Why Europe, Now

Círculo de Bellas Artes – Casa Europa

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There are moments when choosing Europe is a matter of course, and moments when it becomes a decision. We are living in the second kind. Ultranationalist parties are no longer a noisy fringe but forces of government; Euroscepticism has become a respectable political vocabulary; and the common project, ten years after a member state voted to leave it, is spoken of in terms of erosion, fatigue and retreat. In this climate, for a cultural institution to call itself European is not a neutral description of where it stands on the map. It is a choice of direction. The Círculo de Bellas Artes, as Casa Europa, has made that choice, and wants to say why.

Our starting point is a diagnosis that goes beyond party politics. The world we inhabit is becoming, paradoxically, more homogeneous at the very moment it appears more connected. Digital platforms sort us into communities of the like-minded; cities sort us by income; work, leisure and even protest increasingly take place among people who resemble us. We have more information about others than ever before, and fewer occasions to actually meet them. The result is a public that is losing the habit of difference, one that experiences the other less as an interlocutor than as a threat, a caricature or an absence.

Ultranationalism feeds on this loss. Its promise is simple: a community of the same, protected from the different. It answers the discomfort of plurality by abolishing it, at least in the imagination. That is why it cannot be confronted only in parliaments and courts. The struggle is also, and perhaps above all, about the conditions under which people learn to live with those who are not like them.

This is where cultural institutions matter more than is usually acknowledged. They are among the few spaces left where a genuine diversity can still gather under one roof: social, economic, racial, national, generational and linguistic. A concert hall, a cinema, a library, an exhibition room, a lecture theatre open to whoever walks in from the street brings together the student and the pensioner, the long-established resident and the recent arrival, the person who has a season ticket and the one who came in because entry was free. These places are not markets, where we meet only as buyers and sellers, nor tribes, where we meet only our own kind. They are public in the strongest sense of the word.

Gathering, however, is not enough. What a cultural institution can offer, and what few other spaces still offer, is a particular kind of time: the time of argued, unhurried and free dialogue. Against the acceleration of public debate, reduced to slogans, outrage and instant verdicts, culture keeps alive the possibility of following an argument to its end, of changing one’s mind without humiliation, of disagreeing without turning an adversary into an enemy. This is not a refined pleasure for the few. It is a civic apprenticeship. Citizens open to otherness are not born; they are formed, slowly, through repeated encounters with what unsettles them. Art and thought are perhaps the most demanding, and the most generous, school for that encounter.

Why, then, frame this work in European terms rather than simply local or national ones? Because the scale at which we think shapes what we are able to imagine. A cultural strategy designed in national terms, however open, tends to circle back to the question of identity: who we are, what belongs to us, what must be preserved. A strategy conceived in European and transnational terms shifts the question from “who are we?” to “what can we build together?”. It orients action in an anti-nationalist and anti-essentialist direction. This is not because it denies roots, but because it refuses to treat them as destinies.

Europe lends itself to this precisely because it is not an essence. There is no European blood, no single European language, no European soil that could ground an identity in the way nationalists dream of. Umberto Eco liked to say that the language of Europe is translation. Europe exists only as a practice of passage between languages, histories and memories that remain different, a work of mutual translation that is never finished. To act culturally in a European key is to make that practice visible and habitual: to bring a poet from Sofia and an audience in Madrid into the same room, or to hang a work made in Kyiv beside one made in Lisbon, and let the friction between them produce something neither could have produced alone. Every such encounter is a small refutation of the nationalist claim that peoples are closed, self-identical units.

This conviction comes with two refusals. The first is the refusal of a “fortress Europe” that would simply transpose nationalism to a continental scale, defining itself against those who arrive at its borders. A Europe worthy of the name cannot be the identity of the included against the excluded. Its openness is tested at its edges, and among those who live within it without being fully recognised as part of it. The second is the refusal of Europe as a museum, a heritage to be admired and defended. Nationalists also look to the past, but in search of a closed home and a purity to be restored. We look to the past for its unfinished promises.

For the same reason, choosing Europe does not mean giving up criticism of it. Quite the opposite: we are European because we hold Europe to its own concept, and because we measure the distance between its proclaimed values and its actual conduct on migration, war, inequality and the climate. Loyalty to the European project is not complacency. It is the demand that its reality catch up with its idea.

To choose Europe as a strategy, then, is to wager on the future rather than defend the present. The wager is that the common project will not be saved by treaties alone, but by the slow formation of citizens capable of living with difference, of arguing without hatred, of imagining forms of belonging beyond the nation. Cultural institutions cannot do this alone. But they can do something that almost no one else can: offer, day after day, a place where Europe is neither an abstraction nor a bureaucracy but an experience, that of being among strangers and discovering a common world.

That is what it means, for us, to be a Casa Europa: not a house already built, but one we keep building, with the doors open.