

27 Reflections about a European Culture Union

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*(The Heads of State, signatories of the Treaty)..... desiring
to deepen the solidarity between their peoples while respecting
their history, their culture and their traditions.....*

(Preamble of the Treaty of Rome and later Treaties¹):

The founders of Europe had a vision

The unthinkable: the Dutch language being replaced by English. It may still take some time, but it may happen. And Swedish and German in the North or even Greek and some Roman languages in the South, undergoing the same fate. It has happened before in modern Europe, although the circumstances were different: Irish was under colonial British rule when the transition happened. In 21st century Europe rulers having the power to tell a population what language to speak or not to speak do not exist anymore. A great achievement.

But the same effects may be achieved with other means. Not the mighty power imposing from above, but by an organised implosion. A diffuse though strong force that is hardly visible because it acts in smallish ways in many places in parallel. Imagine a dike built to prevent water flooding the city or the land. The water is intelligent; it has no chance if it attacks over the dike, so it decides to seep in from below in a multitude of places. After a while, unless the defenders stay alert and take countermeasures, the dike implodes and the water flows freely.

In most European countries such processes are on the way. Sometimes dangerously slowly, in other countries leapwise such as in the Netherlands where up to date scientific and technical Dutch have disappeared² in the relatively short period of 15 years. In other smaller domains the language has collapsed as well or is at the brink of falling.

The scenario evolves more or less as follows:

¹ The text of the European Treaties can be found here <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/collection/eu-law/treaties.html>

² With some exceptions, such as parts of clinical medicine, and Dutch law. Obviously, scientific language used until, say, year 2000, is still available and documented, but not spoken by the younger generations

- the white collar employees in multinational companies adopt bilingual or English-only policies;
- higher education institutions adopt internationalisation policies, implying that English is used to 'open up' to the world;
- small and medium-sized commercial and semi-commercial activities aimed at national and international clients turn to English because it is cumbersome and costly to communicate in two or more languages;
- governments and their administrations adopt bilingualism because a small but growing number of citizens use 'another' language daily;
- primary and secondary schools prepare the next generation citizens for a world that will be using English whenever the national languages fail to serve communication needs; and as the universities use English, it is logical to anticipate demands from the universities.

The transitional period, from the time that the majority of citizens speak their own language until the time that they have become bilingual or monolingual English, may take several decades. During this period the language proficiency will vary considerably between citizens; and only few citizens will command the native language or the English language fully. This has a negative impact on the quality of our societies and will cause social unrest.

It is in the interest of Europe and the Europeans that this scenario will not materialise.

Culture and Language

This is a paper about culture, why does it start with language?

Culture is a palace with many halls and chambers. The great reception hall is reserved for language; it is probably the most prominent aspect of culture. Language moreover is rather well documented and 'visible' for almost all people. The previous paragraphs have shown in a nutshell how languages may decline. Similarly the cultural phenomena in the other halls and chambers of the culture palace may implode or be washed away.

The culture concept is broad and deep. It embraces all human efforts to make life with fellow-humans and with the natural environment possible and attractive. Cultural achievements are man-made, in contrast to natural phenomena such as weather, materials, plants, mountains.

There are many human beings. All these people live in different places in different circumstances, each bearing the traces of deep historical evolutions. In order to survive, humans live in groups with physical and cultural characteristics shared by the members of each group. Some prominent cultural characteristics are: speech and other methods of communication, clothing and housing, ways of acquiring and preparing food, rituals and rules of behaviour, manufacturing.

The unfinished Treaty

- *The Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under other provisions of this Treaty*

(Treaty of Maastricht, 1992)

The European Union (EU) was established in 1992 by the Treaty of Maastricht. The EU was preceded by the Coal and Steel Community (1951), by EURATOM (1957) and the European Economic Community (EEC, 1957). In 2015 the treaty in effect is the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), but with respect to culture there is no significant difference between 'Lisbon' and 'Maastricht'. The absence of major differences is significant. It signals the lack of urgency with which cultural matters are handled.

Economic and monetary policies have always been the day-to-day business of the Union, even if its origin was the political goal of '*an ever closer cooperation of the peoples of Europe*' to overcome the divisions and the wars of the past. The Maastricht Treaty installed the Monetary Union and paved the way for the euro. The general public associates this treaty which was a major milestone in the political development of the EU, mainly with the introduction of the euro.

It is hardly known today that the Maastricht Treaty also widened the scope of action of the EU by the addition of a Culture chapter. This chapter was short, as if it was added in the last minute. But although no specific actions of the EU were envisaged, it wasn't merely symbolic. The most important goals from the Culture chapter are quoted above (*italics*). The Treaty of Lisbon copied the Culture Chapter of 1992, and failed to define in concrete terms what the EU should do in the culture sector. In Lisbon just one phrase was added to the text, providing somewhat more depth. Particularly the addition of the term 'diversity' is of importance:

The Union shall (...) respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced.

The diversity of Cultures in Europe

The recent Greek crisis demonstrated that Greece and the Greek culture are not well known in many of the other 27 countries of the EU. The lack of knowledge did not prevent people in other countries to ventilate opinions about Greece and the Greeks. In this respect, Greece is no exception in the EU; only citizens of countries sharing a border have some knowledge of their neighbours and may even speak their language.

This general lack of knowledge is disastrous for the cohesion of the Union and the solidarity between countries. If European citizens are asked to show solidarity with citizens of another member state, some basic understanding of the nature and ambitions of the other citizens is required. And if citizens are asked to add a European identity to their various national identities, they must have some idea who the other people are with whom they share their European identity.

Moreover, citizens are asked to enjoy their membership of a culturally very rich Europe. That is true, but only a few Europeans appreciate how true the statement is. The motto 'Unity and Diversity' has been adopted by the EU as a slogan to present its 'nature' to the outside world. It is true, Europe is immensely rich culturally and the world should know. But the EU should make sure that this slogan is more than a phrase, that the 500 million citizens embody this slogan.

The perspective of a Culture Union

- *The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore*

(Treaty of Maastricht, 1992)

It is timely to prepare for a wider perspective for the European Union than the predominant focus on economic and monetary matters. But be aware: this has been advocated since 50 years. It may be difficult for an organisation as complex as the EU to update its list of

priorities. But a more balanced set of policies will contribute to regaining credibility among the European citizens and nations. And most likely, among the countries outside Europe.

The EU should therefore aim for the establishment of a European Culture Union capable of redressing the problems referred to above, and indeed, contributing to *the flowering of the cultures of the European nations*.

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