed way of life, are just as ready to face the same dangers as they are’ (Thucydides 2005: 24).

In this regard, Europe once again harbours an embattled soul. On the one hand, gentle, relaxed and peace-loving Europe can be said to have a ‘feminine’ culture which abhors authoritarianism and the hard power of traditional macho-politics. In all countries, the most pro-European parties (such as the progressive liberals and the greens) are also the most gender-diverse. It is no accident that the most powerful European leader is a woman, and that in the current crisis, Hungarian leader Victor Orbán has emerged as her archetypical macho opponent. To the horror of many hardliners, in some European countries even the institutional holders of the ‘manly’ monopoly of violence, such as the police and the army, have become to some extent feminized. France between 2002 and 2007, Spain between 2008 and 2011, and Italy, Germany and the Netherlands currently have female Ministers of Defence. Italy appears finally to have broken with gerontocratic rule with the relatively youthful Renzi government, half of which is composed of women – while for Berlusconi females were little more than sex toys and colourful pieces of wallpaper.

On the other hand, Europe's soul is being chased by both internal and external enemies who hate and despise this softness and weakness. The populist parties and movements cherish tough masculine values, and generally side with Victor Orbán against Merkel (and with Donald Trump against Hillary Clinton on the other side of the Atlantic). Their tolerance for institutional checks and balances, for political opponents and for minorities is thin, and neither do they show a great appetite for engaging in discussion and (self)critique (since 'the people are always right'). As Geert Wilders recently declared: 'The truth is on one side only. It is on our side, so get used to it'. Marine le Pen, the (female, but tough) leader of the Front National has called for the 'rearmament' of a 'weak' France in order to 'annihilate islamic fundamentalism'. An MEP for the (formerly True) Finns admits: 'We are a very masculine party. We favour hunting and gun possession, and are against abortion – positions which do not appeal to women.' His own wife, though, votes for the Greens, like many other Finnish women.

This distinction between hard masculine power and the weaker power of seduction is not a frivolous one, but represents a moral and political clash of principles. In eastern Europe, machopolitical styles and values have intruded into many governments, most acutely in those of the Visegrad Four (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic). The clashes between 'rugged' Russia and the 'weak' West offer more examples of this deep value conflict. The knee-jerk reaction of alpha male Vladimir Putin to the playful protests by Pussy Riot was followed by widespread commotion about the Russian law against 'gay propaganda'. In this regard, the victory of drag queen Conchita Wurst at the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest was dripping with political symbolism. At the eruption of the Ukrainian crisis, Europe long hesitated to give a firm answer to Putin's illegal annexation of the Crimea. Before the crisis broke, a Dutch expert on Russia wrote: 'With a superior smirk, Putin expresses his satisfaction that, a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia is once again approached with trepidation and awe. As is proper in the self-image of a nation that feels safer when it is feared than when it is loved by the rest of the world' (*NRC Handelsblad* 8.2.14).

The conflict in Ukraine (literally: Borderland) is much more than a border conflict with geopolitical scope. It is also a clash of worldviews and cultures in which the concept of an ethnically pure, masculine and hierarchically organized Eurasia is pitched against a decadent and effeminate 'Gayropa' (*Die Zeit* 17.4.14). Armed and masked men in combat fatigues who smashed ballot boxes, burned ballot papers and uttered death threats against members of electoral commissions: these images from the Donbass in 2014 already sufficed to identify the enemies of European democracy. Soon after, the shooting down of flight MH17 and the death of 298 civilians brought this European border war very close to home.

The ruthless barbarism of Islamic State has meanwhile inspired homegrown jihadi's to kill journalists, cartoonists and Jews in the capitals of Europe itself. After beheading 21 Coptic Christians on a beach near Tripoli, IS fanatics pointed their knives northwards to Rome, threatening to conquer the hated 'capital of the Crusaders'. The terrorists in Paris likewise meant to strike at Europe's heart: at its lifestyle of openness, sexual equality and playful tolerance. Here as well, women-hating and homophobic machos resorted to an orgy of violence in order to impose their version of religious purity.

### **Hard and Soft Power**

Taken together, therefore, the years 2014 and 2015 represent a historic turning point for Europe. Something has fundamentally changed, as economic problems have been largely

pushed aside by geopolitical, strategic and moral ones. Due to the threats and dangers presented by Russia and IS, many Europeans have suddenly realized that they do not only have common problems but also common enemies. Indeed, it is not the national cultures which are presently at risk and at stake, but a broader European one. The peace dividend generated by the fall of the Berlin Wall has been exhausted. No longer does Europe bathe in the warm glow of a victorious democracy which is only surrounded by friends and weak opponents. Europe has also come face to face with its 'others'. It has come to see that its pluralist, diverse and tolerant culture must be defended more rigorously and convincingly against violent dogmatists, iconoclasts and nationalistic conquerors. In this sense, Europe has discovered that it does indeed have an identity and a soul, which it must cherish and defend.

Like a *deus ex machina*, Putin has already provoked a sharpening of our self-image, involuntarily granting the EU 'a new foundational experience' (*Die Zeit* 20.3.14). The eurocrisis, the islamist attacks and the refugee disaster have only deepened this foundational challenge. We have also come to see more clearly that the domestic and foreign opponents of the European project and of European pluralist democracy are to a large degree the same. Western populists in opposition, both of the right and the left, as well as some Eastern populists in government, tend to blame the EU for its 'irresponsible' actions in the Ukraine, and sympathize with Russia's geopolitical demands and strategic interests. Like Putin, they are 'illiberal' democrats who embrace an authoritarian conception of democracy and value cultural homogeneity and national unity over and above pluralism and diversity.

This existential moment once again raises – more keenly now – the old dilemma of European softness, gentleness and moderation. If Europe wishes to maintain itself against these enemies, it will need an injection of hard power and hence a more unified and cohesive political and military effort (Holslag 2014). Europeans have insufficiently realized that their soft power is crucially dependent on the hard security wall which has been maintained by NATO and the *Pax Americana* since 1945. Yet this does not imply that we must surrender the ideal of the 'good fairy' Europe, who scorns male chauvinism and its eternal distrustfulness, its obsession with prestige and its penchant for violence. The mythical story which relates how Europa, the daughter of the Phoenician king Agenor, was abducted by Zeus disguised as a handsome white bull, had better be turned on its head. Upside down, the story anticipates the taming of the bulls (or bullies?) of this world by a strong woman called Europe, the attractive heiress of European freedom, democracy and prosperity. Prime Minister Birgitte Nyborg in the Danish tv series *Borgen* might offer an attractive role model here.

Pride in Europe is also pride in the power of Europe. But this power must flow from a spirit of moderation and self-restraint rather than from aggressiveness and a conquering drive. Since Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*, Europeans have practised the art of self-mockery. Since Montaigne wrote his critical essays, they have fine-tuned the art of self-observation. From Cervantes to Konrád and Kundera, the European novel has pondered the vicissitudes of individualism and self-irony. Since at least Voltaire and Marx, Europe has become adept in social and political self-critique. From this perspective, Europe's heart and soul are constituted by the values of individualism, pluralism, tolerance and self-critique, which together define a unique cultural 'feel' and civilizational style. These values cannot be taken for granted. They represent achievements which should be more deeply appreciated and more decisively defended, if the old European dream of peace and prosperity is once again to conquer the imagination of Europeans.

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