



Observer's Report from the Brussels Conversations 2012

Ben Schofield and Andreas Bock, 17.11.12

Welcome Panel

The Brussels Conversations was the middle of three events held in November to launch the Cultural Coalition for a Citizen's Europe. As such, it held a significant position, looking back to the debates from the first event – the Berlin Conference 2012 – and looking forward to the Amsterdam Conversations in two weeks time.

The Berlin Conference, it was noted, had been dominated by a sense of crisis – both the European financial crisis and a crisis in Europe's very *raison d'être*. It was stressed how our work in Brussels must build on Berlin, and that our work would be shaped above all else by the need for new arguments – arguments about Europe's common history and common future, as well as new state-of-the-art approaches with which to talk about the state of the union.

Speakers were united that we need to think about ever more inventive approaches in our work. Volker Hassemer explicitly reminded us of Hannes Sowboda's call at the Berlin Conference for a new and inventive relationship between citizens and politicians. The panel called for the creation of a new culture of politics, economics, and social life for the whole European space – not least so Europe can genuinely deserve the Nobel Prize it received this year. The panel closed with a word of warning: that we need to move beyond a simple concept of citizen-participation, towards one of responsibility, but that not all citizens will want to take up this responsibility.

If crisis is the best moment to change behavior, then our moment as the Cultural Coalition has come. We must move decisively forward to help citizens act as the owners of Europe. This is not a thankless task – as President of Marcel Hicter Association Raymond Weber reminded us, citizenship movements – from the small scale to the Arab Spring – constantly prove that the mass mobilization of citizens can achieve remarkable change.

Points to take forward for the Cultural Coalition and the Amsterdam Conversations: *How have debates developed since Berlin, via Brussels? Are the themes and challenges of the Cultural Coalition's work now clearer? What new partnerships have developed? How can we increase the inventiveness of our themes, structures, formats, and how can this impact on the relationship between Europe's citizens, its politicians, and its institutions?*

Opening Session: “A Cultural Coalition for a Citizen’s Europe”

The main feature of this panel was a keynote presentation by political philosopher Luuk van Middelaar. Starting from the concept that politicians have consistently attempted to instill a sense of Europeans in citizens, van Middelaar explored three different strategies that states have used to convince their citizens of their common identity. These approaches were:

- 1) The “German” approach – based in nation building and the development of a common identity through national structures and institutions;
- 2) The “Greek” approach – founded in the power of democracy and providing the public with fora to express their voice;
- 3) The “Roman” approach – focused on the advantages of a specific identity or union, the outputs it can achieve (for instance, a “Europe of results”).

Van Middelaar argued that a common identity is always about *self*-identification with a group: you cannot force people to feel European. The most we can do is to entice the public through images, symbols, stories. It is at this stage that culture has traditionally played a role. Such common symbols are problematic, however, and van Middelaar presented a number of case studies where European symbols either became problematic; lost their symbolic value; or were even counterproductive, prompting disengagement with Europe (the flag, the design of banknotes, European citizenship etc).

Van Middelaar concluded by assessing the role of globalization and the financial crisis in shaping discussions of Europeanness. Because of the crisis, he argued, people are aware that what happens elsewhere in Europe now matters economically and politically for their *own* jobs and futures. European news is now headline news – a result for hope (even if the cause of this is not).

During the response and following discussions, activist and academic Peter Vermeersch introduced the G1000 project – a Belgian initiative that created a citizens’ summit, whose key features included online interactions, small-scale citizens debates, and an inventive representation of hard policy results to politicians. Hassemer reacted to the project by noting that politics alone cannot save our future, however inventive the political engagement process devised by G1000 is. We cannot only be inventive about approaching politics, we also need this to mark our approach to culture. Vermeersch replied by stressing that we also need to rethink our understanding of culture – to shift the debate from *culture* to *creativity*. Culture becomes less abstract as a notion when we think about creativity.

Points to take forward for the Cultural Coalition and the Amsterdam Conversations: Is the G1000 project a model of best practice for the activation of citizens? How can it be made more cultural and less political? How can we ensure the quality of such projects? Projects like G1000 shouldn’t be merely presented but really discussed. How can we encourage a shift in focus from the cultural to the creative? Should we also engage with those not yet converted to the European ideal? Why did Monnet not start with culture?

Session I: What is the state of democracy and cultural rights in Europe?

In opening the panel, Kathrin Deventer and Marijn Duijvestein stressed the need for the “new”: new methods of understanding the cultural components of citizenship that will lead to new concrete proposals and activities. Together, they raised four points to focus the discussions 1) Should we engage more deeply with the non-converted? 2) Is the Euro-crisis the moment for coming together? 3) Are the citizens the unacknowledged new legislators of Europe? 4) How can we speak about creativity, rather than just the cultural sector?

A keynote was provided by academic Patrice Meyer-Bisch. This highly philosophical speech focused closely on the question of what it really means to talk about the citizen’s “right” to participate in democratic life. Meyer-Bisch began with the image of us all being in the same boat – namely Europe – but that the boat is sinking. He argued that cultural rights are essentially about human dignity, and that we have developed economic liberties but not civil liberties.

He stressed how economic issues are cultural issues, and how we need to rediscover the humanness, the intimacy, in our economic and cultural interactions. If we secure dignity, he argued, we can build a sustainable wider society and a sense of Europeanness. Throughout, he developed a remarkably broad notion of culture – covering civil liberties, human rights, economic circulation, as well as a more traditional notion of works of art – which mirrored the broad concept of culture underpinning the approach of A Soul for Europe. Responses to the panel were diverse: Some directly related Meyer-Bisch’s discussion of dignity, culture and politics back to van Midelaars’ speech from the night before. How can we reconcile issues of solidarity, freedom and the economic crisis? Put provocatively: are suffering Greeks and Spaniards simply to be seen as the collateral damage of European fiscal solidarity in a time of crisis?

Elisabeth Sjaastad returned to the theme of responsibility, stressing that it is not only politicians that carry responsibility – artists must also do this too. In an attempt to concretize the debate with examples from practice, she turned to documentary film, demonstrating how certain cultural forms very obviously bring about change. Sjaastad also stressed more generally that audio-visual media play a major role in developing our images of Europe – a theme close to the work of A Soul for Europe. Images lead to emotions, and in turn emotions can change mindsets. She concluded that crisis forces artists back into the limelight in order to create new, alternative narratives for ways out of the crisis. These narratives are not just about “us” Europeans, but also tackle the construction of Europeanness in multi-cultural and transnational contexts.

This led to a broader discussion cultural citizenship as a form of migrant citizenship, and the issues faced by discussing double or multiple citizenships. The discussion concluded with the firm sense that the time has come to stop discussing, and to start acting. Hassemer urged us to remember that we are not a think-tank, but an *act-tank*. We are not a lobby group for culture, but a lobby group for Europe on a cultural basis – a notion of culture that had been so-well encapsulated by Meyer-Bisch in his keynote.

Points to take forward for the Cultural Coalition and the Amsterdam Conversations: How can we continue with our Images of Europe project to develop and expand the power of the visual in building and sustaining a sense of Europeanness? How can we explicitly include non-European perspectives into the creation of a European soul? How do we ensure – through our topics and formats – that we stop being a think-tank and starting being an act-tank?

Session II: How can Europe be revaluated and re-evaluated to overcome fear and resentment?

The panel opened with Kathrin Deventer and Marijn Duijvestein re-iterating the importance of the human element to our discussions so far. The human element involves emotions: emotions lead to identifications, and thus to changes in vision and attitude. We were asked not to forget the unofficial mascot of the Brussels Conversations – “Manneke” – and the various social and cultural relations he finds himself in on the powerpoint slide.

This was followed by philosopher Alicia Gescinska’s keynote which focused on the roles that fear and resentment play in creating dissatisfaction with both democracy and Europe. She stressed that she was not arguing IF there is a crisis of democracy right now or not (though there appeared to be consensus at the Berlin Conference that this was indeed the case), but rather WHY it is that citizens lose their faith in democracy, and WHAT we can do about this. Gescinska first turned to the notion of resentment which, she argued, is central to understand why people turn their backs on democracy and why people reject Europe. She mentioned the Greek Golden Dawn movement as an indicator for how the euro crisis became a moral crisis. Resentment is an existential malaise that comes from a sense that we are powerless to change our lives. This means people feel at home neither in themselves, nor the world in which they live. Enzensberger has termed this group of citizens “radical losers”. And Gescinska stressed that people really need moral guidelines. Speaking about values is not old fashioned, it’s necessary - for the sake of Europe.

Gescinska diagnosed neo-liberalism as the core reason that the gap between winners and losers is widening, producing (in the words of Guy Standing) a mass “social precariat”. Ultimately, then, what is at stake in the Euro-crisis is not just the economy. It is not about currency, it is about culture; it is not about money, it is about morality. We need to make explicit what is at stake. The reason we must help Greece is not to aid the European economy (though this is not unimportant) – it is to ensure that freedom and tolerance continues on the continent.

Gescinska’s persuasive analysis was challenged in part by the panel that followed: Activist and author Krystof Czyzewski argued for a more nuanced distinction between misery and poorness, and not to see the two terms as synonymous. Poverty does not always mean a lack of dignity. Sometimes, Czyzewski noted, being rich in Western terms is not a fate, but a choice. It can be a counter-cultural movement in the form of a culture of non-consumers, which moves art away from a self-promotional stance to a self-critical one. In particular, Czyzewski noted that we need to become critical of certain infrastructures, such as the festivalisation of culture.

Vania Rodrigues responded by returning to Gescinska’s concept of radical losers, pointing out (with the concrete example of Portugal) that just because there isn’t a radical right wing party in a country, it doesn’t mean that democracy is not at risk. There can still be radical losers on a societal level that can destabilize democracy. You can engage in civic and cultural acts all week, but if you have no job, all is lost – participation is not the cure-all.

Gescinska noted that while poverty does not mean a lack of dignity, we need to be context specific. Thus, in Western Europe, poverty for average people IS undignified, and we must acknowledge the reality of this situation. Yuriy Vulkovsky urged us not to get lost either in broad economic or counter-cultural debates, but to remember that art changes lives on the personal level: that this is its essential power – the power the Cultural Coalition should harness. The panel concluded with Rodrigues balancing the positives and the negatives of the preceding discussion. She mentioned a post-pessimistic approach and noted that a negative stance does not mean a passive stance. She warned that we must be careful not to create a two-tier Europe: a poor Europe with a non-consuming counter culture, and a rich Europe of opera houses.

Points to take forward for the Cultural Coalition and the Amsterdam Conversations: How can we ensure that we maintain our concept of “Manneke” – the human element and that we appeal to emotions as well as minds? How can we move forward with the notion of a social precariat – does

this model help our work in any way? How can we move beyond with models of participation to creating genuine societal change? Should we develop further documents for members, and for the European Parliament to sign, to be presented to national and regional governments? How can we harness the individual catalyzing effect of culture within the wider frameworks of the Cultural Coalition? How can artists become acknowledged legislators of the world?

Plenary Session III: Closing Comments

Paul Scheffer argued that the primary issue facing Europe is its poor visibility to itself. For instance, the visibility of Europe's history is remarkably nebulous, considering its cultural significance. The cultural memory of Europe is thus far too vague and fragmented.

As a result, we need to think about the infrastructures that will improve this: in particular translation, archives, and other forms of cultural transmission. This could counter the rise of resentment and fear analyzed by Gescinska. But, Scheffer argued, we should avoid words such as fear, resentment, nationalism, racism. Instead we should think of positive narratives: narratives about European experience, historical and present. Peter Vermeersch then summarized key themes that ran through the Brussels Conversations.

- 1) There is a need for new narratives which help us (re)imagine Europe.
- 2) We need to involve ordinary citizens in more "outside the box" thinking; empowering them to influence the reactivation of democracy. Let's be creative!
- 3) We need to trigger the involvement of artists and thinkers in our work, especially those who are not yet thinking about how their work can help us.
- 4) We need to trigger the involvement and responsibility of politicians, as well as tapping into their own creativity, moving them away from short-term thinking, to a long term vision that allows them to come up with new ideas.
- 5) We need to brainstorm across borders with new online techniques.

Points to take forward for the Cultural Coalition and the Amsterdam Conversations: *How can we improve the access to and dissemination of the cultural memory of Europe? How can we create new narratives for the (re)imagination of Europe? Both these points also dominated the Berlin Conference 2012 – so how can we move forward with them in practical ways? How can we create an imagined community of Europe, and how are we being imagined by others outside of Europe? Above all else – how can we finish with the discussion process and start the working process?*