Corin Braga

European Identities and Cultural Imaginaries

Abstract: Although a geographically small continent, Europe has fostered, over the past millennia, the emergence of an impressive number of languages, cultures and civilizations. This constitutes its richness and also its challenge: how should all these local, regional and national cultural identities be harmonized and integrated, without destroying, but rather conserving and enhancing them? A seminal concept in the investigation of the cultural, literary and artistic representations is "the imaginary" (the equivalent of the French term l'imaginaire), as opposed to the traditional concepts of "imagination" and "fantasy". Cultural imaginaries express the relations between individuals and groups, their representations of the self and the others, of the geographical and historical milieus, of the planet and the universe. The images of Europe, positive or negative, global or fragmented, define the conscious and unconscious attitudes and comportments, hopes and fears concerning the individual and common destiny of European peoples.
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Corin Braga
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
corinbraga@yahoo.com

Although a geographically small continent, Europe has fostered, over the past millennia, the emergence of an impressive number of languages, cultures and civilizations[1]. This constitutes its richness and also its challenge: how should all these local, regional and national cultural identities be harmonized and integrated, without destroying, but rather conserving and enhancing them? The concept of an integrated Europe, especially after the traumatic experiences of the world wars, is indeed active in the conscious and unconscious collective mind of the European peoples. This explains the success of the original plan of the founders of the European Union and the ongoing process of adhesion and enlargement with countries from the former communist bloc and of other provenance.

However, this common general expectation is, especially in the context of the worldwide economic, social, political and military crises of the recent years, challenged by the often implicit recommendation that each country and each community should find better solutions for themselves and by themselves. While such solutions could work for some problems and in specific cases, overall it appears that, within the global trend of the emergence of new economic,

trade and financial powers (China, India, South America, Russian Federation), the real chance for Europe to remain a main world competitor is its interior integration.

The main challenge for the European Union is to ensure irenic relations between its states and populations, to find the shared elements of their specific collective imaginaries and mentalities, to construct the architecture of a common European self-image in which diversity, acknowledged and assumed, becomes a factor not of dissension, but cohesion and unity.

In order to comprehend Europe's cultural, literary and arts dynamics, a central concept is that of "fractal identity" (see how this mathematical term, worked out by Benoit Mandelbrot, was adapted to cultural studies by I. P. Couliano and others). While Europe as a whole offers a general compact picture (especially when seen from outside the continent, by Asians, Africans, Americans, etc.), when seen from within, it begins to proliferate one main cultural pattern at different levels: global; by areas and zones (the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Latin Countries, Anglo-Saxon Countries, Protestant Countries, Ex-Communist Countries, etc.); national (states); regional and local (federal communities, ethnic groups, religious minorities, etc.). The members of each of these layers have common features and characteristics, which give them similar profiles. While neighboring communities from the same level might oppose each other, in order to ensure the impenetrability of their structures, at a higher layer, it becomes evident that they compete exactly because they share similar configurations and goals.

The relationships between groups, communities, nations, etc. evolve in a complex dialectics between multiplicity and unity, between conflict and transversal cooperation. This means that Europe is, at all levels, what Umberto Eco would call an *opera aperta*, a work in progress. The actual political and juridical division of Europe into national states is continually challenged by tendencies from the lower and higher layers, which often require different groupings.

These dynamics are all the more evident when observing collective imaginaries, which can act as a progressive factor, which imposes new directions and trends, or as a reactionary factor, which obstructs changes. Research on the European collective representations should secure the comprehension and assessment of these centripetal and centrifugal forces of a multi-layered, evolving Europe. It could provide the artisans of the integration process with a cognition instrument, allowing them to become sensitive to or aware of cultural differences and susceptibilities which could undermine the continental cohesion. These should be addressed properly, without any deleterious effects on the identity of the EU member countries, on their self-images and interests, because otherwise divergent and centrifugal opinions, movements, groups and parties are likely to emerge, rejecting the integration ideal as a massification process. How could this situation be prevented?

What should be acknowledged is that the global deposit, the main "container" of the European cultural identities is the material and spiritual patrimony, the tangible and intangible cultural heritage that Europe has inherited from its dynamic and convulsive history. The first thing to do is to outline a map of the spiritual profiles of

the European communities, at all levels: local, regional, national, zonal and continental. Scientists from the domain of social sciences have already built such maps for material issues such as natural and mineral resources, agricultural and industrial exploitation, population and market resources, etc.

Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that people live not only in a factual world, but also in a spiritual, cultural world, made of images, representations, worldviews, stereotypes, clichés, prejudices, etc. If we care about natural ecology, we should also care about the spiritual ecology of the collective psyche. In the same way in which scientists approach physical and social sciences according to the material domain each discipline represents, researchers in the humanities could analyze the political, geographical, historical, social, and religious imaginaries that express themselves in the contemporary literature and arts.

The seminal concept in the investigation of the cultural, literary and artistic representations is "the imaginary" (the equivalent of the French term *l'imaginaire*), as opposed to the traditional concepts of "imagination" and "fantasy"[2]. The modern concept of "the imaginary" was founded in the mid-20th century, through the works of Gaston Bachelard, Henry Corbin, Gilbert Durand and other prominent philosophers. While "imagination" defines the human faculty of creating random mental images, with no correspondent in the outside reality, that is, false, chimerical representations, the French term *imaginaire*, "the imaginary", designates the imaging or the imagining function of the psyche, its capacity to create new, creative representations. *L'imaginaire* (treated grammatically

as a noun) has two overlapping meanings. In the first instance, it designates the products of the imagination, the passive body of images and representations created by an individual or by the collective mind. As Hélène Védrine puts it, *l'imaginaire* is "the whole world of beliefs, ideas, myths, ideologies that pervade each individual and each civilization"[3].

In the second instance, *l'imaginaire* is seen, on a larger scale, as the dynamic human faculty of creating this complex system of images. For Claude-Gilbert Dubois, it is "the visible outcome of a psychic energy, which has its formal structures both at the level of individuals and of collectivities"[4]. For Joël Thomas, it is "a system, a dynamic function for organizing images, which gives them soundness and correlates them"; or also "the dynamics organizing various foundational systems"[5]. For Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, it designates the "inner creative force of imagination", "principe d'auto-organisation, d'autopoïétique, permettant d'ouvrir sans cesse l'imaginaire à de l'innovation, à des transformations, à des recréations"[6].

Humans relate to the outside world not only through senses and ideas, but also through images and representations. Their comprehension of the world and their ensuing reactions depend on these subjective images. As António Damásio has recently shown, the simple fact of telling stories (i.e. organizing our experience in narrative terms by means of brain maps) is one of the most elementary and archaic "obsessions of the brain"[7]. Rather than a dimension at the margins of the material and physical order of the world (both visible and invisible), "the imaginary" is intrinsically intertwined with it, over-determining the way we feel,

read and represent (through artistic, literary, scientific, historical, religious or mythical discourses) both the reality enveloping us and the way we interact with it and transform it. In order to understand human behavior, anthropologists have to tackle the complex system of representations that underlies mental activity.

As an anthropological concept, "the imaginary" pervades all human practices. It applies to a vast range of domains, from sociology and religion to literature and the arts. Social imaginaries comprise narratives, mythical events, historical characters and collective symbols which serve to make sense of history, organize cultural memory and configure the future. Scholars such as Pierre Nora, Régis Debray, Paul Ricœur, Elémire Zolla, Eduardo Lourenço, José Gil, etc., have highlighted the psycho-sociological function of symbolical, narrative and iconic mediators. Lately, the concept has experienced important and interesting developments, especially in the English-speaking world. Following innovative works written in the fields of literary studies (Said) and political science (Anderson), it has become customary to refer to social and political imaginaries for analyzing the institutionalization of modern societies. Charles Taylor defines "the social imaginaries" as follows:

> By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and

their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations[8].

Images of the self (*autoimages*) and of the other (*heteroimages*) (the "other" being conceived as an individual or as a collectivity), worldviews of nature, universe or God, representations of geography, history, society and culture literary and fine arts fantasy, theatre and cinema, music and dance, advertising and media, etc. are all products and instruments of the imagining function. Even the most common and current attitudes of everyday life bear the imprint of collective habits and representations.

Researchers also talk about malfunctions and pathologies ("*dérives pathologiques*") of the collective imagination[9]. When they are no longer spontaneous and creative, collective images become stereotypes and clichés. Guided by ready-made representations, people no longer react individually to social *stimuli*, but engage in induced irrational attitudes, which lead to prejudices and conflicts. A reflective society should know how to recognize and deconstruct such received opinions which allow for manipulation and control. "The imaginary" is a common patrimony that could, on the one hand, consolidate and enhance prejudices, clichés and behavioral inertias, and, on the other hand, reorient and transform recollections, expectations and hopes, projects and utopias. It is ambivalent: it can prevent or put a stop to change and inspire or prompt new developments. It is important to explore this double aspect of the European social imaginaries within the frame of the effort to produce a Europhile public opinion and a European collective "narrative".

The importance of imaginary representations in contemporary societies can hardly be underestimated. Let us consider a few examples: ecology, historical myths, post-communism and post-colonialism. As regards the first example, the attitude towards the natural environment depends not only on positive data, but also on the imaginary representations. The debates over climatic change generate and are also influenced by their reflection in literature, art (especially film) and media. Catastrophic movies concerning global warming, the rise of the ocean level, the destruction of the atmosphere, changes in the rotation axe of our planet, collusion with a meteorite, pandemics, etc. seem to be more efficient when it comes to influencing official and public opinion than positive scientific data. Insofar as the second example is concerned, historical memoirs and myths, we can see their importance in the debates on the recognition of historical traumas (genocides, holocaust, Shoah, etc.), the competition between minorities, empire-related myths, etc. Finally, post-colonialism and post-communism are a complex reservoir of inherited mental schemas and imaginaries. Literature and arts provide not only the most effective insights into collective psychology, but also instruments for redirecting and educating people's ways of perceiving, imagining and thinking.

While present in potentially every human activity and creation, collective schemes of imagination have a special formalized application in what we generally call "arts". Starting from mythological and religious rites and performances, practically all modern arts, such as literature (epic poems and narrative), theatre and cinema (tragedy, comedy, drama), painting and sculpture, have their origin in the cult of the gods and the dead, as visual representations of the invisible and the supernatural. With the laicization of the historical societies, these artefacts of human creativity lost their religious function and acquired an aesthetic function. However, they never lost their power of fascination, which goes beyond the pragmatic aspect of beauty and draws on collective numinous representations. Literature and arts have replaced the ancient cosmological myths of creation, the historical legends about heroes and heroical deeds, the narratives about the events and experiences of human life, the rites of passage for each category of age, the symbols and images for great themes and topics such as love, war, death, time, animals, geographical space, human society, individuality and human psyche.

Culture, literature, music, dance, fine arts, etc., provide the most complex and sophisticated picture of the collective identity. Cultural imaginaries express the relations between individuals and groups, their representations of the self and of the others, of the geographical and historical milieus, of the planet and the universe. The images of Europe, positive or negative, global or fragmented, define the conscious and unconscious attitudes and comportments, hopes and fears concerning the individual and common destiny of European peoples. A diagram of the literary and artistic representations of our continent provides a psychological diagnostic of the current tendencies and trends of our society. A knowledge database covering all the cultural dimensions of this immaterial inheritance could offer the instruments for a better understanding and creative

use of the mental schemes that rule mass psychology.

Yet, imagination studies ("recherches sur l'imaginaire") do not limit themselves, as I already suggested, to literature or arts, as we might think, because of the common identification of the fictive and the imaginary with aesthetics[10]. They pervade all other social domains, as political, historical, geographical, religious etc. representations. Let us focus on historical imaginaries. It is possible to envisage both a history of the imaginary representations and a study of the imaginary representations of history.

For a long period, historiography has been conceived as a panorama of successive political, social, economic and cultural events, i.e. as an inventory of "objective" data. However, while it is certainly true that individuals and groups respond to external processes and facts, the historical science of the last decades has shown that these processes and facts are always perceived as subjective and internal images. This means that historical representations are modelled by the imagination's categories and values. Consequently, several analysts of the historical imaginary exposed the myths, the phantasms and the collective images that governed the crucial moments of international history, from the French Revolution and Napoleon to the fascist and communist totalitarian regimes. Collective memory and imaginary representations are indissolubly intertwined, forming a major axis of collective identities. They manifest themselves not only through linguistic, cultural and spiritual values, but also through material, tangible values. For example, history can invest places, creating "lieux de mémoire", as Pierre Nora put it[11]. From monuments and buildings to museums and concentration camps, these places carry symbolic charges that go beyond their geographical or economic importance. Each nation and minority group generates its own image of history, so that Europe's historical imaginary should be comprehended as a mosaic of different, intertwined representations of the past.

In the construction of cultural identities, a major role is played by the images that the different groups hold about themselves and about the others: auto-images and hetero-images. *Auto-images.* Starting from Romanticism until the first half of the 20th century, ideologists and philosophers attempted to identify what they thought to be the essence of a people, a nation or a race.

This approach has been thoroughly criticized, especially after the nationalistic ideologies led to catastrophes such as the Holocaust and the Second World War. In our post-modern era, we know that a people's idea and image is a problem of collective representations. Each group and nation has a specific, sometimes incoherent and polemical image of itself. Each of these images encloses a very complex constellation of conscious and unconscious reasons and motives that would need a subtle psychoanalytical approach to collective mentalities. In order to better understand themselves and maybe improve their civic and political behavior, groups and peoples should bring to light the unspoken motivations of their self-representations. *Hetero-images.*

Together with the image of the self, the image of the others is an important element in constructing individual and group identities. People relate to one another not only in a direct way, by interpersonal

contact, but also through common representations, stereotypes and prejudices. Such an approach should envisage the collective images that different people from Europe hold about other European peoples (neighbors, North vs. South, West vs. East, inside vs. outside Europe) and about minority groups in their own societies (religious, sexual, ethnic, immigrant, etc.). It has to be said that my approach to the representations of the Other goes beyond the discipline known as Imagology[12]. While the construction of images of the self and of the other is a cultural process, I do not imply that "national characters" have an objective existence (that they are somehow genetically inbuilt in peoples or races), on the contrary: I consider that they have only a cultural and mental existence, that they are collective representations. As such, they could and should be analyzed and deconstructed, in order to discharge their potential aggressiveness and violent tendencies.

Finally, another important domain that should tackled when analyzing collective representations is that of religious imaginaries. Political institutions and social practices in Europe rely on an important theological-political factor, i.e. the legitimating of authority (be it good or evil). The representations of power heavily depend on the religious apperception of the sacred and the religious myths of sovereignty. In European political civilization, there have coexisted different forms of government: royalty, the republic, the Empire, authoritarian states, democratic states, etc. The democratic states are a form of rational secularization of the theocratic monarchies, which created their own foundation myths (see the French Revolution). During its history, Europe has experienced diverse forms of revolutions

and reforms, projects and utopias largely fed by messianic and chiliastic religious movements. Recently, the totalitarian experiences of Communism and Fascism have also involved propaganda mechanisms of destroying ancient political myths and creating new ones, able to lead the masses. These collective social imaginaries have evolved in a strong relationship with different other factors, such as the great migration, conquest and colonial movements, cultural influences (Orthodox vs. Catholic Christianity), economic conditions (North vs. South), political regimes (West vs. East), ethnic composition. Each national synthesis should reflect this complex situation, by tackling the pertinent issues for each respective country and, at the same time, remaining open to transversal issues.

Exploring collective representations is especially important in our times. Contemporary post-modern society is evolving into a "global village", in which people from all over the world are provided, via media channels, with information on potentially every single event that takes place on Earth. Nevertheless, unlike in the traditional village, where the transmission of this information was direct, non-mediated, and interpersonal, in the global village the information is indirect, mediated, and transformed. The transnational advertising system, the worldwide movie distribution networks, newspapers and magazines, cable and satellite television, the Internet, itinerant fine arts exhibitions, the global diffusion of literary works, all these media no longer supply "perceptive" images of remote people and events, but only virtual images, processed in offices and studios. These images become liable to carry additional, subliminal messages, which may be exposed

to ideological or commercial manipulation. Political campaigns and electronic wars, fashion and cultural popularity awards represent just a few trivial examples of the way in which received images influence our vision of reality.

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Notes

1. A part of this text has been published, in Romanian, with the title "Imaginarii europene și patrimonii culturale", on the site of Institutul de Studii Avansate pentru Cultura și Civilizația Levantului, 2021, https://institutlevant.ro/programe-si-proiecte/uniunea-europeana-intre-sperante-si-anxietati/corin-braga-imaginarii-europene-si-patrimonii-culturale/.
2. Cfr. Corin Braga, "Imagination, imaginaire, imaginal. Three French Concepts for Defining Creative Fantasy", in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 6, n. 16, 2007, pp. 59-68.
3. Hélène Védrine, *Les grandes conceptions de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 10.
4. Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *L'imaginaire de la Renaissance*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1985, p. 17.
5. Joël Thomas (ed.), *Introduction aux méthodologies de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Ellipses, 1998, pp. 15, 19.
6. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'imaginaire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003, p. 13.
7. António Damásio, *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, London, A Grosset-Putnam Book, 1996.
8. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham-London, Duke UP, 2004, p. 23.
9. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Imaginaires du politique*, Paris, Ellipses, 2001, p. 82.
10. Cfr. Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Baltimore-London, The John Hopkins UP, 1993.
11. Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1984-1992, 3 vols.
12. Cfr. for example Manfred Beller and Joseph Theodoor Leerssen, *Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters: a Critical Survey*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2007.