

The Ultimate Crisis: Narrating and Translating Europe

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The current crisis of Europe and the European Union is only one in a continuous chain of endless calamities. However, this crisis seems to be special. Europe has changed profoundly in recent times. Europe has reached its limits. Europe is no longer a project; Europe changed into the mode of defense. The present article tries to hint at hidden European narratives as a cultural answer to this crisis. These narratives are in need of a new concept of translation, which seems to emerge; a translation which simultaneously perceives and conceives of Europe in a “methodological cosmopolitanism” (Ulrich Beck): beyond its limits and far beyond any matter of language, responding to the crisis by translating itself.

1. Europe’s crisis seen from a cultural point of view

When thinking about crisis, one might think of a special case: the crisis of universities, the crisis of the *Deutsche Bank*, one’s own personal crisis last summer or simply the never-changing front page of any journal in the last 15 years. But there is one crisis that all Europeans share: the crisis of Europe.

Europe has been the favorite object of my academic writings dealing with the European imaginary and the representation of the idea of Europe in literature for nearly 30 years. But Europe has changed profoundly in recent times. Literally, Europe has reached its limits. Europe is no longer a forward-looking project; Europe has entered a mode of defense. It seems that there will be no time for Europe to wait for an ever-fuller realization of its program. And the world will no longer allow Europe to develop on its own. Closing its borders, sending back refugees, asking authoritarian regimes for help: Never before has Europe faced such an obvious contradiction of its own values. The European dream seems to have changed into a nightmare or, even worse, into a fundamental doubt about whether there has ever been a European dream without this dream also being a threat to those who are not Europeans. In the light of Europe’s helplessness in the so-called refugee crisis, many of the qualities that had defined Europe’s outstanding position in the world seem to show their dark side. For the first time, someone who understands themselves as a convinced European feels forced to ask: Can we still believe in Europe?

For a long time, it has been clear that European economic integration has not duly come along with a cultural project—a fact that the European Commission responded to by creating the initiative ‘A soul for Europe’ (www.asoulforeurope.eu), which unfortunately has never found just attention due to the political and financial crises which have seized the discourse on Europe in the last years. Only recently, Francis Fukuyama (2016) has

drawn attention to the difficulty of establishing a notion of belonging and identity beyond the idea of nation and nationalism. And some years earlier, German president Joachim Gauck (2013) publically asked for a European narrative capable to develop such a notion of sharing community. A European narrative has never been successfully established. Or even worse: the narratives that exist have been ignored as such and were not duly acknowledged as European founding texts. Therefore this article claims the necessity of a new narrative awareness through which Europe might learn to understand itself in its historical and contemporary challenges. I will argue, that such an alternative narrative perspective must be based on an innovative concept of translation as grafting in which Europe addresses its roots as much as its routes to a shared future, searching a “methodological cosmopolitanism” as suggested by Ulrich Beck (2016: 6). Translating Europe could then be a way out of what we experience as the crisis of Europe.

2. Narrating Europe, or In favor of an alternative tradition

The research projects that I have conducted under the heading “Narrating Europe” have always been intended as an attempt to restore such narratives which would address a common European interest (Hanenberg 2004). The publication of one of the first founding texts of a common European interest, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, celebrated its five hundredth anniversary in 2016. In the context of More’s narrative, the messenger of the ideal utopian state is not the British intellectual himself but rather a Portuguese sailor named Raphael. This is the history behind the utopian idea that you must have discovered foreign countries before you can imagine an alternative view of what has long been established. From the beginning, the common European interest has been defined by experience abroad, by experience with new worlds outside of Europe.

Another example of a European narrative, in this case from German literature, is Johann Jakob Grimmelshausen’s picaresque novel *Simplicissimus* (1668/1984), an impressive portrait of the European state of affairs during the Thirty Years’ War. It is famous for its satirical description of suffering war and destruction. What is less known is that the author completed the book by a so-called *Continuatio*, which was published later in 1669 and in which he sends out the hero to travel around the world. In the end, Simplicissimus is shipwrecked somewhere in the Indian Ocean, and finds a peaceful life in harmony with nature, long before Robinson Crusoe would make such a destiny an admired experience. From his standpoint in the Indian Ocean, Simplicissimus develops an idea of

Europe, which is simultaneously a critique and an invitation to rethink attitudes and policies. In this sense, the narration is a means of political reflection and of utopian thinking—and such understanding has gained a long tradition in Europe.

In fact, if we wanted to join characteristic points about how Europe defined itself culturally, the concept of a utopian critique would certainly be a key issue – a utopian critical narrative which has alimented itself by the experience of travel and intercultural encounters. Only through the image of the Other Europe was able to discover itself. Later in the 19th century, utopian thinking fostered both a real drive to change Europe and a certain decadence in which Europe felt tired about itself. The most famous, though never really popular, German novel promoting this attitude was published in 1838 under the title *Die Europamüden*, written by Ernst Willkomm (1968). In fact, even those who seem to be tired of Europe still maintain a typical European narrative feature: to be able to address an alternative, as in Goethe’s poem: “Amerika, du hast es besser / Als unser Continent, das alte” (Willkomm 1968: 1*; cf. Hanenberg 2004: 70).¹

European culture has been driven by the experience of alternatives – both out there in the world and in a utopian age. However, this also means a continuous self-reflection, even when and where the experience ‘out there’ contributed to Europe’s discovery of its own. The focus on its own interest by using foreign experience—this is what has made European narratives strong and European culture vulnerable, inviting a continuous rise of violence and destruction.

It is not true that there have been no European narratives. However, the truth is that they have been widely ignored as such. Instead of fostering a notion of Europe, literature studies and literature itself have been oriented towards the *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991) of nations – leading now to the crisis of Europe. In opposition to such national approaches, research on narrating Europe has tried to draw attention to phenomena that could support a European dimension rather than the conventional national reading (Hanenberg 2004; Hanenberg and Gil 2013). And there are as many reasons to lead such an interest to success as there are for its failure. Of course, the long history of national philology will easily tend to favor national approaches over European perspectives. Nevertheless, this long history cannot make us forget that the authors of all

¹ “America, you’ve got it better / than our continent the old one”.

times have drawn inspiration for their work from a common heritage reaching from Virgil and Homer to Shakespeare and Goethe, and from this Western male tradition to Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing and Toni Morrison.

There is no such thing as a national literature. Authors and readers do not respect national borders. And many of them have actually built their narrative work on transnational experience. The number of authors who actually traveled through Europe and beyond bears witness to the experience of a social, political and cultural reality which has always been broader than the borders of a given country. Some of my favorite authors belong to this group: Wolfgang Hildesheimer, exiled in England, Palestine and Switzerland, Peter Weiss, exiled in Czechoslovakia, Britain and Sweden, Uwe Johnson, who left the German Democratic Republic and died in England (Hanenberg 2014a), Paul Celan, whose journey is beyond words and space (Hanenberg 2014b), Joachim Schädlich, who tells us about Kokoschkins travelling from Odessa to New York (Hanenberg 2013), Ulrike Draesner, whose seven turns from the borders of the world – to paraphrase the title of her novel – arrived among contemporary migration and Marica Bodrocz, a Croatian-born German writer who searches her white peace in post-Yugoslavia. None of these authors can be reduced to a nationally limited experience (Hanenberg 2016a).

Speaking of literature as a national phenomenon has always been a mistake—a mistake in service of the *Imagined Communities* that shaped political culture since the 19th century (Anderson 1991). We could well have learned other lessons from literary history, drawing our attention to diversity and unity on a wide range of fields and exploring the utopian potential residing in such narrative constitution. Narrating Europe instead of imagining national communities could have been a peaceful attempt—both to overcome hostility and to offer a specific experience of cultural richness. Could we have avoided the current European crisis in this way?

The need for such a project of narrating Europe is even more appealing when one considers Europe's role in the process of globalization. Though Chinese vessels reached the East-African coast in the 15th century, they were called back to China without reaching Europe—and thus it were European ships that turned around the globe and started the unfinished adventure of intercultural exchange (Landes 2006). Globalization was for its first 500 years a process of Europeanization, and Europe cannot deny its role

and responsibility in this process—though we now know how important and promising it might be to provincialize Europe at any instance (Chakrabarty 2000). As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, Europe is *An Unfinished Adventure* (Bauman 2004), in which a responsibility driven by a 500 years' history claims for less national and more European awareness and for less national and more European narration. The world calls for Europe's responsibility which Europe will not be able to deny.

3. Translating Europe: a new concept for coming to terms with its crisis

In its global role, *narrating Europe* always means *translating Europe*. Translation is a challenging endeavor – today even more so than ever. “Broadening and expanding the category of translation is important for the emergence of a ‘translational turn’ in the Humanities and Social Sciences”, writes Doris Bachmann Medick (2013: 186). There is a new meaning in the term of translation nowadays: a radical sense of trans-ness.

More than finding ever more equivalences and corresponding terms, it might be necessary to overcome the European narrative through translation. A change has taken place between a concept that could claim translation as the real European language (as Umberto Eco did; cf. Wolf 2014) and the experience of a broader sense of translation introduced, for example, by Bruno Latour (1993: 11): admitting that not only human translators can be actors in a global transfer of making and meaning (Latour 2005: 107). Shoes, ships and shores shape understanding and action as much as traffickers, traders and other translators. Negotiating the European narration is no longer a matter of good or better ideas: it is a practice, the meaning of which is produced as much by doing and letting as it is sold out as a political program.

Latour's concept of translation (Latour 1993: 11) recognizes the role of objects, things, physical processes and nature in the constitution and negotiation of making and meaning. Leaving behind the concept of what he calls an artificial and historical separation of nature and culture, Latour's *Actor-Network-Theory* (2005) responds to a world in which environmental challenges, political options and practices of consumption accumulate to a cluster of indistinctive effects. In this sense, translation has become a much more dangerous endeavor in which equivalence and divergence might coincide. In other words, translation is not just a matter of convergence in meaning. Instead, it asks for a permanent effort of reporting and mapping its effects, produced even beyond its semiotic affirmation.

The history of translation is no longer a matter of words and senses—“word by word and sense by sense” (Derrida 2004: 428). Translation is much more complex than the classical idea of a dictionary-based effort can support. It includes facts and figures, deeds and death, contexts and conditions. It is impossible to separate translation from the contexts and conditions of communication.

New means of communication offer refugees the opportunity to know about their routes, the conditions on their way and the context of international refugee rights. They help them to make their way over, to meet their traffickers, to stay in contact with the family somewhere back home. And we will learn about their routes and rights by the same means, which lose their neutrality in the very moment of their use.

4. Unpacking a “methodological cosmopolitanism” through translation

The so-called refugee crisis has definitely translated Europe into a new state of affairs. Some months before his death, referring to what Zygmunt Bauman has called the times of interregnum and the increasing and continuous experience of violence and terrorism, Ulrich Beck (2014) admitted “that even we social scientists are reduced to silence in view of a reality which overruns us” (my translation). In his unfinished book *The Metamorphosis of the World*, Beck writes:

The world is unhinged. As many people see it, this is true in both senses of the word: the world is out of joint and it has gone mad. We are wandering aimlessly and confused, arguing for this and against that. But a statement on which most people can agree, beyond all antagonisms and across all continents, is: “I don’t understand the world any more.” (Beck 2016: xi)

A metamorphosis is taking place that destabilizes “the certainties of modern society” (ibid.). A “methodological cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2016: 6) will be necessary to correspond to cosmopolitized experience. With “the lesson of the nations turning around the ‘world at risk’” (ibid.), a new form of narration will have to be established in which original and translation fall together. Already in 2000, Nikos Papastergiadis wrote:

There is a great urgency in our need to rethink the politics of identity. If the historical and cultural field that shapes contemporary society is increasingly diverse and varied, then we can no longer exclusively focus on the traditions and institutions that have taken root in a given place over a long historical period. The

identity of society has to reflect this process of mixture that emerges whenever two or more cultures meet. (Papastergiadis 2000: 2)

How to think such a process of mixture from the standpoint of a “methodological cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2016: 6) is Europe’s current challenge—both in terms of a “world at risk” as Beck has described it as well as in terms of an increasing diversity in the experience of identities and cultures. Suggestions to think this “methodological cosmopolitanism” reach from Paul Gilroy’s ‘conviviality’ (2004) and Nestor Canclinis *Hybrid Cultures* (1989) to Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996) and Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’ (1990). The common challenge of such suggestions is a certain risk to stabilize the heterogeneity of origins in the promise of a future differential. The central link between a Kantian rationale for universal peace, Europe’s colonial past and current issues of transcultural experience might be addressed by a new awareness of the tension in the notion of identity, even when it is transferred to the acceptance of hybridity. As Uwe Wirth (2014) explains, the concept of hybridity is based on the idea of creating a third entity out of two former elements. The third entity would therefore never exist on its own, but in dependence of its heterogeneous inputs. A similar argument has led Wolfgang Welsch to favor the term transculturality over multi- or interculturality, since in the latter the idea of single and isolated cultures that give origin to their coexistence or interrelation works as a necessary prerequisite.

Uwe Wirth’s suggestion to think about cultural experiences in the sense of *greffage*, or grafting, points to a different way in coming to terms with the notion of hybridity. Grafting, as Wikipedia informs, “is a horticultural technique whereby tissues of plants are joined so as to continue their growth together”.² Grafting is a radical form of ‘translation’ in which two former entities merge into one. The technique of grafting allows the building of a new unity in which formerly separate entities melt together. Bruno Latour has shown that such translated entities constitute most of the realities we experience between culture and nature and between different cultures (Latour 1993: 11; cf. Blok and Jensen 2011). To separate culture from nature or cultures from cultures is a philosophical, scientific and political tradition which has led to a modernity in which we have never been at home—as Latour’s famous book title *We have never been modern* indicates (1993). It has certainly never been the way of a “methodological cosmopolitanism”, an argument that

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grafting> (last retrieved on 30.052017).

recuperates both the political and ecological dimension in the concept of cosmos. Grafting as a radical form of translation, a specialized form of “cut and paste” (Wirth 2014: 32), could indeed be the way for Europe to find out of its ultimate crisis. Grafting could offer new narratives in which roots and routes would be linked not as hybrid and even less as contradictory experiences, but as a new unity in which formerly separate entities melt together. After grafting, Europe would never again be as it was—and it would nevertheless maintain all its roots and inoculations. Grafting as a radical form of translation would focus less on origins and more on the process in which the experience of cutting and growing engender new forms of life. Cutting is a harmful experience. And so is displacement—both for humans and language, as Derrida has taught us (Derrida 1988; cf. Wirth 2014: 29). Translation is the recontextualization of meaning, as displacement is the recontextualization of life. When conceived of as grafting, displacement can be seen as a form of cultural translation that includes the experience of both cut and paste.

5. Leaving the crisis behind: How Europe might learn to translate itself

As Doris Bachmann-Medick (2013: 187) writes, “translation can be fruitful for reinterpreting situations of global cultural encounter, difference and conflict”. In this sense, refugees tell us a lot about how to translate Europe today. They tell us that Europe has not learned to deal with Otherness in a way that simultaneously respects and protects the Other—as if modernity had given us the right to distinction. And they tell us that Europe has not even duly addressed inner-European diversity: otherwise refugees would not try to choose the same destinations in Europe for the social welfare established somewhere and missing elsewhere. A Europe in which some countries count on a minimum income which is smaller than a child’s benefits elsewhere is not a unity that can successfully ‘defend itself’ against whoever will try to cross its borders. Such a Europe is beyond itself—even within its own borders. Such a Europe is built upon an old idea of translation, in which the act of translation merely negotiates meanings. But translation negotiates much more than meaning: environmental challenges, political options and practices of consumption accumulate to a cluster of indistinct effects, which establish difference where equivalence is expected. Europe in its *graftage* has strangely caused dissolution instead of solution, dissimilation instead of assimilation.

Translation as grafting is ubiquitous—and it will depend on our standpoint whether we will do a good job as translators or not. Translating Europe definitively means leaving Europe behind. Source and target culture get confused. How lucky could Schleiermacher (2002) be, distinguishing so properly between “Different Methods of Translating” through foreignizing and domesticating? But where is the house that we could domesticate for? Translation is ubiquitous. We might also say translation is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Such is the condition of *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000). And this is the reason why “Zygmunt Bauman has even proposed the figure of the interpreter as the new protagonist of our times, suggesting that mediation is the key role to be played by intellectuals today” (Polezzi 2012: 346).

Translating Europe therefore does not mean “leav[ing] it to its enemies to be horrified by” the conditions of modernity—as Horkheimer and Adorno attested to Sade and the Enlightenment, making such an attempt “pivotal to its rescue” (2002: 92). Translating Europe might well mean Europe’s inclination to utopian thought, it might well be an old and ever-new readiness to encounter the Other, which expresses itself in leaving behind its own conditions – as if Europe itself were the refugee. Such a displaced Europe would then be the translator’s task.

But how to imagine this displaced Europe? Perhaps the intriguing story in Shumona Sinha’s short novel (2015) of an Indian-born French interpreter and translator might be an exemplary and explanatory narration which best shows the challenges of such a displaced Europe. After months in service of refugees seeking asylum in France the translator cannot stand anymore the ties of wounds and needs, suffering and begging, crying and lying, so that she completely loses her belief and trust, her solidarity and empathy (Hananberg 2016b). Translation is no longer a matter of equivalence. It is a matter of truth and honesty. The “active role played by interpreters and translators in shaping interactions between migrants and institutions” (Polezzi 2012: 349) is a central aspect of how Europe translates itself. The risks translators and interpreters take, writes Susan Bassnett (2011: 23),

are huge, because they are dealing not only with the hostilities of a particular conflict, but with deep-seated psychological fears of Otherness, fears that stem from the terrible power of a language that is unknown to us, outside of us and belonging to other people who may be our enemies. Translators and interpreters

who have the courage to face down those fears in their day-to-day work deserve our respect and admiration.

“Translators and interpreters who have the courage to face down those fears“ may help Europe to leave its crisis behind, shaping new narratives by translating itself. However, dealing with “deep-seated psychological fears” is not just an issue concerning the others (cf. Sturm, Nadig and Moro 2011). Only when allowing translation to be a creative form of grafting, translators will be able to offer those new narratives which are of hope rather than of fear. In this sense, there is no promise in Shumona Sinha’s novel. By knocking down a refugee traveling in the Paris metro, Shumona Sinha’s protagonist fulfills a poetic demand inherited from Baudelaire: *Assommons les pauvres!*³ Should this be the utopian thought from which Europe might emerge?

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³ Knock out the poors!

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