

Cretan Europa's second coming

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The EU goes to church

« Are you a citizen? » the young journalist asks me earnestly. I smile inside. Reminds me of another favorite, 'have you stopped beating your wife?' – yes, no, can't win. « Sorry, no, at least not the citizen you are looking for...that would be one of the randomly chosen ones over there. »

I have never seen such a buzz in the Renaissance cluster of Badia Fiesolana, a medieval Roman Catholic monastery nestled in the hills of Fiesole overlooking Florence. Not your everyday teaching day at the European University Institute: two hundred citizens have been invited from across Europe to take part in an experiment in continental democracy—the first transnational citizens' assembly in the EU's history. They have invaded my working space for what feels like a therapy weekend at the bedside of our aging European project. I happen to wear the hat of a so-called expert, servicing this endeavor. People of all ages and tongues are huddled in little groups or running around to stick their colored stickers over hundreds of messages pinned on the majestic building's walls. Tomorrow, the citizens' messages will be translated into recommendations for the EU and later their ambassadors will defend their views in Strasbourg's European parliament hemicycle:

...affordable kindergartens in every companies...development of media competences for every citizen...tax big corporations to invest in education...tax long range transport of animals... entities shall be punished for data protection violations....removing data consent should be easy, fast and permanent... prevent politicians from owning media outlets... change the names of EU institutions... create a multifunctional digital platform where citizens can vote and answer polls...artificial intelligence to strengthen EU democracy...an app on the EU... fund online and off line interactions with other citizens across bordersinvests in countering disinformation swiftly... code of conduct for EU officials... better support social interactions between migrants and EU citizens...create multilingual online forums...reopen the discussion on a constitution for Europe... deal with alienation from politics...lifelong learning on citizen participation...hold European citizens assemblies...

Today, in December 2021, these messengers are the beating heart of European politics. But for how long? To what end? Who really cares?

Quite a few of us present in the monastery that day—the non-random citizens—do in fact care, and quite passionately. Some are here on behalf of EU institutions which a few months ago launched the so-called Conference on the Future of Europe, to « reform »—I'd prefer revamp—the union for the next generation. The rest of us—a motley mix of academics and civil society activists—are here as « critical friends », observing, fact-checking, analyzing, critiquing, advising. We will continue to do so in the next few months and years as the EU continues to experiment with emeshing its traditional system of representation with new ways of involving citizens in its mysterious ways. I have been asked to answer citizens' questions as they polish their recommendations, and to do so impartially. I am slightly amused by that pretense of impartiality after forty years of agonizing over the what, the how and the why of the European Union.

As a recent emigrant to Florence from Brexitland, I'm not yet jaded by the historical echoes of my dear Niccolò Machiavelli's Republic of Florence, which, on and off for a few hundred years, conducted one of the great European experiments in popular sovereignty, including by filling government offices by lottery (*la tratta*). Five hundred years after the end of the Republic, we are channeling too the participatory spirit of ancient Athens (this time with women included, and modern slaves hidden away), alongside the next generation (16- to 25-year-olds) which makes up a third of our randomly picked assembly. Alas, and just like Athens, resident foreigners are not included. The silver lining? There will be room for improvement as the democratic spirit takes hold.

Yes, silver linings... my mind wanders... If I squint a little, another order of things starts to appear, other meanings becoming legible through the palimpsest. We are meeting in a church, the ancient cathedral of Fiesole, said to have been built on the martyrdom of Romulus, the founder of Rome. It was restored by Cosimo di Medici in the 1400s, and later used to house patients, soldiers, pirates, engravers, books, and nowadays, our students when they get their degrees. A church? The tall, impressively barren barrel-vaulted structure is kind of a give-away. And yet, secular Europe's powers-that-be, orchestrating the event from Brussels, made it a condition our that we engage in a symbolic cover-up, hiding away all religious artifacts behind temporary double walls.

Christian Europe is around us in a quantum superposition, both here and not here. As my colleague Olivier Roy has argued in his *L'Europe est-elle Chrétienne?* (2019), secularization's unrelenting advance may have powered the rise of the nation-state in Europe, but secular power is itself a theological construct, the expression of a will from above rather than below. Europe's cultural and anthropological matrix remains Christian. Sure, fewer than one in ten Europeans declare their adherence to Church doctrine and only a fraction of them practice regularly. But most have learned from an early age how their ancestors united for centuries in the shadow of wondrous cathedrals, and our « European » boundaries are, after all, those of 1000s A.D. Christian Europe.



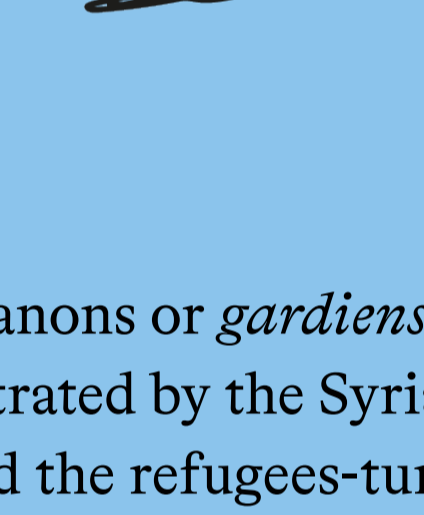
Closer to the present, we owe to post-war Christian Democrats the lasting European bargain that made the EU possible: the embrace of the welfare state in exchange for their Social Democratic cousins' renunciation of collectivist dogmas. If today's EU seems orphaned from her Christian past, it cannot be *faute de pères*. Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer—these devoutly Catholic founding fathers (no founding mothers, note), didn't need to inscribe 'Christian identity' into the original treaties, because they did not doubt the existence of a Christian soul inside the EU's bureaucratic body. When, half a century later, their successors tried to inscribe Christian roots into their 2004 draft Constitutional treaty, it was because this original unspoken assumption no longer seemed to be a given.

For sure, Christian Europe gave us Popes urging mutual tolerance, and today, best of all, radically green Argentinian Pope Francis. But while Francis called on Europeans to stop shutting out « those in greater need who knock at our door » and to « extend their arms towards everyone », the Viktor Orbans or the Kaczynskis of Europe denounce such love for thy neighbor as Christian self-flagellation, invoking the old Antemurale Christianitatis to erect new walls against the old other, even if today's non-Christian « invaders » are seeking refuge from wars often owing to the Europe's old Christian missionary zeal. Brussels, in turn, earnestly denounces the denouncers—but better not ask whose side FRONTEX is on. That European arms have opened to Christian Ukrainian refugees is unlikely to change the equation. We can do better.

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Journeys of reckoning often have to do with re-knowing something anew that we had almost forgotten. Whether or not Europe perceives itself as Christian, Christianity has long ceased to be European. And if Europe is no longer at the heart of Christianity, Christianity cannot be at the heart of the EU. What better alternative to Christian Europe than a story we all kind of know and yet ignore, a ubiquitous image which adorned the frescoes of ancient Rome and Pompei long before her contemporary cartoonish fame, while awaiting her future destiny as the logo of The European Review of Books. Few foundational myths have been so liberally invoked as Europa, infamous princess abducted by Zeus-as-bull from somewhere in the East, thence to be anointed Queen of Crete and from there godmother of this small continent at the tip of Eurasia. Her image has been appropriated though the ages with no small amount of unrequited lust by poets, painters or politicians, plebians or publicists who fantasized about « the rape of Europa » as the object of their conflicting desires—an apt allegory for our European project.

If you ask me, ancient men dreamt up the many great rebellious women of mythology – think Arachne, the godmother of #MeToo, denouncing the gods' arbitrary power – not because these men were early feminists but to exorcise their fear of female power. If after 1945, Europeans created this Union to exorcise their fear of the past and to claim a future, and if Europeans have now become nostalgic for the past and fearful of the future, can these mythological women help us imagine better futures?



Luckily, myths—with no clergy, no canons or *gardiens du temple*—belong to all, for political appropriation, as brilliantly demonstrated by the Syrian Antigones in the documentary film, *We are not Princesses* (2018), and the refugees-in-exile Ulysses in Christiane Jatahy's *Our Odyssey*. The infinite ambiguities contained in each myth-world can open up spaces for democratic conversation or mutual engagement, can offer us a shared language with which to embrace recurring paradoxes and contingent meanings rather than scorn them. For if, in democracies, conflict must be handled rather than denied, and if values remain incommensurable and thus unamenable to liberal compromise, then myths are better templates for contentious conversations than bureaucratic blueprints. Myths, by flirting with tragic choices and with the absurd ironies entangling human beings, contain their own epistemic limits. And from the ironic distance of modernity, myths' intense symbolic pulse can help lower our literal pulses as we argue over politics and agree to disagree.

And so I imagined starting a conversation with these random citizens about another Europa, my Europa, to make Europa say what I, the so-called expert, was not allowed to say. Forget the countless EU programs funding desperate searches for a *European narrative*. The Europa I wanted to portray can only tell many stories. Europa is yours for the taking, I would tell them—and no, old Zeus, not in that way! As a woman, activist, scholar, I would use her to tell a different idea of Europe, one which speaks of a lightness of being and a more feminine politics, of indeterminate routes and glorious otherness.

For one, we would ponder why Zeus, in an inspired Olympos, chose a foreign woman, a Phoenician princess hailing far from the slopes of Olympus (probably today's Lebanon). Europa's strangeness is more radical still: we can think of her as the perennial object of a civilizing mission and colonial conquest – an exotic woman saved from barbarian men by a powerful white man, to paraphrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. I'd like to believe that my Europa's attractiveness to the world—in spite of the scars her imperial forays have left everywhere and the deep wrinkles they have left on her—owes something to being the world. This Europa summons a microcosmos where diasporas mingle their loyalties between home and homeland. Isn't Europa, the story whispers, a mosaic of others? In this account, the failure to grant refuge on European shores is a betrayal of Europa herself, our refugee-in-chief.

Or we would transport ourselves to Crete, the island at the edge of the European continent where Zeus drops her off when he's done with her. This is where Ulysses tells Penelope that he « stranger in her unhabituated eyes » hails from. « They have not all the same speech », (Ulysses says; « their tongues are mixed. ») Imagine Europa dwelling in Crete's Palace of Knossos as it slowly falls into ruins over the ages, an outpost for the strongest of the day, Mycenaean, Roman, Byzantine, Andalusian Arab, Venetian, Ottoman.... She has known them all, who raped and draped her in equal measure, surviving forever on the fuzzy boundary of bygone imperial projects. Today, she can stand for Europe's peripheries, each with their own long, curious relationship to « Europe » – ah, the other Europe, where some still say: « we are going to Europe », a shifting, arbitrary, porous space. The British Isles, Scandinavia, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy even, and what used to be called Eastern Europe, and, beyond, the Balkans. If today's EU has a soul, it lives in its periphery, or the periphery of its periphery, from Heraclion to Palermo, Oulu to Galway, Lisbon to Lesbos.

Or our collective gaze could give up the 'somewheres' altogether and make *motion* the only way to journey Europa together. Flux, flow, fluidity. Isn't this what the EU ought to be about, the journey, not the telos dear to Christian Europe? Far from offering some new European order, she keeps creative disorder possible. She is indifferent to the obsession with *finalité politique*, and suspicious of centralization as some irreversible logic.

But would the random citizen be satisfied by these versions of Cretan Europa?—foreign, liminal, on the move? They know better, and would detect a key ingredient missing: power. Obliging, I would imagine how, bored in her Cretan outpost, dreaming of a grander destiny, Europa cajoled Zeus to take her to fateful Rome, where imperial and pontifical tentacles enlightened and suffocated the rest of the continent in equal measure. There, if our citizens happen to visit the Palazzo dei Conservatori and gaze at the faded pictures of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, they might wonder what befell the carefree spirit of Princess Europa, lost among men in grey suits, the so-called founding fathers, pretending to give birth (without founding mothers) to a new Europe. Did the mothers hang out together with Cretan Europa in the corridors? We are not told. But a stone's throw away, Michelangelo's Pieta sighs in serene despair—a relic of the Renaissance betrayed or at least belittled.

And then from Rome to Brussels, to figure out what would be done in Cretan Europa's name. Much good in the name of perpetual peace, leaving behind a past of war – though in her current EU incarnation, she sighs that that effort is belittled now, not only by the Olympians who rule (does it make sense, she might wonder, to call this Europa a peace project when its member states are responsible for a quarter of global arms exports?), but by complacent European citizens who believed that peace, like diamonds, was forever.

But much ill, too, when in the name of perpetual austerity, the EU became synonymous with domination: of small states, of vulnerable people, I would lament the irony of Europa's self-proclaimed guardians in Brussels bullying in her name, and the fact that my Europa must try continuously (without ever quite succeeding), to escape both the bullies and the taint of her association with them. But it is with hope over naïve optimism that I try to retrieve her from capture as Europeans rediscover (I hope) the magic of solidarity and community in the wake of an indiscriminate pandemic.

Christian vs Cretan Europe? Some might complain that the beauty contest is rigged. Most of us, man or woman, find a woman riding naked on a bull more attractive than a naked man dying naked on a cross. But in this layered Badia church, the choice is up to you.

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Would my musings about Cretan Europa have landed in receptive ears? I would like to think so. Most of these random citizens, however frustrated they may be with the EU bubble of jargon and procedures, have embraced it as a community of translation, between their 24 languages and also across their different social biases and social capital, their respective interests and fears, their localities. This is the deep meaning of the kind of demoi-cratic, transnational, horizontal EU which I have long championed. Why not then go for the ride.

In the end, I find myself in the predicament of Richard Rorty's liberal ironist. Facing up to the contingency of my beliefs and desires, and agnostic about my own vocabulary and impressed by others—by the vocabularies taken as decisive by people or books I have encountered, I find that my own argument can neither fully confirm nor fully dissolve my doubts. As I philosophize about a certain object (say, the 21st-century European project), I cannot convince myself that my channeling of Europa's story is any closer to « reality » than anyone else's channelings. I need to elide, to mix-and-match, to clutch at metaphorical straws.

The citizens are starting to ask whether what they are doing now—each randomly selected but together representing the whole European citizenry—could become a habit in our European Union, a permanent citizen assembly, permanently renewed and rotating around the continent. And so with childish enthusiasm I would hark back to Europa's land of origin, the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, and reverse the gaze: the EU should learn democratic lessons from others. Start by travelling across time and space to the Phoenician thalassocracy from which Zeus is supposed to have extracted Europa, and which long preceded and probably inspired the Greek Aegean islands, whose local democratic experiments in turn inspired Athens, the ancient democratic apogee, where councils of elders and assemblies of citizens deliberated over production and trade, local government and foreign alliances.

What, in the end, did we hear on that weekend in Florence from the randomly chosen citizens? Schematically, when asked what is to be done, many seemed, more or less, to want « more Europe » across the board, but when asked how that is to be done, they seemed to want it done closer to home in transparent, inclusive, innovative and participatory ways, leveraging digital technologies for debate across borders. Our Phoenician ancestors would have found it all pretty cool.

Recovery from the amber of dead empires, including empires of the mind, is a challenge that all need to embrace – and why not with a little help from Cretan Europa. Back in our Florentine Badia, I turn back to the young journalist. « Actually, citizen I am too. »

By Kalypso Nicolaidis, published in Issue One

EXPLORE THE ERB

Borderland
Dorthe Nors

The great storm surge is coming. It has always been coming in the borderland between Denmark and Germany. Here, Danish writer Dorthe Nors visits the Frisian Wadden Sea island of Sylt, as part of her travels along the North Sea coast.

Eat the dust
Patricio Prun

Søren Kierkegaard compared reading reviews of his books to « the long martyrdom of being trampled to death by geese. » What martyrdoms does today's bookishness portend?

On learning to write again
Adania Shibli

Ramallah, downtown, fifth floor. The phone rings and the caller's number appears on the screen. It's an unknown number. And yet a call that comes at this hour must be answered.

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