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## **Performing Europe.**

### **Framing and representing the Europe-culture nexus in a local context.**

#### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a contribution to the understanding of what occurs when “culture” and “Europe” meet in a local context. Specifically, the subject of study is the Festival of Europe (Festival d’Europa), a biennial event dedicated to European themes held in the city of Florence (Italy). The article analyzes the origins of the Festival, the idea of culture embraced by its organizers, and cultural performances staged by local actors during the 2015 edition, combining top-down and bottom-up perspectives. The article provides evidence-based reflections on how European-centered cultural repertoires are developed and experienced using qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.

Keywords: Europe of culture; Festival of Europe; Local actors; Cultural diversity; Heritage; Cultural performances.

Cet article contribue à la compréhension de ce qui se passe lorsque « culture » et « l’Europe » se rencontrent dans un contexte local. L’objet d’étude est le Festival de l’Europe (Festival d’Europa), un événement biennal dédié aux thèmes Européens organisé dans la ville de Florence (Italie). L’article présente l’origine du Festival, l’idée de culture adoptée par ses organisateurs et par les performances culturelles organisées par les acteurs locaux lors de l’édition 2015 du Festival, considérant ainsi les perspectives top-down et bottom-up. En utilisant des méthodes qualitatives, l’article analyse comment des répertoires culturels, centrés sur l’Europe, sont pensés et vécus.

Europe de la culture ; Festival d’Europe ; acteurs locaux ; diversité culturelle ; patrimoine ; performances culturelles.

#### *Introduction*

Over the last two decades, scholars have shown a renewed interest in the cultural aspects underlying the process of European integration (Bruter, 2005; Calligaro 2013; Cram, 2001; Foret, 2008; Kaelble, 2003; Laffan, 2001; Manners, 2011; McLaren, 2006; Shore, 2000; Theiler, 2005). A general comment accompanies this literature: the underestimation of the significance of local contexts as well as their institutions, in giving rise to a sense of

Europeanness (Sassatelli, 2002). The intersection of culture, politics and European belonging has often been analyzed at supra-national level through the narratives that institutional actors (mainly the European Commission) offered on how to represent Europe and its cultural identity (e.g. Shore, 2000; Bee, 2008). But what happens when culture and Europe come together at local level? How are cultural conceptions of Europe modulated by local institutions and actors? My presentation seeks to answer these questions through a case study, an empirical research study on a festival: the “Festival of Europe” held in Florence.

Organized by institutional actors with the involvement of civil society, the Festival of Europe is a complex macro-event, which takes place in Florence during the month of May every two years. The Festival was born in 2011. It has as its explicit subject Europe in its multiple manifestations. I will present some of the results of the field research I carried out during the 2015 third edition of Festival.

Specifically, during this edition, the Festival (strictly speaking) hosted 64 events. Alongside these initiatives there were others organized by the Municipality of Florence and entitled Blue Night. 47 initiatives were included in the programming of Blue Night. Although strongly intertwined from an organizational point of view, the two programmings (Festival and Blue Night) have always been relatively autonomous. I will talk about this in more detail later as this is an important distinction. However, the Festival “as a whole” hosted a total of 111 events.

Tab. 1. Realized events (Festival 2015) classified by type

<b><i>Cognitive</i></b>	
Conferences, seminars, workshops, round tables, etc.	52
<b><i>Performative-cultural</i></b>	
Concerts, exhibitions, theatrical performances, etc.	51
<b><i>Ritual</i></b>	
Public meetings and commemorative ceremonies	8
N.	111

More specifically, 51 cultural events (concerts, exhibitions, theatrical performances, etc), 52 cognitive events (conferences, seminars, workshops) and 8 ritual-like events (such as commemorative ceremonies) were organized during the 2015 edition.

In my presentation, I will focus on three main issues: *a)* the origins of the Festival, *b)* on how the organizers have framed the concept of culture and *c)* how the cultural actors involved have used this concept when staging their performances. I intend to discuss how the EU and local institutions have directly or indirectly moulded the idea of culture from a top-down perspective. This analysis is complemented by a bottom-up perspective that analyzes whether and in what way cultural actors have, consciously or unconsciously, recycled institutional discourses or developed new strategies of representing a cultural Europe.

### *The origins of the Festival of Europe*

When and how did the Festival originate? This point can be summarized in a sentence uttered by an institutional actor I interviewed: “The Festival is the brainchild of the European University Institute, created in order to frame the State of the Union conference” (institutional actor)<sup>1</sup>.

The European University Institute was the driving force behind the realization of the Festival. Founded in 1972, the European University Institute is an international organization based in Fiesole, Florence, which is linked to European institutions yet remains independent. In 2011, the European Institute designed and organized the first “State of the Union”, an annual three-day conference involving national and European institutions. Many of interviewees stated that this conference was the central happening of the Festival by virtue of the participation of high-level institutional and political figures. It was while this political conference was being organized that the idea for the Festival of Europe was born.

During the first edition of the Festival (2011), the EUI presented itself as its sole creator and promoter, but it was mainly financed by a 'Management Partnership' composed of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM), the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP), whose representatives took part in the organising Committee supporting the EUI. Management partnerships are tools created by the European Commission to facilitate the co-financing of information and communication measures for the general public (CEC, 2004). Proposed during a particularly difficult period of the EU's political

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<sup>1</sup> In order to reconstruct the origins of the Festival, I interviewed four institutional organizers (one representative from the Tuscan Region, two representatives from the Fondazione Sistema Toscana, and a representative from the Europe Direct Office). As regards the cultural actors' strategies of representing Europe-culture nexus, I used project schedules of each event and in-depth interviews. Detailed project schedules of each event consist in the 2015 Festival edition. I also carried out fourteen semi-structured interviews with the organizers of single cultural events, six of whom were representatives of public entities (museums, public agencies, etc.), five represented non-profit associations and three were private subjects (art galleries, individual exhibitors etc.).

legitimacy characterized by uncertainties related to the approval of the Constitutional Treaty, and by concerns regarding the forthcoming EU enlargement, Management partnerships are flexible instruments created to improve communication regarding the EU by «adapting it to local circumstances and linking it to national political agendas» (CEC, 2007, 14). In 2008 the Italian government, as well as the EC and EP, subscribed to the Management Partnership called “Communicating EU in Italy” (*Insieme per comunicare l’Unione Europea in Italia*), which ceased to be operational in early 2013. It was this partnership that funded the first edition of the Festival. It is reasonable to say that the Festival originated from an institutional strategy aimed at communicating Europe. But why create just a festival? An institutional actor clarify this point.

During all three editions [2011, 2013 and 2015] we attempted to combine leisure time with serious themes. This is a way to bring Europe closer to the people rather than to boring, staid professors. [...] We must be aware that some of the people who attend are unfortunately poorly and ill-informed. Therefore, the best way to attract their attention is not to stupefy them with an overly academic approach, but to amuse and entertain them.

In my opinion, a clear instrumental approach to culture is here unfolding. Among the multiple instrumentalities of which culture can become the subject, it is not new to promote consensus by hosting spectacular or ludic events (Philo and Kearns, 1993; Harvey, 1990). The not-so-hidden strategy behind the realization of the Festival as a whole was to “popularize Europe”, by simply “attaching” culture to a political event in order to create a legitimate social image.

### *Programming cultural events*

The second point I intend to discuss concerns the cultural programming of the Festival. The tendency to treat culture as a synonym for leisure has been a constant in all three editions of the Festival. It has been made even more explicit by the continuing decision to differentiate the Festival programme (strictly speaking) from the Blue Night programme. The Festival (strictly speaking) has always hosted events with a more institutional profile (seminars, conferences etc.), while the Blue Night programme has always been more centered on recreational and aesthetic performances. Moreover, when the Festival (strictly speaking) hosted cultural events, they mainly consisted in high-culture genres (piano recitals, theatrical

plays, chamber music etc.), while the Blue Night editions focused on popular genres (pop concerts, children's shows, film screenings etc.). According to one of the organizers, the Notte Blu represents «the pop spirit of the Festival, in which one attempts to celebrate ..., and entertain people through events aimed at a broad audience, as opposed to other events organized for academics, politicians and intellectuals». This institutional design appears to have encouraged a cultural distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) based on high versus popular culture.

Beyond this distinction, the tendency to treat culture as a synonym for leisure reflects the difficulty of representing Europe in cultural terms. Europe is largely absent in the leisure performances (high or popular) of the Festival. It can be further claimed that, as regards to cultural events, it was the Festival "per se" that counted rather than its content. Festival organizers did not orient the events towards a specific way of understanding the relationship between Europe and culture. This is proven by the highly indefinite formula with which the applications for participation were collected. In the 2013 and 2015 editions, the participants submitted their proposals for cultural and other events by filling in an online form, in which the local actors had to indicate the recipients, budget, location and equipment required as well as a description of the events they proposed. In the online form, the Festival organizers did not expect local actors to specify the relationship between the event and Europe. In this regard, the cultural programme of the Festival is similar to the experiences of European Capital of Culture programmes: Europe is much more present in speeches than in actions (Sassatelli, 2009, 118-120; Patel, 2013).

In short, the overall image of the Festival is that its cultural programming lacks consistency. Apart from the organizers' decision to keep high and popular performances separate, the Festival has functioned as a simple container of everything proposed from below.

### *Cultural actors' performances*

Now I would like to address the third point of my discussion: how the cultural actors have used the concept of culture when staging their performances.

In my opinion, the very idea of creating a festival has guided the type of performance proposed by local actors. As the organizer of one of the musical events stated "when we decided to take part in the Festival this is we had in mind: to play our music and entertain people". The idea itself of a "festival" is to offer recreation and entertainment. Many of the cultural events held in the 2015 Festival were entertaining performances (21/51, 41%) of both

popular and high-culture genres. The lack of more specific directions for implementing the Europe-culture nexus further enhanced the ludic/recreational nature of the Festival's cultural events. The overriding conception of culture as leisure originated from this institutional deficiency as well as from the difficulties experienced by local actors in representing Europe in more cultural terms.

However, in the Festival's staged performances, culture was not only considered as being synonymous with leisure. As reported in Table 2, two core themes emerge as regards to the actors' performances: culture in terms of local heritage and culture as diversity.

Tab. 2. The Festival's cultural events subdivided according to the concept of culture

Culture as	Number of events
Leisure (high or popular)	21
Diversity	17
Local heritage	9
Other (e.g. environmental education)	4
Total	51

Staging local heritage depended on how local actors – especially public cultural institutions (museums, libraries) and private entities (art galleries) – considered the concept of culture, using it as a tool for promoting the city's identity. Even on the contemporary scene, festivals balance the dual needs of representing the local area and broadening its horizons (Picard and Robinson, 2006). However, this projection can hide conflicting intentions. Some of the events have assumed an essentialist-celebratory nature, by highlighting the “centrality” of Florence and its great artists for European and universal culture. This emerges, for example, from the words of a cultural actor when he states that “Florence remains the great Capital of Culture for Italy and Europe”.

However, for other events, the European framework was used as a tool for reconsidering local cultural heritage. For instance, an exhibition and guided tour entitled “Florence, a Monocular for Europe and the World” showed how the arts represented an instrument of mediation in the diplomatic relations between Florence and the rest of Europe. Lastly, there have also been events in which local cultural heritage has been commodified. Cultural objects, such as a historic buildings or private collections, have been commercially exploited by organizing paid visits . From this perspective, cultural heritage represents a strategic tool for «selling places» (Philo and Kearns, 1993) when it comes to attracting tourists and

marketing the authenticity of cultural sites. However, a common characteristic of all types of Festival events centered on cultural heritage – deliberately included in the programme of the Festival (strictly speaking) – is that they aimed to promote high culture, top class clothing to show/sell to well-educated people.

As regards to the strategies of representing cultural diversity, local actors have shifted away from the concept of a high-elitist culture by conceiving it as a “way of life”, namely as values, customs, everyday cultural objects and practices etc. It was mainly non-profit organizations that promoted performances centered on culture as diversity. They have assumed two forms which I call: celebratory and inclusive/deliberative.

A celebratory style has emerged above all in relation to food performances. Here, cultural actors have merely staged European culinary diversity, represented through “the tasting of Greek foods” or by staging “cooking competitions to offer the best Andalusian traditional recipe” etc. By focusing on the celebration of culinary traditions, this representation of cultural diversity reproduced the same weaknesses of the EU rhetoric about diversity at local level. This style of representation is suitable for creating experiences in which diversity is merely *sampled*. Viewed from a critical perspective, these cultural performances depoliticize the difference (Karaca, 2009; Lähdesmäki, 2010) by hiding more important political issues, like the contrast between a homogenizing EU food policy and the preservation of local culinary traditions. The Italian case assumes a paradigmatic significance in this respect (Castellanos and Bergstresser, 2006).

Through a series of very different performances, local actors strayed away from this celebratory style, and adopted a more inclusive/deliberative approach to culture. An example was the event called “Bundesallee 133” had a “paradigmatic” significance for its modes of approaching diversity and its proposed forms of aesthetic involvement. I would like to briefly describe this event. Organized by a cultural association, “Bundesallee 133” staged the burning of the books in Berlin which occurred on the 10th of March 1933, during the Nazi rise to power. What would have been of us Europeans if the Nazis had succeeded in destroying the masterpieces written by Proust, Joyce, Thomas Mann and many others? This event gave a magnificent representation. In the various halls of the Library where the event was held, the atmosphere was unearthly and silent in spite of the dozens of participants. In one of the rooms, actors wearing white hazmat suits and gas masks roamed between unusually empty shelves in order to represent a sort of “day after”, as if all the books in the world had disappeared forever. In another totally dark room, dozens of dimly illuminated books were stacked haphazardly on tables as if they were on a funeral pyre, while in the background a

voice called out the names of the authors and the titles of the books banned by the Nazi regime. In yet another room, motionless and grim-faced actors, came slowly back to life and began to read passages from the burned books as the spectators passed by. Cultural diversity, embodied in the variety of the burned books, was subsumed into a broader concept: the good as opposed to the radical evil of war embodied by Nazism. Other Festival events also embraced an inclusive/deliberative script. Examples include a documentary on mental hardship and social intolerance in Chiapas (Mexico), a photo exhibition dedicated to the women from the poorest parts of the world, and a walking tour to various places of worship in the city (mosques, synagogues) organized in order to promote interreligious dialogue. However, in all of the various inclusive/deliberative performances, “Europeanness” was not directly thematized. Even if one of the organizers of the mentioned photo exhibition stated that “this event aims to draw attention to the link between Europe and human rights”, this relationship is restricted to the intentions that animated the event, rather than to emerge from its contents. Paradoxically, the more local actors attempted to modulate the concept of culture in inclusive/deliberative terms, the more they neglected Europe as a reference horizon.

### *Concluding remarks*

The case study on the Festival of Europe revealed a number of critical issues concerning the relationship between Europe and culture when put into practice at local level.

The overriding strategy that inspired the Festival’s cultural programmes was paradoxically the deliberate decision “not to act”. As regards to cultural events, the Festival organizers considered them as tools for lightening, through entertainment, the far too institutional approach in communicating EU, which was the main reason behind the Festival. However, this conception of culture as leisure was not directly imposed. Local actors have enjoyed wide discretion in representing Europe from a cultural point of view.

According to my analysis, local cultural actors have seldom used this freedom of choice in order to develop new strategies for representing a cultural Europe. Interestingly, without formal constraints, cultural actors have reproduced some of the EU rhetoric on culture and its weaknesses at local level, such as an essentialist and high-culture conception of heritage, the tendency to commodify cultural objects and to celebrate cultural diversity, without problematizing it. A sort of isomorphism has matured between EU discourse and local civil society regarding the way of conceiving culture. This does not mean that the Festival did not leave room for performances more oriented towards creating a critical cultural public sphere,

in inclusive/deliberative terms. The above-mentioned performances of this kind show that moral and aesthetic elements can converge thus creating highly reflective encounters. Yet it is important to note that local actors did not include explicit references to Europe in these performances. This reveals that the European frame of the Festival remains simply evocative and that its usage by local actors highly flexible.

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