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United in Difficulty: The European Union's Use of Shared Problems as a Way to Encourage Unity

Item Type	article;article
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Download date	2024-07-15 17:00:53
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Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7389

*United in Difficulty: The European Union's Use of Shared Problems
as a Way to Encourage Unity*

Presented by Grace Cleary at the 2012 American Anthropological Association Meeting,
San Francisco, CA in the panel

“Europeanization and Discourses of Crisis, Cultural Policy, and Democracy”

Abstract:

Since the European Union's inception, it has invested considerable resources into cultural programs aimed at fostering a sense of shared European heritage. However, these efforts have always been balanced alongside the need to leave space for diversity within and across EU nations. In this paper, which highlights the findings of my MA thesis, I examine the European Capital of Culture (ECC), which I studied in Córdoba, Spain during the spring of 2011. I look at how European identity is being defined in a specific context, and in particular how the contest is refocusing on new forms of shared heritage by looking at common European problems and how cities are working to solve them. I argue that both unity and diversity are encouraged, but that initiatives such as the ECC delineate and construct the acceptable boundaries of shared cultural expressions and cultural difference. I argue that the EU's focus on the methods and attitudes for dealing with shared problems is becoming an important part of European identity; one that allows countries to maintain certain kinds of marketable difference, like food or music, while also encouraging a common outlook on handling problems. While shared history, religion, nationality and/or language once served to unify people within a country's borders, these characteristics no longer provide an adequate bond within the supranational EU. In shifting the

contest's unifying function to include common problems, the contest is drawing on shared European narratives and anxieties, and through the contest, the EU is monitoring how these 'challenges' are defined and dealt with.

1. BACKGROUND

This paper is based on research that I have been carrying out since 2011, when I spent three months living in Córdoba, Spain, a city that was then competing to be European Capital of Culture. I have since followed the Capital of Culture contest through newspaper articles, social media, and EU documents. I found the Capital of Culture contest to be a rich site for studying EU policy and how it plays out at local levels. While I have employed various research methods in my study of this contest, this paper will focus primarily on the analysis of texts: specifically, the dossiers that each of the participating cities submitted to the European Capital of Culture judges at the end of the competition. These dossiers were written by members of local cultural foundations, and its members included local and sometimes regional politicians, professors, businessmen and women, and occasionally, professionals working within the heritage industry.

2. ABOUT THE CONTEST

The EU has taken on a number of economic, political, and cultural projects that encourage a sense of shared heritage. The first European Capital of Culture title was awarded in 1985, and it has since become highly competitive. Drawing on financial reports from previous winners, city officials often assume that winning will bring an increase in tourism and revenue, which provide a strong incentive for participation. Each year a national and international panel of experts selects two countries to host the Capital of Culture, and within each country, many individual

cities vie for the award. The contest's judges expect the competitors to "highlight their contributions to Europe's cultural richness and diversity," and to demonstrate a "European identity" (Córdoba Cultural City 2011:29-32) .¹

In 2011, six Spanish cities competed against each other to become capital of culture: Córdoba, San Sebastián, Zaragoza, Segovia, Palmas de Gran Canaria, and Burgos. In June of 2011, the contest ended, and the EU decided that San Sebastián would hold the title "European Capital of Culture" for all of the year 2016.

3. ARGUMENT: Positive Definitions of Europeanness

This paper looks at the European Capital of Culture Contest, specifically how it has become a way for the European Union to encourage a shared sense of European heritage among EU states while also leaving room for diversity within and across EU nations. It describes ways in which the ECC delineates and constructs the acceptable boundaries of shared cultural expressions and cultural difference. The argument put forth here is that the EU's focus on methods and attitudes for dealing with shared problems is becoming an important part of European identity, one that permits countries to maintain certain kinds of marketable difference, such as food or music, while also encouraging a common outlook on handling problems. I examine how heritage is being redefined in the European Capital of Culture contest. I analyze the ways in which the ECC contest strives for heritage that is less exclusive and how this heritage is defined more in terms of process than product. In aiming to create cross-EU bonds the contest eliminates some boundaries while reifying others. I describe ways in which European identity is constructed through the

¹ For instance: "Europe: From One Street to the Other," the "Intercultural Cities Index," The Erasmus program.

contest, focusing specifically on how the EU's promotion of a discourse of shared problems has enabled countries to live up to the EU motto "United in Diversity."

A key component of winning the contest was to demonstrate a distinctly European identity. But rather than spelling out in explicit terms what objects, events, places or traditions might constitute European identity, the contest guidelines emphasize that candidates should promote dialogue, diversity, and a sort of EU patriotism, where finding one's current place within Europe, and locating one's past within Europe is paramount.

4. Negative definitions of Europeanness.

I've briefly described the ways in which the contest constructs a definition of what Europeanness is in a sort of positive sense—in terms of tolerance, diversity, and so forth. In my analysis of ECC documents though, I found that the contest also defines these cities' identities in a second, more negative sense. In this second sense, the contest delineates ways in which cities are less than ideal, that is, through the problems that they face. These "problems" serve to unify the cities by creating solidarity through common challenges. In terms of the contest's focus on problems, the EU is able to monitor the process of civic improvement that takes place throughout the contest. The EU can then learn what kinds of problems these cities face and how the cities are working to solve them. The focus on common problems further enables the contest to act as a unifying mechanism and creates a sense of solidarity.

WHY FOCUS ON PROBLEMS?

5. Since the European Union's (EU) inception, member states have invested considerable resources into cultural programs aimed at fostering a sense of shared European heritage. At the same time, these efforts have always been balanced alongside the need to leave space for diversity within and across European Union nations. Finding unifying factors while also allowing for diversity requires Eurocrats to walk a fine line since many EU states and regions rely on cultural difference as a marketable commodity and also a source of identity. Many of these countries utilize their cultural heritage as a sort of brand that sets them apart from others. Defining Europeaness in terms of shared problems permits these countries to maintain those cultural distinctions.

WHAT WERE THE COMMON PROBLEMS?

Cities who compete to become ECC must submit a dossier to the judges. The dossier contains questions that the city is expected to answer, for instance, "What, in your opinion, are the strong points of the city's application and the parameters of its success as European Capital of Culture, and what, on the other hand, are its weak points?" The cities' responses to this question shared several common themes.

These include:

- A. The difficulty of including all segments of society in cultural life
- B. Being a smaller, less-prominent city.
- C. Feeling disconnected from the rest of Europe.
- D. Experiencing regional discrimination
- E. Dealing with economic challenges

- a) In terms of the first problem, the difficulty of including all segments of society in cultural life, this aspect dealt with, things like low youth attendance at cultural events, problems with wheelchair accessibility within the city, and difficulty reaching out to immigrants. Each of the dossiers discusses ways in which they can be more inclusive, and several cite specific groups that the campaign will reach out to—disabled populations, the elderly, ethnic or linguistic minorities and young people.
- b) The next problem, that frequently came up was the problem of being a smaller, less prominent city, which can lead for instance, to difficulties drawing in tourists, or even just the difficulty of becoming more prominent in the eyes of the EU. Burgos, and particularly Segovia, wrote about the need to make smaller cities feel like more important players within the EU. Segovia notes that more than half of Europe’s population reside in towns and small cities, and that, “Europe, for its very survival, needs small cities to believe in Europe, to feel that they are an active part of Europe, to be imaginative and strong so that their unique features and peculiarities can be used to help construct Europe” (Segovia 2016 Office 2011: 56)
- c) A related problem was feeling disconnected from the rest of Europe. This includes disconnection in terms of transportation—a particular issue among this group of candidates. Now that the larger European cities like Paris, Rome, and Madrid have already been capitals of culture, the smaller, lesser-known cities are beginning to compete and many of them lack the transportation infrastructure that these previous capitals of culture had. In the case of one particular city, Córdoba, the authors of the dossier also described feeling inadequate in terms of promoting the city to outsiders, and also conveying their unique cultural patrimony to the rest of Europe. In the case of Palmas de

Gran Canaria, the dossier's authors describe the geographic isolation they experience as a part of a chain of islands off the coast of Africa, and over 1000 mile southwest of the nearest European port. [maybe expand on how else the cities are isolated from Europe?]

d) Several of the cities wrote that they experienced some kind of regional discrimination—San Sebastián wrote that the rural areas surrounding it were not seen as “modern” by the rest of Europe. Burgos expressed a similar sentiment in terms of the city as a whole—that it had once been on the cutting edge of industrial production, but an aging population, among other factors, had left the city heading for decline. Córdoba's dossier described North/South discrimination that they experienced both in general and as a candidate in the contest, and even included a map, similar to the one shown.

- Orange circles
- Blue Circles
- As you can see, only Córdoba and Palmas de Gran Canaria fall below the midpoint of the country.

In its bid, the authors write,

“Córdoba, and indeed Andalusia in general, is usually associated with traditional values: the south is seen as geographically and socially peripheral, offering little in the way of innovation; the north, by contrast, is seen as modern, wealthy and contemporary in outlook. One aim of this bid is to show Spain and Europe what the city is really like, and to dispel the distorted view that outsiders have of Andalusia: 126)”

In its dossier, Córdoba frequently attached itself to its region, Andalusia, the southern most region of Spain, and referred to itself as “Andalucia’s candidate” five times throughout its dossier, and the word “Andalucia, is mentioned 182 times.

e) Finally, all of the dossiers mentioned the economic problems that Spain is facing, although, interestingly one dossier, Burgos’ mentioned that it was doing much better than Spain as a whole, boasting that it has half the unemployment rate. Even cities like Burgos and San Sebastián, for whom Spain’s economic crisis has been less severe, noted economic issues like overdevelopment of the tourist sector which is pushing out older communities, or other planning issues, such as imbalances between the city and the rural periphery. Córdoba, whose unemployment is over 35% and Palmas de Gran Canaria, whose unemployment is also above the national average, both described these problems in depth within their dossiers, and both emphasized the positive impact that they believed winning ECC would have for them.

CONCLUSION

Through my study of this contest, one of the things I had hoped to better understand was how these supranational cultural initiatives, carried out at the local level, can become part of the process of Europeanization. I argue that by creating guidelines for the contest and applying them across all of the candidate cities, the EU plays an important role in the ways that the cities present themselves and the differences that they are permitted to exhibit, but that local decisions in how to interpret the rules are significant as well, and help to determine what Europeanness is and what it will become. There are more tangible consequences as well. While fifty-four cities

have been designated European Capital of Culture, there have been over a hundred cities that have competed and, should the contest continue, there will be as many as one hundred-twenty more cities competing for the title over the course of the next decade, all influenced by the demands of the contest. Being a candidate city involves more than simply creating a dossier – it often entails urban renewal projects, construction of new heritage sites and interpretation centers, and other large-scale changes. There are long-term financial consequences, with both winners and losers spending significant amounts of money as participants in the contest. Finally, as I've attempted to show in this paper, citizens' perceptions of these cities and others have the capacity to be altered by this dominating discourse of shared problems.