

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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# Introduction

# Introduction to the Special Issue

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**E**urope is more than a geopolitical and institutional reality; it is also an idea that is continuously reinvented as collective identities transform. “Europe”, in that sense, functions as a floating signifier that different actors fill with competing narratives and meaning (Laclau, 1994). While European actors and institutions have promoted specific ideas of Europe since the 1950s (Calligaro, 2013), in recent years they have become increasingly active in re-imagining Europe. Attempting to strengthen the European Union’s legitimacy (Foret, 2009; Sternberg, 2013), they seek to anchor “Europe” in a shared narrative. This process responds to a historical context in which the EU’s legitimacy is frequently questioned (Schmidt, 2019), and when the post-war “reconciliation narrative”, highlighting peace, prosperity and reconstruction (Petrović, 2016), no longer seems sufficient justification for European integration.

The ambition to construct a “New Narrative” is most explicitly expressed in the “Narratives for Europe” project run by the European Cultural Foundation between 2009 and 2012, and in the “New Narrative for Europe” project launched by the European Commission in 2013, both intended to help anchor “Europe” in a shared “new” narrative. “A new narrative for Europe,” former President of the European Commission José Manuel Durão Barroso explained, “not because we don’t remain loyal to the *raison d’être* of the European community and the European Union,” but “because I think we need, in the beginning of the XXI century, namely for the new generation that is not so much identified with this narrative of Europe, to continue to tell the story of Europe” (European Commission, 2013). Barroso subsequently employs a telling metaphor: “Like a book: it cannot only stay in the first pages, even if the first pages were extremely beautiful. We have to continue our narrative, continue to write the book of the present and of the future” (*Ibid.*).

The “new narrative” project launched in 2013 and continued by the Juncker Commission, essentially attempts to preserve the “permissive consensus” vis-à-vis the EU (Bouza Garcia, 2017a), seeking to avoid the politicization of the EU

and to portray the opponents of the policies of the European Commission as “Eurosceptics”. The call to narratively reimagine Europe comes at a moment of perceived “EU crisis”, in which Eurosceptic actors are mobilizing historical narratives to oppose European integration (Petrović, 2019). This political and discursive process has historical precedents, as it was always in adversity that the “contested concept” of Europe became a self-conscious idea, so that “the European idea has been more the product of conflict than of consensus” (Delanty, 1995, 2). But the “new narrative” project reveals something about Europe’s current state as well: once the political and geographical centre of the world, it has now shifted to a more peripheral position and this poses a challenge to the European project. The less Europe is able to define itself as a centre, the more in need of a new story “we” seem to be, but also, the more difficult the construction of such a story (with clearly defined actors and events) becomes (Van Weyenberg, 2016).

The idea of constructing a (new) narrative for Europe builds on the relation between story and history, considering history as a textual and discursive formation in a way that evokes the work of Hayden White (2002). It also draws on the causal relationship of narration to nation, most famously theorized by Benedict Anderson, who investigates the role of the imagination in how people conceive of themselves as part of the same social group (2006), and Homi Bhabha, who compared the “symbolic structure of the nation” with the workings of “the plot of a realist novel” and who argued that narration “links together diverse acts and actors on the national stage who are entirely unaware of each other” (1990, 308). Extending this relationship of narration to nation to the larger imagined political community of Europe has certain limitations, but it allows us to understand how social representations serve as “regulative ideas for the formation of collective identities” (Delanty, 1995, 5).

What does it say that European institutions seem increasingly bent on fashioning narratives for Europe? And if we cautiously agree to view Europe as a narrative, should we not ask the questions that storytelling evokes? For example, if “Europe” can be read as a narrative, who are its addressed readers? Who are its authors and how exactly is this story written? But also, what is made central and what is made peripheral to, or even left out of, “Europe: The Story”? What are the story’s purpose and effects, especially within the context of current debates about the state and function of Europe and of the European Union? Additionally, who are the heroes and the villains in the different narratives of Europe? These questions are central to the unders-

tanding of the past and present of the European integration process, and to a large extent will influence Europe's future.

The circulation of narratives of Europe is not a spontaneous process, as narratives are articulated by actors in the public sphere. In the public sphere, which can be defined as “a social construction constituting a community of communication” (Risse and Van de Steeg, 2003, 16), narratives compete for visibility and resonance, and tap on the existing cultural resources that a community has. We take narratives seriously, by analysing how, by whom and with what political goals Europe is narrated by different actors in the European public spheres (Risse, 2014). We are interested in how particular narratives of Europe become hegemonic while others do not (Shore, 2006), and in how such dominant narratives communicate values and ethical principles that determine which actors gain political influence, and which are instead blamed for the perceived problems. Discourses on Europe, in short, always hold ideological implications.

At the same time, it is important to understand that narratives of Europe travel throughout Europe in a segmented way, due to the national fragmentation of the public spheres (Risse, 2010; Koopmans and Statham, 2010). This makes the study of narratives of Europe all the more interesting, given that the very competition of different narratives to define Europe, even if they oppose each other, is “de facto” contributing to an understanding of Europe as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006). Moreover, as Diez Medrano (2003) argues, the understanding of European narratives is filtered by the national cultures in which they are put to work. We will look at narratives from both of these perspectives.

The main goal of this special issue is to call for more critical attention to the stories of Europe that circulate. To this aim, we build on Calligaro (2013), who analyses the EU promotion of Europeanness, and on Sassatelli (2009), who investigates official European narratives by looking at how they are translated into practice. We consider this special issue as a follow-up to two other special issues. First, *The Narrative Turn in EU Studies*, edited by Bouza García (2017b), explores how narratives have come to prominence in European studies in recent years and focuses on the ways in which European narratives are used to legitimate the EU as a political community. Second, *Narrating European Integration: Transnational Actors and Stories*, edited by Kaiser and McMahon (2017), takes an interdisciplinary perspective to emphasize the role of actors in the narration of European integration. We attempt to complement these

two publications by focusing both on the top-down narratives of Europe that are put forward by institutional actors, and on the ways in which these narratives might be challenged by bottom-up narratives created in the public sphere. We seek to explore the tension between the continuity and homogeneity that Europeanizing narratives propagate, and the inhering differences and inequalities that alternative narratives might reveal. We are additionally interested in how cultural narratives of Europe (will) adapt to a Europe that is at present changing radically, as a result of the increase in nationalism, for example, or in the context of Brexit.

Although the way in which Europe is imagined as a community has never been stable, in the contemporary political climate the debate about what “Europe” is or should be seems increasingly heated. In this debate several “Europes” seem to exist (Biebuyck and Rumford, 2012). In terms of narrative, two types of stories about “Europe” can be discerned, with some referring to Europe as a culture and as a civilization, and others primarily understanding Europe as a polity, *de facto* using it as a synonym for the EU. These two narratives of Europe can be congruent or competing, depending on the strategic choice that actors make. In our exploration of both types of narratives, we pay special attention to three things: first, how narratives make use of the past, for example by constructing Europe as a teleological narrative with clear historical origins, or by rewriting history in order to serve a contemporary political agenda; second, how narratives function as spaces of inclusion and exclusion, for example by formulating a narrative “we” in opposition to a range of specific “others”; third, how narratives engage with the ideas of Europe as either a homogenous entity or as a diverse community and how they manoeuvre the inevitable tension between both these ideas.

The contributors to this special issue come from different fields (political science, journalism, literary studies, and cultural analysis), but they share an interest in how “Europe” is narrated by different actors in different contexts and they all take the circulation of narratives of Europe not as a natural, but as a socially and culturally constructed process. In terms of methodology, this special issue covers different approaches to discourse analysis, understanding discourse in broad terms as “the language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view” (Fairclough, 1995, 56), and taking it to comprise both written and visual texts. We welcome this diversity in approaches, since we seek to build bridges between different strands of research and to encourage interdisciplinary work. Despite their different disciplinary

backgrounds, the contributors all focus on the specificity of language, zooming in on the particular rhetoric strategies that narratives on Europe reveal.

The special issue opens with an article by Oleart and Bouza Garcia about the narrative struggle for “Europe” in the debate surrounding the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The article analyses the narratives put forward in strategic documents by European Commission and the Stop TTIP coalition, conceiving the two opposing narratives as the opposition between “European Aegis” and transnational populism. Van Weyenberg subsequently undertakes a critical reading of the House of European History, an initiative of the European Parliament, analysing the House’s selection and arrangement of artefacts and texts. The analysis is undertaken from a postcolonial perspective, aiming at identifying the ideological implications of the European narrative on display.

The next three articles investigate the ways in which “Europe” is narrated within the national contexts of the United Kingdom and Germany. Henkel uncovers how the British press created a narrative of Britain in the EU – and previously the European Economic Community – that ultimately contributed to the Vote to leave the EU in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the article investigates how reports employed the narrative structures of myth and populism to construct an opposition between the British people and the EU. Moving on to Germany, Conrad, Hallgrímsdóttir and Brunet-Jailly analyse the extent to which in the states of Bavaria and North Rhine Westphalia, the global financial crisis has led civil-society and party-political actors to spread narratives about Europe and the European Union that are increasingly sceptical about European integration. In the next contribution, Volk too focuses on the German context, carrying out an in-depth qualitative discourse analysis of the proposed European counter-narrative of the transnational populist protest movement *Fortress Europe/Festung Europa*, whose leading actor is the German anti-migrant movement “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West” (acronym: Pegida).

The concluding contributions explore the difficulties of specific social groups to enter mainstream narratives of Europe. Van Amelsvoort explores the obstacles faced by women writers with a migration background to become part of the story of Europe through a discourse analysis and comparative reading of two emblematic novels by women writers who self-consciously address this issue in their narratives. Lastly, Van der Waal focuses on the “forgetfulness” of such narratives to include actors who may be deemed “losers” of the European

project, such as “the poor”, the *lumpenproletariat*, and migrants. Van der Waal thus explores how the representation of these “eminently forgettable persons” can help us to think about the European project as a social project of togetherness, in relation to the EU’s motto “unity through diversity”.

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