“Repairing Europe”: A Critical Reading of Storytelling in European Cultural Projects

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While European integration was long considered to be primarily about economic and political cooperation, since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty it is increasingly approached from a cultural angle. Culture has become a key instrument in trying to shift people’s national sentiments to a loyalty to the European community and in seeking agreement on how Europeans collectively remember their past and envision their future. In what follows, I look at two cultural projects that reflect this ambition of European political and cultural bodies to strengthen the European Union’s legitimacy by anchoring “Europe” in a shared narrative. The first project is the future House of European History, initiated by former President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering in 2007 and scheduled to open in Brussels in 2016. The second is the Via Regia, one of the touristic trajectories promoted by the European Institute of Cultural Routes, an organization launched by the Council of Europe in 1987. My focus is not so much on the projects themselves, as the museum is yet to be built and the route yet to be travelled (at least by me), but rather on how they are presented online and, more specifically, on the European narratives these online presentations imply. These are narratives of “Europeanization,” understood here, following Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls, as a cultural practice that seeks to produce a “specific European culture and history” and to contribute to the creation of “new forms of individual and social identification in Europe” (4).

My primary aim, then, is to critically examine the role and function of narrative in both cultural projects. Within the broader context of this volume, I additionally wish to shed light on the relation between narrative and the notion of peripherality. The House of European History’s proclaimed “leitmotiv” of “centre and periphery” is significant in this respect. While it promises a productive and critical thematic focus, the museum’s plans ultimately fail to give room to those stories considered “peripheral” to the central narrative of Europe on display. This means that despite its proclaimed attention to the historically shifting dynamic between center and periphery, and to the altering power relations that such shifts entail, the museum actually builds on a problematically static center-periphery model, so as to keep the European story on display intact. With regard to the Via Regia route, which runs from Santiago
de Compostela in Spain to Kiev in Ukraine, it is significant that the conceptualization of locations on the route as either “peripheral” or “central” entirely depends on the different narrative functions they are intended to perform within various (regional, national or supranational) narrative frames. Both the House of European History and the Via Regia cultural route, then, reveal centrality and peripherality as narrative constructions. Before delving further into these two projects, however, let me first introduce my preliminary questions by looking at “Narratives for Europe,” the European Cultural Foundation’s guiding principle between 2010 and 2012.

“Narratives for Europe”

With “Narratives for Europe” the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) invited “thinkers, artists, writers and activists from Europe and beyond” to “share their thoughts and observations,” to “juxtapose, compare, dare, contemplate, open new perspectives and to provide food for thought” and to “build Narratives for Europe.”1 The result was an online collage of contributions from Europe and beyond, among them an exchange between the Dutch writers Abdelkader Benali and Jan Brokken on “the sadness of the discourse on Europe,” pieces by the Belgian cultural historian and writer David Van Reybrouck and the Egyptian playwright Laila Soliman on “Flirting with Stereotypes,” and contributions by the Belarusian Journalist Iryna Videnava and the Tunisian activist Lina Ben Mhenni on “Historical Taboos.” This kaleidoscope of voices was intended to “form a showcase against generalisations and populist streamlining,” because “only a subtle, nuanced and determined approach can help us find the answers for today’s world.” These answers, it is suggested, come in the form of stories, which is also the message conveyed in the contribution by Indian writer Amitav Gosh: “The new Europe has yet to find its story – and politicians and leaders will never be able to give it that story. This story can only come from writers, dreamers, and thinkers – and it has yet to be told.”2

Despite the ECF’s emphasis on providing a forum for reflection and debate, the overarching framework is clear from the start: “building Narratives for Europe.” As the choice of the preposition “for” indicates, these narratives should first and foremost be beneficiary to Europe. Europe, it is suggested, is in dire need of new stories. But why this desire for new stories and what does

1 http://www.narratives.eu/.
2 This is part of Gosh’s keynote lecture for the ECF’s “Imagining Europe” event in 2012, presented in PDF form on the “Narratives for Europe” website.