

# Synchronizing Europe

(‘Battle for Time’ in Dutch)

Do reports of yet another suicide attack somewhere in the world cause you, too, to feel something like nostalgia for the era of protracted hijackings and hostage-takings, when terrorists were still prepared to spend the final weeks or days of their lives with their victims? When even at the high point of their holy war the most fanatical zealots still felt the need to talk to their captives in an effort to persuade them of the righteousness of their cause? When there was still a negotiation stage during which ultimatums were set, declarations read out, safe conducts demanded and the world’s press briefed on the ideals behind this or that action? Do you remember survivors’ tales of how they had developed sympathy for captors, as frightened as they themselves, who were nonetheless at pains to explain their motivation? How despite the fear and hatred and the unequal balance of power they had eventually managed to communicate with one another and in some cases the victims had even succeeded in getting their tormenters to see reason? There is more going on here than the psychological management of fear according to the Stockholm syndrome. The real point is that time renders things negotiable, reversible; it softens attitudes and favours understanding, even in the most extreme circumstances. Shared time is a basis for deliberation, conversion, opinion-forming, collectivity, nation building. Conversely, none of these things can happen in the absence of shared time. This ancient piece of wisdom is not very popular nowadays when the preference is for the here-and-now, for irreversible processes, faits accomplis, pre-emptive strikes and the deliberate avoidance of dialogue. For isolation in a mental cocoon of one’s own. For driving into a compound with a truckload of explosives. For stepping into the metro with a backpack filled with dynamite. Sowing nothing but panic, nothing but meaninglessness.

The clash of civilizations is not a matter of long-drawn-out sieges or dogged trench warfare but of smouldering hatred and sudden outbursts of aggression. What began as an Old World humanist dream, as a European vision of consistently subjecting space, time, cause and effect to human will over time, has become completely entangled in its own dialectic. Now even the war, the terrorist/anti-terrorist madness, has become a personal agenda item, a capricious hybrid of fundamentalism and hooliganism whose never-ending attacks spawn only fear.

## **Fear rules**

This is also more generally a time of fear and discontent, especially in Europe. This ageing, depopulating and morally confused part of the world is beset by fears. Fear of approaching old age when there will not be enough money to pay for pensions. Fear of geopolitical irrelevancy, squeezed out of contention by the new giants of East and West. Fear that this loose confederation of nations will surrender its sovereignty to the Brussels monster for little or no return. Fear of plummeting share markets, exploding debt mountains, collapsing property markets, the eastward flight of jobs. Fear that biotechnology will irrevocably distort our relationship with nature. Fear of melting ice caps and other by-products of the greenhouse effect. Fear of nuclear proliferation. Fear of a disintegrating society in thrall to single issue politics, private interests, corruption, grasping and calculating citizens and other variants of the culture of narcissism. Fear that a destabilized democracy will degenerate into a bread and circuses populism of politicians who are more concerned with how their hair looks than with the needs of a society spanning at least three generations. In short, this is a time of fear of

ourselves. For anyone who still dares to think knows that we ourselves are largely to blame for all this. It wasn't foreigners who got us into this mess. Nor will a Fortress Europe mentality get us out of it. The sense of fear haunting Europe is born of ignorance – ignorance of the other, but also of ourselves.

Sadly, self-knowledge is not the most strongly developed faculty in times of fear. Far stronger is the faculty for projection. People who are afraid find it much easier to point to “the other” as the source of their fear. And causes for that fear are never hard to find because the other will always include a few problem cases – rabble rousers, hooligans, vandals, morons, provocateurs, terrorists – who are by no means averse to deriving their own sense of relevance from the prevailing fear and who are consequently always good for daily reports of an excess here and an assault there. Such a climate favours the scapegoat mechanism in which people are prone to generalize and to turn the other into a hydra-headed monster that can only be defeated by draconian measures, even the suspension of basic principles of democratic governance. The upshot is performance contracts for discouraging or deporting immigrants, policies of zero tolerance, new screening methods and civic entrance exams for would-be immigrants, organized raids and preventive stop and search, widespread wiretapping, the closure of public areas for public use and so on. In other words, a spate of regulatory measures is let loose on us today with the same fanaticism with which only yesterday, during the Golden Age of postmodern relativism, every attempt to regulate new social phenomena was rejected as an unacceptable infringement of the individual right of self-determination.

Here you have the contemporary knee-jerk response to fear: measures. Measures are the be-all and end-all for mediocre spirits. Europe today can without difficulty be described as an aggressive swarm of measures – unconstrained, for the time being at least, by a constitution that might provide them with a culturally informed logic. Measures aimed at curbing fear appear at present to be of two kinds: preventive measures and repressive measures. The preventive ones pertain to everything a government and society can do to avert still more problems. Borders are sealed, exclusion zones created, legislation amended – all measures which, in spite of the rhetoric surrounding the economic necessity of an “attractive location climate”, are guaranteed to spoil or only very selectively encourage such a climate. Repressive measures pertain to a new, strict regime intent on punishing all forms of social disorder. The only problem is that for prevention you need the gift of clairvoyance and for repression an unshakable faith in the rightness of your policy. And this is exactly what is most lacking at present.

Anyone with any foresight at all must perceive that in the long run the fears outlined above can only be quelled by embracing rather than excluding the other; not by trying to condition people by way of measures, but by understanding them through spending time with them. True prevention is not a question of avoiding but of actively addressing problems. Whichever way you look at it – from the economic viewpoint of an ageing Europe, from the religious viewpoint of the search for meaning in a profoundly secular society, from the psychological viewpoint of the need for respect and recognition, from the demographic viewpoint of a declining social dynamic – in the long term a new infusion of energy is an absolute necessity. But without tolerance, there can be no new energy.

Similar difficulties dog the strategy of repression. Without a strong belief in the moral core of law enforcement, it rapidly degenerates into total arbitrariness. Policy that is not informed by what Georg Simmel once called “the idea of Europe”, an inspirational idea more enduring than today and bigger than the individual, becomes a question of the current fad. Typical

European historical lessons, such as the division of the Carolingian Empire, the separation of Church and State, the Balance of Power, the Dialectic of the Enlightenment, the Holocaust and the Yalta legacy, are conveniently forgotten. Politicians concentrate on immediate gains, not on what is really needed. Repression turns into policy for the public stage, a diligent search for scenarios that score well with the media and for individual careers. It is a form of repression that benefits no one in the long run because instead of acting as a corrective, it escalates. We are in the middle of such escalation now.

In short, measures adopted on such muddled grounds have a tendency to be counterproductive. All they do is to invoke yet more measures until the policy as such gets tangled up in itself and its own objectives. Responses such as these serve not to quell the fears of our times but to confirm them. Before you know it, people are hitting out wildly in all directions. Europe, back to square one. You reach a stage when you are thankful for the anaesthetizing effects of consumption, tourism, museumizing, and similar formulas for keeping people quiet. At least they help to postpone full-blown violence.

The mediocre response of mere measures will never be enough to ensure peace, freedom and prosperity. Fear is very often the company on the road to serfdom. So Europe today is yearning for a narrative, a will of its own, a vision, emotional attachment. To achieve that it must shrug off its negativism and embrace European civilization with total conviction. But perhaps it is possible to come up with a different approach that, rather than re-emphasizing civilization as a goal in itself, creates a new one. An approach that is not coercive but participatory. A response that would not interpret Europe as a static territory, with a fixed cultural canon, but as a synchronized experience in time. Mounting fear of the future can only be curbed by finding multiple forms of time-sharing: conversations, collective narratives, rhythms, rituals, shared expectations, daily routines and so on. It is a simple but largely forgotten message: those who share time with one another are more likely to develop mutual understanding. Those who do not share time with one another inevitably grow apart. If, for a variety of historical reasons, such sharing no longer occurs of its own accord, it will have to be organized and propagated. Up till now, European unification has been largely a question of economic and political faits accomplis. But there is not one serious programme for European encounters, the synchronic sine qua non of any kind of integration and nation building. For this the ideal of the animated coffee house, as advanced by that consummate Euro-intellectual George Steiner, will not suffice. What is needed is some genuine, continent-wide brainstorming, a process of active re-invention – and this is precisely what the new Europe lacks. For too long “Europe” has been a formula, masquerading as an ideal, the sole purpose of which has been to prevent another war. An instrument for de-escalation. But the question of how Europe is to cope with new global escalations – economic, political and cultural – is becoming pressing. There has been no shortage of forces to shake Europe out of its complacent slumber. But there are scarcely any ideas about how we are to achieve the next step: engaging in a dialogue in order to turn this continent into a new ideas machine. But first it is necessary to explain more precisely why the time factor is so important in all this.

### **Society as clock**

Society and Time: it might sound like an abstract, somewhat unrealistic association, but in fact the sharing of time is at the heart of social unity and solidarity. Synchronicity is the cement that binds society. For a long time the rhythm of the years, the rotation of the seasons, the sequence of feast days, was a collective experience. Shared time – whether it be churchgoing, a sporting event, a ball, or the weekly episode of well-loved television series –

provided plenty of matter for conversation. The reason people so often start by talking about the weather is that this is still something we experience together. But alternation has made way for omnipresence. Things that used to be regulated by temporal conventions are now permanently available in a pervasive freedom of choice. You can shop any time you want. There is always sport on TV, as well as drama, entertainment and porno. And if it's not on TV, it's on the Internet. Indeed, everything is on the Internet, twenty-four hours a day. There is always work, too. Likewise celebration: symposia, carnivals and other festive occasions. And holidays too, at the drop of a hat. It's a simple matter of taking some of your own free days and heading off – on a hiking trip through the Atlas mountains, diving along the Great Barrier Reef, snowboarding in the Rockies. The further away the better (the European tourist attractions have long ceased to be the object of eagerly awaited pilgrimages and are more often the setting for a mid-week or weekend break). Instead of a rhythmic succession of events, culture has become a pick-and-choose menu from which the citizen-turned-consumer puts together his or her own programme. Time has become a commodity, complete with price tag. Lives are no longer devoted to something, but filled with something. Who you are is determined not by your actions but by the trail you leave behind in hundreds of databases. Granted, this is all a bit overstated. Even now one still occasionally encounters people with whom one can arrange to share the important things of life. But the fact remains that the underlying organizational systems have had their day. One could analyse this on various levels but the level of European civilization offers plenty of departure points for an anthropology of time. After all, many moments of synchronicity had to do with cultural values that prevailed, throughout the continent and which are now in decline. Secularization has put an end to our God-fearing sharing of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in which the individual was part of a narrative of creation and salvation, in which the time for prayer dictated the daily rhythm and the time for sacrifice gave structure to the year. The dismantling of the great European ideologies has put an end to the Utopian notion of life in which today was irrevocably bound up with tomorrow. We are no longer irreversibly and collectively on the road to a better world. Betterment is up to the individual now. Individualization has severed the social temporal ties whereby people experienced things together. In many cases life experience has become a matter of personal choice and not something that is automatically shared with others. All these historical tendencies have resulted in a release from the straitjacket of time that dictated when you experienced moments of value and with whom.

At this critical moment in European history, in which the Union must prove and reassert its relevance and vitality, we find ourselves in the onward-rushing universal here-and-now. The past is sinking into oblivion while the future has ceased to be the focus of our aspirations. Exit two time dimensions that people can share. As for the here-and-now, it is much more of a personal affair. Yet it is precisely at this moment that we are supposed to cope with an influx of different and competing cultures. Anyone can see that this must lead to problems.

Just as individual lives consist of an accumulation of strictly separate levels of experience, so society as a whole is turning into a pluralist patchwork of diverse temporal experiences. Even in notoriously monocultural suburbia we see an emerging mosaic of black and white schools, full and empty parking spaces, moribund churches and flourishing mosques. It is all part of the clouding of the collective sense of time in multicultural society. Conflicts flare over the organization of time. Pungent cooking smells in the early morning. Five times a day to the house of prayer during Ramadan. Anger when Saint Nicholas fails to visit to a “black school”. Everyone is more wide awake than ever, but nobody knows what time it is for someone else. What this situation teaches us is that time is the fundamental order that binds

everything together and without which everything falls apart. An unquestioned acceptance of the clock, diary and calendar is making way for a collection of temporary and arbitrary agreements that are made on purely pragmatic grounds and only remain valid as long as it suits the people concerned. This is the culture that gives rise to the dissatisfaction that has been so keenly evident in most European countries in recent times. It is also at the heart of the integration problem. Far more than a shared language, it is shared time that enables people to live in harmony and to respect one another. Some biologists even go so far as to claim that the ability to empathize with the way another person spends their time is what distinguishes us from animals. And although the perception of time scarcely rates a mention in the current fierce debates on integration, it is a problem that can only be understood in terms of a wide diversity of social attitudes.

What reaction patterns can we detect in the current discourse on society? It is no longer a debate about Left or Right, Socialist or Capitalist. Although it is certainly possible to treat time as a class war issue, choosing a position is not so much a matter of striking a balance between social justice and individual freedom. Increasingly, positions are adopted in a (usually unconscious) reaction to today's fragmented temporal order. In other words, these reaction patterns are neither ideological nor materialistic but temporal. On the one hand, there is the progressive approach in which the individual right to self-determination with regard to time is central and the tendency towards further atomization of time is not really disputed. According to this way of thinking, it is up to those who think differently to become just as progressive, enlightened and individualistic. On the other hand, there is a powerful conservative tendency which expresses itself primarily in terms of the preservation of values and standards, but whose real aim is to counter further fragmentation of time with an eleventh-hour appeal to the needs of society. Such thinking betrays a latent jealousy towards those groups which still display the social cohesion inherent to a strongly shared sense of time. After all, the only family that could still be termed the "cornerstone of society" is the average immigrant family. In the final analysis, the whole debate about Europe as a cultural unity is about how far we can go in personalizing time before that unity ceases to be a unity. Are there no pan-European phenomena that truly bind us together? Absolutely, and not infrequently such things, like "democracy" or "enlightenment" or "romanticism", are regarded as a tediously predictable tyranny of clichés, rather than as something that engages our emotions. Yet time is not held together by vague sentiments but through concrete, public actions. By dialogue.

### **Synchronicity**

If it is true that all forms of community are ultimately grounded in shared time, one is forced to ask whether our increasing capitulation to divisive time will eventually make community impossible. Conversely, one could start to investigate how the synchronicity underlying every community might be restored. For the subject of this essay, that restoration would be on a European scale. That is what it's about: the synchronization of the experience of time to a level at which you begin to develop a certain generosity towards another person, to their world view, life rhythm and ideals. But what begins as tolerance of another person's lifestyle often ends in indifference to the other person's time. What begins as a search for 'the other in ourselves' is liable to degenerate into an impatient, even aggressive, search for ourselves in that other. The emancipation of time from the shackles of faith and ideology had a liberating effect on the individual's right to self-determination, but this has in turn resulted in a society in which people have become their own time units, shut up in their time capsules and communicating with one another only via protocols.

According to American sociologist Robert Putnam, the Western world is experiencing a crisis of social capital. Communities are disintegrating as a result of long working hours in the information professions, two-career families, suburbanization, the rise of new media and above all the transition from a civil to a narcissistic society. The result is that people hardly do things together anymore. Yet one of the greatest binding factors for any community is the sharing of drama and the sharing of time. For a continent that is having difficulty reinventing itself, this is where the problem – but also the solution – lies. Europe has turned it back on its own invention, the shared historical drama. Yet, especially given the area of tension it currently finds itself operating in, it must surely be possible to reinvent it. There is no dearth of suitable historical events: the Fall of the Wall, the war in the Balkans, the transatlantic schism of 9/11, the introduction of a new currency, the expansion of the EU to include the Slavic states. What we now need to find is some way of underpinning these events with a shared experience, hopefully without inducing another huge historical trauma.

It begins with this insight: the most fundamental and consequently most difficult task is to come up with a strategy that brings people together psychologically in a way that is not simply conservative (bring back the good old times), regressive (back to basics) or even reactionary (a call to order). This is a very real danger in the European context. It is all too easy to interpret the unity of time as a nostalgic project, replete with romantic images of wholeness, clarity and security: a “we”-filled longing for the restoration of family, tribal and blood ties. On this reading Europe is primarily Frankish, has reconciled itself to the Germanic and is now grudgingly prepared to take the Slavic on board. A Romantic restoration of something that has never existed, an empire against all odds.

The deracination engendered by globalization conjures up a need for a new point of reference. A longing for a European Ur-mother. But longing is not the same as action. Nostalgia is a very limited form of re-synchronization, even when this nostalgia is shared with others. Were it to form the basis for actual policy, propaganda for a *Europe Profonde* or *Das Europäisches Heim* would not be far away. In Euro-nostalgia all you share is a romanticized memory, an absence, certainly not events. True kinship can only be achieved by experiencing something together. In Europe that has for too long been the Second World War. The entire European Union was based on *Nie wieder Krieg*. As the veterans die out, however, that binding factor is rapidly losing its force. A new experience must be created. Simply breathing new life into the old one will not suffice.

So how is this to be achieved without promoting the cause of the next big disaster? First of all, it cannot be accomplished without a vision. A vision of a form of European temporal culture that encompasses local, national and international policy levels. I would suggest that there are two basic levels on which this vision could manifest itself. One is politics; the other is culture. To begin with the first: there are countless possibilities at the level of policy making. For instance, a European super-ministry for temporal organization, a Ministry of Time, could help to further awareness of the vital importance of synchronicity for the well-being and integration of European nations and peoples. There are many ways of doing this, from a reformulation of multicultural policy to include the notion of time, to an international media campaign. Secondly, such a ministry could work towards the introduction of European community service. In light of the previously noted importance of collectively shared stages of life, such a compulsory contribution to society, in which everyone could in principle meet fellow members of their generation across all strata of society and all ethnic groups at least once in their life, would have an emotional and stabilizing effect in addition to the obvious practical benefits. Thirdly, many countries have a custom of daily collective ritual, usually

with some spiritual overtones. In the US, for example, pupils in public schools begin the day by reciting the pledge of allegiance to the United States flag. Might something similar be feasible for Europe? Fourthly, this ministry could prepare a memorandum setting out quite clearly the temporal consequences of the tension between individual freedom of choice and compulsory collective solidarity. Allowing individual interest to prevail results in less synchronization. But what is really at issue here is not the tension between social justice and individual interest but success factor number one in a society with flourishing social relations: shared time. Fifthly, such a Ministry of Time could propose a series of fiscal measures aimed at promoting synchronization. Taxes on the purchase of time in the form of private services, exemptions for initiatives that create collective time. Sixthly, a lot more could of course be done towards the creation of a temporal organization through an orchestrated action in which the cultural, technological and integration policies, as well as other areas of responsibility of the current European commissioners, are vetted for their time dimension. Seventhly, the machinery of government and politics should also be scrutinized with reference to the aspect of time: sessions of representative bodies, speed of circulation of policy documents, sound bites in political interchange, regular automatic pay rises for civil servants and so on and so forth. Eighthly, there is the task of organizing the media. Thanks to their multiplicity and far-reaching penetration of society, the media are the ideal instrument of synchronization. The average European spends more than two hours a day watching television and whiles away the minutes spent in traffic hold-ups listening to the radio. These hours and minutes are currently consumed by zapping between the growing number of channels and stations that make up the fast food menu of broadcasting. But if government were to become a guardian of public time, it should surely be possible to come up with something other than the distribution of broadcasting frequencies? Instead of leasing out frequencies, the Ministry of Time could assume the task of deploying the available talent to ensure that the channels are dedicated to something of substance. Ninthly, there is an urgent need for an evaluation of the seemingly unstoppable subjectification and individualization of time. As a result of the effect of market forces on the times at which shopping, education, work and leisure activities are available, people are able to draw up their own personal daily timetable without consulting anyone else. Tenthly, the ministry could consider establishing a number of new national, or still better European, events in support of the collective European identity. This might well entail the commissioning of art and architectural works.

This brings us to that other manifestation of a European vision, the aforementioned mandate of culture to produce or facilitate synchronicity. This vision would be about transforming art and culture from their current focus on hyper-personal universes, unique objects and celebrity status, into a practice of dramatic and creative time sharing. If Europe today is no longer a genuine public realm, no longer a refuge for the mind, no longer a stage for poets and thinkers, no longer the most logical forum for politics or the natural breeding ground of genius. If Europe has forfeited its status as the cradle of democracy and its culture can no longer be relied upon to make it free... what is its culture? If the European citizen is no longer an autonomous, free, upright, approachable, self-assured individual, but rather a consumer whose life is defined not by their deeds but by the digital trails they leave. If everything is recorded and analysed, whether it be by iris recognition, fingerprints, credit card transactions or the ubiquitous CCTV camera. If the integrity of individual Europeans can be readily checked via cradle-to-grave databases and gigantic computer systems that are continuously scouring the Net in search of subversive behaviour patterns. If highly personal data are accessible to parties who do not even know the person concerned... what kind of culture is that? If democracy is on the line in a network society where the bulk of public intercourse

takes place on web sites, in chat rooms and electronic voting booths, a society in which the citizen becomes a netizen... what kind of culture is that?

The answer to these rhetorical questions is clear. Such a culture will certainly not be about aesthetically pleasing, meticulously styled object buildings on superb locations, or about untouchable masterpieces of art. Nor even about spatial interventions on troublesome spots, aka site-specific art. Something different is called for and the proposition advanced here is that it should no longer be sought in space or matter, but in *time*. Culture in Europe's public space becomes culture in Europe's public time. In other words, in the time that we share, the time in which we acknowledge the other and the other can get to know us.

Culture could be the intensification of such moments, could ensure that this time is experienced by all and that a language is found in which to express those shared moments. Art-specific time. This art requires new makers, new forms, new organizations and a new public. Culture must begin again from scratch. For a culture that serves the experience of time rather than of place must itself be time-bound. A moment. A momentum. It notes the course of events and makes use of this. It concentrates not on form but on process. It develops activities that we no longer recognize by the place where they occur, but by the artistic effect they produce. In short, activities characterized not by borders but by border-crossing. Their focus is not on eternity but on history. This art is itself time, a creative moment in the ever so costly public time.

Culture – let it for once not be a sector but an attitude. An attitude that can appear and disappear as needed. Through the dimension of time it can rediscover its indispensability. And by cutting right through society it will also rediscover its public.

*Translated from the Dutch by Robyn de Jong-Dalziel*