

The importance of asking questions with no definite answers: a reflection on the evolution of ECF and the European Sentiment

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The urgency to find a new, common European identity in post-war Europe, has led to the ideas to mobilise the intellectual and education potential of the Europeans, to overcome the traumas and re-build Europe together. Today, in spite of its achievements of 65 years unprecedented peace and prosperity, we need to boost again our “feelings” about Europe. Towards a feeling of engagement, affect and new meaning. What is the European Sentiment?

Writing a research paper on the European Sentiment is a process which proved itself to be way more complex and contentious than expected. As I write these lines after extensively researching and reading archives, articles, videos, and reports around what the sentiment is and could be and what the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) has done around it, thousands of people are protesting within the streets of Poland to advocate for the country to leave the European Union. As well as this, a month ago, Ivan Krastev released a report for the European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR) which highlighted how the Covid-19 pandemic not only exacerbated Europe’s already pre-existing divides, but also created new generational and geographical ones whose consequences are expected to be felt over the next decades. The past years can also provide numerous examples, as the impacts on European cohesion of Brexit, the 2015 migration crisis or even the 2008 financial crisis are still being studied today. It appears that most often than not, Europe and its institutions have become a scapegoat for national and economic failures. How then to properly navigate the notion of the European sentiment when what appears to be ubiquitous is an anti-European rhetoric?

The work and mission of ECF is a relevant and pertinent start. Indeed, a foundation whose creation relied on the dream of an “Europe of the Heart and the Mind” naturally embodies, if not answers to difficult questions, a great way to comprehend the workings of the promotion of the development and the preservation of a feeling of mutual comprehension and democratic solidarity between the people of Europe. Its current mission is to develop and support cultural initiatives to share, experience and imagine Europe, still centered around what its founder Denis de Rougemont mentioned 67 years ago on the “necessity to awake a common sentiment of the European”. However, not only is this sentiment complex to pinpoint and define in the first place, but there is also validity in pondering whether the way De Rougemont understood

it is still relevant today. Indeed, even if the webinar organized by ECF in March 2021 on “Unpacking the European Sentiment” started with a quote from Robert Schuman which argued that “all efforts will be vain if Europe is not animated by a European sentiment”, the 16 scholars and European experts who then discussed the notion did not have to do so in a post-war context. The European continent has managed to live (relatively) peacefully for 75 years, a wall is not dividing the West and the East anymore, the Balkans are not at war anymore. The terminology, however, remains the same: there is a need for European sentiment, and it is urgent. For that reason, it is important not to overlook the important similarities between the sentiment De Rougemont and Schuman mentioned with the one that ECF currently works for in response to the new challenges and divides influencing Europe and the European project.

A paramount point I want to stress is the importance of not providing a static definition to the European sentiment. The discussions and debates this notion encourage are what enables it to evolve in accordance to a more inclusive and diverse Europe. However, it also is important to develop a certain compass to grasp what is meant by the term. Firstly, “sentiment” implies subjectivity; a personal interpretation of what it means to be European, to live within Europe and to relate to other people who do, too. Secondly, the term Europe is also one without a fixed definition. Over the past seven decades, the continent has been through plural conflicts, a wall dividing its territory and signifying an important ideological and political division as well as different enlargement processes. What Europe meant in 1954 is not necessarily what it means today – especially as the European Union has also parallelly extensively developed. The vastness of these subjects makes them worthy of their own essay, but what is paramount to highlight here is that when mentioning the European sentiment, Europe as a continent and the European Union should be separated. Indeed, to feel European is a process which might not involve the dynamics of the EU at all. When dealing with such a complex notion, this is a very important component to keep in mind.

Three words describe the essence of the ECF: flexibility, anticipation, and independence. Its history can also be viewed in four stages: integration into the European cultural landscape (1954-1967); a determinedly forward-looking approach and intensive cooperation (1968-1989); firm commitment to the support of culture professionals (1990-2001); and the development of a cultural policy for Europe (2002-present). A new stage can now be added to this list, as the ECF is adopting a self-reflective stance and dwelling within its history to regenerate imagination and ideas for the future of Europe and Europeans. It is only by

compartmentalizing its evolution that the foundation is, as Europe and the sentiment shaping it, able to constantly change and adapt. To reflect on the European Sentiment is therefore as much of a political and social process as a historical one. Any answer to questions regarding the sentiment cannot be linear nor straightforward. It requires a verbal capacity to combine the past, the analysis of the present and the possibilities of the future which stands against all form of criticism. This verbal capacity must synergize with the complexity, if not impossibility, to define what the sentiment is and entails. The idea and concept of the common European sentiment can only become concrete when tied to a specific context and subjectivity; and this is where lies the importance of this research and of the self-reflective stance ECF is adopting. Being unable to find definite answers does not necessarily mean one ought not to take the time to reflect and ponder. After all, unless we understand fully the questions that we are asking – in a profound, critical and self-reflexive way – then we are unlikely to find the right answers.

[Why this project on the European sentiment?](#)

Before dwelling into the archives, it is also important to wonder why anyone would bother to pinpoint, define, and track the so-called European sentiment? Why spend hours researching and analyzing it if, anyhow, it will depend on specific circumstances and subjectivities? A very concise and simple answer to these questions might lie in the words of the Turkish novelist Elif Shafak in *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*: because we are undergoing a crisis of meaning. For far too long, in our social and political dealings, we have consulted a same old dictionary and collection of words and concepts that was compiled in the aftermath of World War II and the Cold War. We no longer feel the need to look up rudimentary words, we take for granted what everything means: freedom, democracy, community, sentiment, Europe. However, in doing so, there is no deconstruction anymore and dynamic concepts become fixed and, worse, outdated. Within the European project and in knowing that “creating Europe is one thing, having Europeans is another”, there is a need to always go deeper than first assumptions or simple definitions regarding ideas and concepts. This is a way to bring meaning again. Giuliano da Empoli and Mathieu Lefèvre have recently come up with the concept of “intensifiers” to produce positive messages and narratives that mobilize attention and actively mobilize the very people these narratives seek to engage directly. This conceptualization also resonates with the meaning crisis Shafak notes and goes to show that it is only by actively and dynamically engaging with concepts that one will be able to produce relevant and pertinent

narratives. Regarding the relationship between ECF and the European sentiment, this process is paramount. It connects the personal with the collective. The term sentiment is one which implies a personal and subjective vision of what being European means. However, to build a cohesive and inclusive community tied by these different European sentiments is a future which should be imagined and worked for. As writer Guido Snel underlined within ECF's webinar on the sentiment this year, feelings can become "valuable companions to our rational European lives". Perhaps it is precisely this companionship which will enable the different lives of Europeans to also connect with one another.

Moreover, the crisis of meaning has an extensive impact on identity. Increasingly, an absence of reflection and discussion on this concept leads people to grasp their selves as a single (based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, class...) rather than, as needed to feel European, a mixture of multiple belongings, cultural allegiances, and diverse inheritances. This is not to be taken lightly. To reiterate my use of Shafak, as we leave the lockdown days and face the consequences of Covid-19, "how we define our identity will shape our next steps". Especially European identity, who has been impacted by a rise in nationalist and anti-EU sentiment as well as rising divisions among governments and citizens. Populists base their "us" versus "them" narrative specifically on this growing nationalist feeling and exacerbate the fact that all identities are based on the similarity to some people and difference from others to advance their xenophobic agenda. This is where the European sentiment is essential. There is an important connection between the concept of identity and the concept of belonging: for people to grasp Europe as a part of their identity, they need to feel as if they belong to the continent. In other words, they need to live, share, imagine and experience Europe. In the face of the important challenges we have been through and are about to face within the aftermaths of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are in need of an European identity. For that very reason, the European sentiment should be at the forefront of discussion and analyses.

There is also a pressing need for coherence from Europe on the international level as global geopolitical challenges are rising, the most pressing and evident one being climate change. The continent must be able to face them collectively and concretely. Europe will not be able to be a dynamic force if it lacks a cultural dimension. As a matter of fact, European sentiment, identity, and culture are tied together and influencing each other. Therefore, an analysis on the sentiment cannot and should not be done without including culture. The term here is grasped in the same way the founder of ECF saw it: a particular valuing of mankind and a vehicle for

social renewal. After all, culture is a dimension of everything as everything both exists and is imagined. It is where people can fantasize, symbolize, and create a language of the imaginary that is essential in times of crises like the one we are going through. Through culture, solidarity and compassion become central as interest and curiosity for others become both encouraged and celebrated. This will also make Europeans more friendly towards each other and, fundamentally the territory itself a more interesting place to live in. To focus on the European sentiment is therefore, inherently, to focus on the place and the role of culture in Europe. The joint proposed framework Cultural Deal for Europe by ECF, Culture Action Europe and Europa Nostra embodies a relevant step towards a Europe with a central place for culture within its post-pandemic future. Advocating for at least 2% of the Resilience and Recovery Fund of Member States to be allocated to culture would not only demonstrate the EU's political commitment to place culture at the heart of the Europe but would also enable to create a future focusing on what ties European together and thus inherently on the European sentiment.

1954: Europe of the Heart and the Mind

Something particularly interesting with the creation of ECF is the way its founding fathers managed to turn the frustration they felt towards the state of the European project into a positive and optimistic energy. Indeed, in her farewell speech to Denis de Rougemont, Princess Margriet of the Netherlands mentioned the myth of justified anger which surrounds the creation of ECF, for what shaped the formation of the foundation is a willingness from Robert Schuman and Denis de Rougemont to create a more inclusive and solidary European future whereas economic and geopolitical matters were the principal components being discussed then.

Firstly, despite what the name cultural foundation might make one believe at first sight, the foundation was not created merely for arts and culture but focused on a broader idea of the European *vivre ensemble*; the set of values, behaviors and ties which could foster a greater sense of belonging amongst European countries and citizens. This is what De Rougemont framed as the “Europe of the Heart and the Mind”. Anger is thus what shaped the formation of the foundation, firstly in Geneva, and then to Amsterdam in 1960. The aim was to change the intellectual and moral climate of Europe, for the continent needed to be unified in a peaceful and cultural way, and not merely through economic terms. This happened at the crossroads, in the aftermath of the world war and as the entire world was still living through unpredictable

times. De Rougemont argued how money is only given to the rich, and how to be rich, one must be able to give – the idea of a foundation came with the realization that as soon as people will start to believe that the foundation can give, then money and funds will be given to it. This was then about imagining new ways for philanthropy and funding to operate, with a reconceptualization of these notions through a European lens. In that regard, the international non-governmental organization devoted most of its income to the promotion of cultural, scientific and education activities from 1954 to 1970. This firstly crystallized in congresses, where the European sentiment was central. These prestigious meetings happened in several European cities and touched on subjects such as “The Cultural and Intellectual Unity in Europe” (Amsterdam, 1957) or “Youth Training in Europe” (Milan, 1958). Prime ministers, thinkers, philosophers, writers were involved next to citizens and young individuals to exchange on their vision on European topics regarding education, cultural heritage, agricultural management. A forum and platform were therefore provided to discuss the best way to live together and belong to the territory – a concretization of the imagination and possibilities an anger and dissatisfaction with the limited economic formation of Europe led to.

Therefore, even if the Europe of the Heart and the Mind is tied to a post-war optimistic sprouting of pan-European ideas and institutions, the feeling of frustration and the urgency to learn how to live together in times of crises still highly resonate with our current situation. Moving fast forward to March this year, the current director of ECF André Wilkens stressed the need to look for solidarity among Europeans. This connects him directly with De Rougemont and Schuman in their research of a new and common European identity in times of political turmoil. What the archives on the sentiment thus reveal is that, if Europe, ECF and the sentiment have changed, evolved and been through major events in the last seven decades, the core mission of the foundation remained as relevant as 67 years ago. The visions and the founding ideas have not changed; the narratives and contexts did. The drive is the same. The fear for rising nationalism, the active work for European countries to grasp the importance of a cultural Europe, and the need to imagine new ways of living together and connecting with each other is still present.

What Robert Schuman and Gaston Berger noted in the first Congress of the ECF in Amsterdam in 1957 is that the Foundation is audacious; audacious for its European endeavors, audacious for its stance going above and beyond the state and the nation. Europe was seen as rich for the diversity of its inspirations and the peoples that made it, and it was in the common interest of

Europeans to grasp their civilization as a whole: to get where it comes from and more importantly, to have enough drive and imagination to have a vision of where it can go. Today, we still do not know what Europe means. Nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric are becoming commonplace, migrants are drowning at our shores, minorities are being oppressed. Discussing European unity is often still seen as utopian at best, elitist at worse. Perhaps then what Wilkens stressed in his call for solidarity is, precisely, a Europe of the Heart and the Mind. In the words of the urbanist Peter Hall, “anxiety can become a creative force”: a force that is best leveraged when combined with the courage to analyze its roots lucidly. To stop and reflect on the European sentiment is therefore a potential way to exchange nihilism for European enthusiasm – and, if it is not, then the process of asking the right questions and conducting the right investigations will certainly be insightful regarding the future missions and programmes of the Foundation in its aspiration to create a cultural and united Europe. This teaches us a lot about the sentiment as well: it is as much as an aspiration to link countries within a continent that has just been at war and is slowly starting to find terms of an economic cooperation to foster discussion and debates around what unites Europeans after having been through two years of a global pandemic.

Researching the European sentiment firstly is a process which brings one back to the roots of the foundation, where the concept already was ubiquitous and a priority. However, despite grasping what shaped the formation of ECF, the sentiment remains a concept without a singular definition that cannot be fully described without the context it takes place in. Anyhow, in the same way it would be an oversimplification to believe that the sentiment which drove the founding members of ECF and the one we focused on today are radically different because the Europe they focus on is not the same, it is also important to realize that is not because the sentiment is complex to pinpoint that it is not possible to concretely assess and analyze the work that has been done around it as well as its evolution.

[The evolution of a sentiment, the evolution of a foundation: a few examples](#)

Writing on the European sentiment through the prism of ECF’s work is also not a straightforward process as the archives of the foundation are still lacking an assessment of substantial achievements made regarding the sentiment. When trying to measure and interpret information regarding a notion that cannot be completely quantifiable, it is however paramount

to remain concise and to the point or one can easily be overwhelmed with a vast number of interpretations and debates. Thus, looking at different programs and projects that were conducted by the ECF throughout the years appears as a relevant way to learn about what the sentiment then was and how the foundation worked with and around it.

After a first wave of intellectual exchanges, conferences on educational issues and support to musical activities, ECF moved from Geneva to Amsterdam in 1960, where it began to work on this Europe-wide interdisciplinary and action-oriented research programme about Europeans in their future society. This project was named Plan Europe 2000, was launched in 1967 and lasted until 1975. Drawing from the legacy of the congresses, its aim was to ponder on the best and most relevant ways to live and act together within the European territory. Four different fields were covered: Educating man for the 21st century; Man and industry of tomorrow; Urbanization: planning human environment in Europe; The future of agriculture and environment. These projects did not define nor really mention the European sentiment as such. However, it has been rendered clear by now that this notion is inherent to the willingness to question what ties Europeans together and how the functioning of the continent could be improved. This search for commonness, for the best form of education in the 21st century or the role of social sciences within the technological era brought more than 200 workers from 15 different countries together. 47 volumes in 8 different languages were produced, embodying a European approach not solely in its geographic dimension but also as an indication of quality and being inspired by the anti-status quo thinking of 1968. This is what the sentiment was then about: a revolutionary way of looking at what is with new eyes.

The project “Man of the 21st Century” also resulted in the establishment of diverse research institutes across Europe and in 1987, one of them worked together with the European Commission and started the Erasmus programme. This famous student mobility project was run by the European Cultural Foundation until 1995 and can be seen today as one of the greatest successes and achievements in the crystallization of European identity and manifestation of European sentiment. This programme also greatly exemplifies the work of the then director of ECF, Raymond Georis. His vision for a connected Europe defined by the mobility of its citizens shaped the way the foundation functions today. Georis’ principally focused on facilitating communications between politicians and educators. For him, education and culture needed to be seen in European terms – and today, Erasmus is the world’s most successful student mobility programme, with 3,3 million students having been abroad through it in 2020

only. A study from the *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst* from 2014 revealed how almost all the Erasmus alumnis they interviewed identified strongly with Europe, highlighting how being provided with the opportunity to explore other countries enhanced their Europeanness. On a personal level, I am writing this paper as a French intern for the European Cultural Foundation in Amsterdam whilst living in Berlin and studying in Paris after developing my European sentiment whilst studying a Bachelor in London during Brexit. The privilege of this mobility is by far what triggered my European sentiment the most – continuously getting to experience and live within the places and faces defining Europe is what enables me to call it my home. The fact that ECF and Geories were a pioneer in the creation and functioning of the Erasmus program provides us with two important lessons on the sentiment applicable today. Firstly, it goes to show how tangible, quantifiable work can be done on the European sentiment. Secondly, it permits to see that the mobility of people is now a fundamental value of European integration. The possibility of free movement across borders is the foundation of European unity and a very fertile ground for the development of a European identity and sense of belonging, and this should be kept in mind within the quest to not only understand but work in the future on the sentiment.

Another lesson from the ECF's work on the sentiment is that, as we have already mentioned before, no concept nor vision should be seen as fixed nor remain unquestioned. For instance, in 1994, the foundation reflected on Plan Europe 2000 and noted how despite the pertinence of the lessons that came out of it, it was tainted by a certain elitism, utopian nature and an idea of a linear future. Numerous new elements had to be considered by ECF; the 1971 report "Limits to Growth" from the Club of Rome changed the way people looked at the world, the Berlin Wall fell, geopolitical relationships within the continent completely changed. Hence, on the 5th of November 1994, a day of debate named "Plan Europe revisited" was organized. It proposed new discussion on the future, involving a more global and international view of Europe whilst acknowledging the increasing influence of powers without territory such as NATO or the market laws. European identity was stressed as a recognition, understanding and cherishment of the differences that exist between states, nations, cultures, and religions in the act of similar traits for harmonious existence. Moreover, openness was noted as the prime factor defining what Europeanness is. The sentiment evolved with its time – and globalization was becoming an increasing lived reality. Hence, working on the European sentiment necessitates to be self-reflective on what has been achieved already. The decision to dwell into what Plan Europe

2000 had already done to make its understanding of Europe more inclusive and up to date exemplifies what working on European common and cultural identity constantly entails.

What the ECF has also actively achieved regarding the sentiment is to understand it through a socially and politically engaged stance. This is notable for instance on the programme “Art for Social Change” which was conducted in South-East Europe. Seeing art as a medium against social exclusion, the ECF worked to include an European dimension in such process. In 1995, the foundation funded the study “Art as a Catalyst” to focus on experiences and initiatives with marginalized youth in different countries. The aim there was to strengthen the capacities for societal integration of disadvantaged young people across Europe by means of artistic activity and by transmitting them a capacity to communicate and to exchange experiences in a culturally polyphonic context. Social change was thus seen as achievable through both an artistic and European manner. This social and political component of the sentiment is also prevalent in the programme of May 2009 “New Narratives for Europe”. After the economic turmoil of 2008 and the complications around Europe, there was a need for a story to tell and new narratives to inspire the youth after a growing disconnection between Europe and its people, between the EU and its citizens – people who experience Europe every day and yet do not feel like they belong to it. The point here was to build European narratives going beyond language, borders, and national territories. This came with an increasing recognition of the fact that most of the narratives that were produced until then focused on the perspectives and the subjectivities of the dominants and the elites in society. In other words, the sentiment had to be rekindled and thought about in a more inclusive and open way to remain a valid concept – and that is what ECF advocated for. It is interesting here to see that narratives were defined as collective stories and representations made from people’s memories of the past, their experience of the present and above all their imagination of the future, as this applies perfectly to the dynamics of the sentiment that have been highlighted until here. Wary of not combining European narratives and a European sentiment, as the two are different notions, this definition however enables to pinpoint another aspect of what the European sentiment entails for, like narratives, its underpins and binds communities and keep them moving forward.

One could also mention the action-line Enlargement of Minds which started in 2002 and was a way for the foundation to question the impact of the big 2004 wave of Enlargement on cultural relations with Mediterranean neighbours. This social and political stance – that a future of Europe cannot be considered outside of a continuous exchange with neighboring countries and

without a reflection on the current context and its implications – can be linked to Gottfried Wagner. For the director of ECF from 2002 to 2009, the European project not only had to involve culture and the sentiment, but these components needed to be inclusive, diverse and, fundamentally, representative of Europe. This legacy is still celebrated today, and the constant self-reflexive yet action-oriented vision Wagner had for ECF can also be found within initiatives such as this very paper on the European sentiment.

Listing these different programmes and initiatives evidently only can provide a partial understanding of what ECF has done around the European sentiment and the impacts of these actions on it. However, what this process enables is to exemplify how it is possible and necessary to work on and with a notion that does not have a static definition. The foundation has been at the forefront of this action.

Today's self-reflection: the European sentiment in times of crises.

As André Wilkens underlined, rather than being self-congratulatory on the almost seven decades spent working on promoting and understanding the European sentiment, ECF decided to return to the vision of its founding fathers and the lessons of its history to better understand the challenges and opportunities which can potentially appear in this time of crisis Europe is facing. What also became clear through the redaction of this discursive piece is that to write about the sentiment is to write about the history of the foundation – and the other way around. It is also interesting to note that this is the first time in its history that ECF is devoting an entire project to the sentiment, and not just understanding it as an externality from other political and social projects. Doing so is, in the end, a very hopeful process – because it reveals how both Europe and the ECF have managed to go through times of crises, and how these turmoils embody windows of opportunities for discussion, deconstruction and new imagination for the future. Indeed, ECF has always been able to put in place projects and narratives enhancing the European sentiment, even at times where the European project felt almost as on the edge of erosion. The past decade is a great example. After the 2008 financial crisis which put all Member States in a very difficult position and where a lot of skepticism started to grow against Brussels and Frankfurt, ECF put in a place a programme to reinvent narratives and stories in Europe to discuss the importance of living together and belonging to the continent. When Brexit happened, ECF's reaction was to forge a renewed commitment to building and

strengthening shared European and cultural spaces, advocating for cultural and societal connection with the UK rather than separation. ECF hence called for an intensification of activities and efforts to enable communities and individuals across Europe to co-shape their dreams, futures and cultural space with creativity and cooperation. During the migration crisis that hit Europe in 2015, the foundation repeatedly shared stories and imageries of migrants to change the narrative around their arrival and include their acceptance within what it means to be European. Every major crisis of the past decade has divided Europe, and Covid is no different. What brings hope is that the foundation has repeatedly shown how, when the sentiment is in danger, it will work to put in place more shared European experience and exchanges. This notion is one that can unite and that produces the energy necessary to think about Europe in a positive and hopeful way. During lockdown, the foundation has for instance launched the Culture of Solidarity Fund to support imaginative cultural initiatives that, during the global pandemic crisis, reinforce European solidarity and the idea of Europe as a shared public space. The point here is to find solutions to crises transnationally, by and through European actions. The next months and years are going to be particularly difficult; but perhaps this difficulty also embodies an opportunity for a renewed imagination not just centered around but also triggered by this sentiment.

The deconstruction is not over

On the other hand, being hopeful regarding the foundation's relationship to the sentiment should not stop us from constantly reflecting on the notion, especially as current debates and discussions have increasingly rendered clear that it can still be exclusive and harmful. Europe must constantly turn the mirror back onto itself and interrogate how the different elements of its social and political reality have been constructed block by block to create the conditions in which it now find itself. The intricate nature of European identity does not prevent it from potentially being harmful to certain groups and individuals. Indeed, Europe's historical entanglements beyond its shores – through slavery, colonial relationships, and imperialism – were founded upon racial and cultural difference and upon unequal relations of power. This realization even influenced the writer Tsvetan Todorov to apologise for the European soft power and the violent and excluding legacy it carries within its values. Even if the purpose of this paper is not to deconstruct Europe's colonial and patriarchal past, it is paramount to understand that the impossibility of some individuals to feel European come from structural

and political dynamics that the sentiment itself can be at risk of upholding. A pertinent book to dwell into if one is aiming to start a discussion on this subject is *Afropolitan* by Johny Pitts, where the writer and photographer travels across Europe to portray the black bodies of the continent. His goal is to create, through his pen and lens, a “space where blackness is taking part into shaping European identity at large”.

The contentious legacy of the sentiment also goes further than the racial component. Detmer Kreemer wrote an insightful analysis in *Are We Europe* to explain “Why Europe Isn’t the Gay Friendly Haven People Think It Is”. In the same edition of the magazine, a political science student, Loredane Tshilombo, noted that “if [they] had to use one word to describe the black queer experience in Italy, it would be invisible”. These interrogations are also well documented and put forward in journalist Laetitia Chabannes’ podcast *Europe and Sentiment*, in which the episodes explore how it still is far easier to “feel European” if one is a man, white, wealthy, able-bodied, and heterosexual. Even if Denis de Rougemont once affirmed that we should stop blaming ourselves for the wrong we have done, especially to people who do not realize what they owe to Europe and who are, consciously or subconsciously, trying to imitate it, this is not the stance of the ECF anymore. Diversity and deconstructed discussions are at the forefront, and the foundation repeatedly promoted platforms and experiences to welcome various expressions of what it means to be European and how to continuously deconstruct and redefine what the European sentiment is. Even though such contentious aspect of the sentiment would be deserving of its own research paper, it is essential to give a brief mention of some the limited dynamics that are still shaping it nowadays. This is specifically why a promotion of the sentiment entails a capacity to see the world from multiple positions simultaneously, both geographically and temporally. After all, the present and the future can only be grasped and imagined with a thorough look at the historical, social, and political past.

[Where do we go from here?](#)

Denis de Rougemont once underlined that “decadence starts when people no longer says “what are we going to do?” but “what is going to happen?”. So, what are we going to do? Where should we go from here?

Research, papers, and data should be continually produced for ECF's work on the sentiment to remain up to date and pertinent. Because culture is what brings us together and because the European sentiment cannot be achieved without a cultural Europe, extensive work will be conducted on the aforementioned Cultural Deal for Europe, for it comes as a result of decades of shaping and informing EU cultural policies and advocate for both a stronger and central place of culture and a European sentiment.

A constant and consistent conversation, dialogue, and deconstruction around what it is to be European and what ties Europeans together should be promoted. Regarding this, the ongoing ECF initiative of the European Pavilion provides both a virtual and physical place to explore, discuss and question the Europe of tomorrow and what being European means and entails. Started originally as a series of podcast, the European Pavilion programmes ambitions to facilitate a space that encourages and reflection on Europe. This goes through a European network of arts and cultural organization that, through artistic and education projects, offers the opportunity to explore ideas for a future Europe. This is a way to fuel imagination and ambition regarding the evolution of the continent and the lives of its inhabitants, and thus naturally entails an exploration of the sentiment. When it is said that “the pavilion, which has taken on many functions and forms throughout history, has the quality to remain open to new definitions and meanings, much like Europe itself”, one can also add that this exactly coincide with what has been demonstrated regarding the European sentiment.

To foster the European Sentiment, it is also important for both the ECF and European actors to keep in mind that mobility is the factor Europeans value the most when it comes to their continent. There should therefore be continuous and active work on creating programmes and opportunities to “experience” Europe, and these experiences should be based on a sustainable, accessible, and inclusive mobility.

ECF should also work on to obtain numbers and statistics regarding the position of Europe within the international sphere and the way the rest of the world perceives the European sentiment. As the Head of Policy of ECF Isabelle Schwarz suggested, for Europe to become a genuine smart power and for culture to blossom to its full potential, a more visionary, courageous, coherent, and sustainable approach to its external cultural relations is needed. The same applies to the European Sentiment.

There is also a pressing need to concretize a European public space, and the project of a European media channel producing European content could be a great start, like the proposed Europafunk initiative. Focusing on symbols to crystallize a feeling of belonging and of identity could be pertinent. For instance, declaring the 9th of May as the first European holiday in history could be a pertinent step for the European sentiment, as this would imply the official declaration of a day to commemorate the European project and the dynamics it involves.

Conclusion

To conclude, capturing the European sentiment is as essential as difficult and contentious. Dwelling into the archives of a foundation who has centered its work around it has illustrated how the best way to tackle its workings and dynamics is to constantly reflect on current circumstances and create opportunities that remain relevant with the Europe of today. In this regard, ECF is devoted in its 2020-2025 to create programs and opportunities enabling to imagine, share and experience Europe. This comes with a full awareness that Europe should be united but not uniform. The sentiment and the identities and senses of belonging it entails rely on constant discussions, debates, and deconstructions. The sentiment can still be excluding and limiting today, and a self-reflective sense is essential to approach why people feel European – or not. ECF can also find hope and solace in grasping how, through times of crises, it has always managed to adapt through a cultural and social stance always aiming for a cohesive and inclusive Europe. As we are starting to observe the consequences of the Covid-19, knowing this is paramount. This discursive essay started with the words Elif Shafak who said that how we define our identity will shape our next steps. Perhaps what learning about the sentiment through the work of ECF teaches us is that it is also the next steps which will continue to change, challenge and affirm our identities. After all, European identity is a mixture of trajectories. It is an identity grounded on a sentiment which finds its roots in multiple positions, both geographical and temporal. We can always go back, turn around, discuss, learn, start again. And maybe this is what feeling European is about, in the end.

Resources used

First Congress in Amsterdam, European Cultural Foundation, 1957

L'Unité Européenne et ses Vicissitudes, Isaiah Berlin, 1959

Citizen and City in the year 2000, European Cultural Foundation, 1970

Plan Europe 2000 Revisited – Final report, European Cultural Foundation, 1994

Foundations in Partnership: the Example of Social Inclusion in Europe, European Cultural Foundation, 1994

Art for Social Change, an European Initiative, European Cultural Foundation, 1997

Why We Need European Cultural Policies, Nina Obuljen, 2004

The European Cultural Foundation: a look back at fifty years of activity, European Cultural Foundation, 2004

Europe as a Cultural Project, European Cultural Foundation, 2006

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