EUROPA — UMA CASA COMUM?
EUROPE — A COMMON HOUSE?
The role of culture as a vector for a common European house. The challenges of the EU action and the mobilisation of players in the field of culture to build a European casa comum

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Abstract

At a time when the European project seems to have reached a stalemate, culture may be a valuable tool to find new ways to go forward and to contribute to lay the foundation of a European house. This paper explores the EU action related to culture and the role cultural actors may play in fostering a cohesive European society open to its neighbours and beyond. It analyses two cases: the implementation of the EU cohesion policy in Sicily, at the extreme south of Europe and in the heart of a turbulent Mediterranean, and the role of European cultural networks supported by EU institutions and promoting transnational cultural cooperation. It analyses the articulation between the EU cultural action, and the way it may answer the needs and priorities of the cultural players, supporting the development of uma casa comum.

Keywords: cultural field, European integration, cohesion policy, Sicily Region, cultural networks.

The process of the building of Europe is not a long river that glides along, and today, as the sociologist Monica Sassatelli puts it, one may wonder if it has lost the plot. In other words, it seems that the recipe to build “unity in diversity”, the motto of the EU project trying to find ways to unite different people in a “casa comun”, is not effective any more.

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On the one hand, the home that was dreamt and implemented by the founders of Europe, with its robustness and its fragility, seems incapable to host the European people any longer, as the Brexit vote has shown in 2016 in a dramatic way. On the other hand, Europe is seriously challenged by populations fleeing from Africa and the Middle East and risking their lives to reach it. The flows of migrants who tried to enter Europe in 2015 led to one of the most serious crises of the European project, and the conclusions of the European Council in June 2018 have shown that migration is still one of the most sensitive and challenging issues of the European agenda, revealing strong disparities among Member States’ positions. Culture may be a valuable tool to find new ways to contribute to overcome this stalemate. Indeed, even if culture is the expression by excellence of one’s singularities and has brought about dramatic conflicts, it is also recognised as a vector to strengthen societies’ identities and cohesion. In this sense, culture could play a key role in the building of Europe, and lay the foundation of a European house – uma casa comum. But is there such a thing as a European culture and how to define it? And if culture can be mobilised to carry on the EU integration process, how the EU action could foster its development?

There is no unique definition of culture, let alone of a European culture. Following the anthropological “modern” sense of culture referring to societies that produce culture through their interaction, culture appears as a particularly volatile notion – it is precarious precisely because of its social component. However, in an attempt to define what European culture could be, different approaches could be adopted. First, the historical perspective developed by Paul Valéry suggests that the notion of a European culture is based on a Mediterranean heritage shaped by three influential components. For him, “any race and any land which has been successively Romanized, Christianized and subjected, in terms of spirit, to the discipline of the Greeks, is absolutely European”. For the philosopher Denis Rougemont, who strongly believed that only culture could save Europe after the Second World War, the contribution of the German people was essential as they promoted the freedom of association, which in turn has inspired the European federalism. Another way to try and identify the specificities of Europe as an entity touches upon the analysis of its relation to the others through a dialogic perspective. For Rémi Brague, “European distinguishes itself from other cultural worlds through the specific mode of its relation to what is its own, appropriating what is perceived as foreign”. In other words, Europeans have a unique way to make other cultures their own. This perception leads to another

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6 BRAGUE, Rémi - Europe, la voie romaine. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. ISBN 2070408779, p. 120.