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# Introduction: European Crises

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## Abstract

This introduction addresses the increased levels of social, political and ideological polarization and the socio-political conflicts in contemporary Europe that are often subsumed under notions of ‘crisis’. We argue that the humanities and social sciences must react to these scenarios in at least two ways: by critically reflecting on the European project, and by analysing key elements of current ‘crisis’ discourses, such as post-factual narratives of ‘decline’, ‘survival’ and ‘emergency’, and populist fictions of homogeneous, ‘tribal’ cultural domains.

## Keywords

crisis, culture, Europe, humanities, narrative, politics, social sciences

There is a sense of ‘crisis’ or ‘crisis consciousness’ in Europe today. European societies face increased levels of social, political and ideological polarization and socio-political conflicts. These phenomena cannot be ignored by the humanities and social sciences and should become the focus of intensified scholarly inquiry. We are witnessing new politics and cultures of exclusion vis-à-vis minorities, rapidly increasing socio-economic divisions, and the erosion of democratic self-understandings and civil norms through social media – and beyond – which affect many spheres of political and cultural life in Europe. There is a partial crisis of legitimacy specifically affecting the EU and European democracies, their institutions and their political elites. And there is a real, all-too-present political and cultural attack on democratic constitutions, civil rights and liberties, and public freedoms. Yet the ‘European crisis’ is also a dramatized, narrated, constructed one. The current surge of authoritarian populism is both a factor and a symptom with regards to

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this crisis and ‘crisis consciousness’. Employing post-factual narratives of ‘crisis’, ‘decline’, ‘survival’ and ‘emergency’, populist actors actively deepen politico-cultural divides between ‘cosmopolitan Europe’ and its discontents. Presented with a great sense of urgency, these actors help discursively reinforce perceptions of an all-encompassing apocalyptic ‘crisis’ that has been disseminated more broadly into our restructured public spheres and cultural imaginaries. Such apocalyptic scenarios are closely linked to the mobilization of resentments directed against ‘the corrupt cosmopolitan elite’, ‘the globalists’, and ‘others’: women, minorities, Jews, refugees and immigrants, the most vulnerable groups of European society.

In light of this, we might say that this special issue responds to a critical conjuncture. Tribal cultural narratives, fostered and configured under the principles of what Van Dijk et al. (2018) have defined as ‘the platform society’, are antagonizing the all-encompassing post-war narratives that have informed policymaking and social engineering for almost 60 years. The cultural imaginaries that consolidated liberal democracies are unable to match the power of the new semantic configurations that orbit around three very specific domains: the nation as the last defender of the welfare state (set against the perceived threat posed by transnational or global networks); the individual as the irreducible operative unit of the social fabric (as opposed to solidarity as a foundational value); and the tribe as the homogeneous cultural domain and aspiration of any communitarian political construction (as opposed to pluralism and trans-culturalism). Is it possible to disrupt the psycho-emotional appeal of the identitarian epic and recover ground for the narration of new, inclusive politico-cultural projects?

Some possible answers are provided in the pages of this special issue. It brings together scholars from cultural studies, literature, film, media studies and communication, as well as political science, international relations and history. Similarly diverse is the range of European crises that are referred to: from the 2008 financial breakdown to the current debates on migration, and from Brexit and crises of democracy to conflicts of history and cultural memory. The contributions attest to the constructive disturbance of crisis as a moment of renewal, reinvention and redirection. Within this densely woven and diverse web of approaches and notions of ‘crisis’, numerous new topical interconnections come to the fore. Four core areas provide the basic structure of this volume: crises of unity and democracy; crises and metaphors; the ‘migrant crisis; and countering crises.

## **Crises of unity and democracy**

The first strand of contributions addresses past and current reconfigurations of the discourse of democracy in Europe and considers these in relation to questions of unity and the threat of disunity.

In ‘Rethinking European democracy after legitimacy its crisis: On Hannah Arendt and the European Union’, Lars Rensmann suggests that Arendt offers an important resource for rethinking post-national democracy in Europe today. Arendt reminds us, Rensmann argues, of the ‘chronic crisis’ of national sovereignty that engendered European democracy in the first place. Her work also provides a model for a critical, democratic-theoretical response to the current European legitimacy crisis that points beyond nationalism and technocratic EU governance.

Paul Michael Lützeler, in 'Overcoming the crisis of disunity', recapitulates how debates on a European Constitution have been led by literary authors since the Congress of Vienna and have continued up until the present day. A particular focus lies on literary writers' continuous interventions against a reductive 'pan-economism' of the European project.

In 'Democracy not lost? Functional democracy as a panacea for crisis in interwar Europe', Stefan Couperus offers a politological re-evaluation of a time in which newly established European democracies struggled to find a status quo. The historical emergence of ideals and forms of functional democracy as a counterbalance to parliamentary democracy invites us to rethink the curtailment of democratic backsliding and authoritarian reflexes in today's crises of democracy.

Stefan van der Poel addresses the 'memory crisis' evolving from divergent perceptions of the Shoah as a crucial conflict between Western and Central Europe. As his analyses of recent cultural debates indicate, while the West tends to underline the universal importance of the Holocaust and to institutionalize this memory in resolutions and declarations, Eastern Europe places far more focus on communism and on identity-based policies.

## **Crises and metaphors**

A second set of articles addresses the key roles of metaphors in crisis discourses and proposes new approaches for analysing them.

In 'Narrating crises and populism in southern Europe', Pablo Valdivia discusses new regimes of metaphors that have been evolving in crisis discourses since 2008. Further developing some crucial insights of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Turner) and critical metaphor theory (Musolff), Valdivia argues that the focus on these regimes is key to understanding the new cultural narratives of populism.

Alberto Godioli and Ana Pedrazzini, in turn, provide an extensive analysis of the use of metaphor and framing in political cartoons depicting Brexit and its fallout. Their quali-quantitative study, entitled 'Falling stars and sinking ships', demonstrates how a political crisis can trigger both the creation of new metaphors and the re-functionalization of old ones. In this framework, non-populist actors are faced with two options: either mirroring the populists' incendiary rhetoric or defusing the conflict by employing a more rational discursive strategy.

In his case study 'Hauntologizing the (un)foreseen present', David Amezcua draws on Derridean notions of an uncanny imaginary to showcase how the works of the prize-winning Spanish author Antonio Muñoz Molina provide new critical perspectives on the metaphors surrounding the 2008 financial crisis.

## **The migrant crisis**

A number of contributions deal with the current debates surrounding refugees and migration.

Florian Lippert focuses on two key reasons for the European 'migrant crisis' which are often not sufficiently addressed in media and political debates, since they are themselves rooted in journalistic and political practices. To analyse this lack of critical

self-reflection in politics and the media, Lippert outlines the preliminaries of a new interdisciplinary approach that is based on comparisons with the field of self-reflexive cultural production.

Nilgun Bayraktar, in turn, problematizes the dominant Eurocentric perspectives that reduce refugee and migrant crossings to illegal violations of European borders. In an analytical case study, she shows how contemporary essay films disrupt this framework, and the sense of urgency and tragedy it evokes, by situating refugee mobility within larger constellations of historical and contemporary mass displacement.

In 'Reading the EU's migration and security "crises" through (South-)Eastern Europe', Senka Neuman Stanivuković and Marek Neuman critically discuss the implicit assumptions surrounding 'European normality' in predominant crisis discourses by looking at the contrasts between EU enlargement policies and the realities of south-eastern Europe and the EU's Eastern neighbours.

## Countering crises

Finally, several contributions discuss cultural practices and strategies of reconciliation and (re-)unification in the light of past and current crises.

Tomás Albaladejo, reprising his well-known notion of ectopic literature, discusses how both authors writing abroad and texts written 'out of place' establish transcultural connections to overcome the fragmentation of crisis-ridden European culture.

Cathrin Bengesser revisits the debates on European television as a medium for narratives of solidarity within today's TV industry, policy and culture. Building upon Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the need for civic solidarity in the face of Europe's crises, Bengesser presents the trans-European crime drama *The Last Panthers* as an example of the interplay between economic, political and cultural Europeanization in contemporary TV production.

Berber Hagedoorn adds a media-critical approach by analysing how both media users and media scholars perceive crises within today's overloaded information landscape, and how this affects the formation of cultural memory in Western and Central Europe in this 'post-truth' era, riddled with information 'bubbles'.

Marcus Pyka discusses the evolution of the Eurovision Song Contest as a pan-European pop-cultural tradition that has served as a highly ambivalent arena for past and current conflicts: from its utopian ideal of a 'peaceful cultural competition of nations' in the Cold War era up until its recent reflections of debates on the Crimean occupation and LGBTQI rights.

Last but not least, in 'Digging for sanctuary: The garden as a contact sphere', Vera Alexander draws on community garden initiatives and the mediatization of gardening to suggest strategies of reconceiving a productive material relation to place and the environment in a bid to recalibrate the tension between newness and sustainability in a shared search for European narratives for the future.

Just like the EU itself, this special issue aims to be united in its diversity. In particular, all the contributions share a strong awareness that Europe's recent and ongoing crises make it more necessary than ever to critically reflect on the European project: aside from the self-evident etymological link, the present conjuncture has

revealed the impossibility of thinking about the ‘European dream’ before first coming to terms with the ‘European reality’ (Castells et al., 2018: 8). But how is it possible to critically rethink the idea of a shared Europe, while at the same time providing a valid alternative to populist dichotomies and simplifications? The main contention underlying the present volume is that the first step towards answering this question must lie in acknowledging how the past, present and future of Europe are shaped by a complex entanglement of political and cultural factors. In this respect, cross-disciplinary research – as illustrated by the studies collected here – can represent a valuable antidote to both the uncritical idealization and the irrational catastrophism which increasingly characterize responses to Europe.

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## Author biographies

**Pablo Valdivia** is Chair of European Culture and Literature at the University of Groningen and Executive Director of the Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies. His research deals primarily with the notions of ‘Literature and Crisis’ from an interdisciplinary, transnational perspective, and also focuses on the relations between exile and literature and literary interculturality. He is an expert on ‘cultural narratives’ and ‘conceptual metaphors’, and he carries out multi-disciplinary research with special emphasis on the fields of the social sciences, cultural industries and cognitive sciences.

**Lars Rensmann** is Professor of European Politics and Society at the University of Groningen, where he also serves as Chair of the Department of European Languages and Cultures and the Director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Cultures and Politics. He was previously Chair of the Department of Political Science and International Affairs at John Cabot University in Rome (2012–16) and Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (2006–11). His recent books include *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism* (2017) and *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations* (2012, edited with Samir Gandesha).

**Florian Lippert** is Associate Professor and Deputy Chair of European Culture and Literature at the University of Groningen, and Expert Evaluator for the European Commission. He is the author of *Selbstreferenz in Literatur und Wissenschaft (Self-Reference in Literature and Science)* (2013), and has published widely on modern and contemporary literature and film, the European migrant crisis, critical theory, literary and film theory, discourse theory and social systems theory. His latest publications include *Self-Reflection in Literature*, a collection co-edited with Marcel Schmid (forthcoming) and ‘Watching Europe watching its borders: cultural self-reflection and surveillance in films about migration’, *Perspectivas de la Comunicación* (2018).

**Alberto Godioli** is Assistant Professor in European Culture and Literature at the University of Groningen, and Programme Director of the Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies (OSL). His main research areas include humour and satire across media, modernism, law and literature, and peripheral spaces in contemporary literature and film. He is the author of *Laughter*

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Vera Alexander is Senior Lecturer in the Programme of European Literature and Culture at the University of Groningen, specializing in Anglophone literatures and cultures. Her publications and teaching combine and connect Anglophone postcolonial and transcultural studies, diasporic literature, ecocriticism, life writing and travel literature. She is in the process of completing a monograph (*Anglophone Garden Literature: Relations, Growth and Identity Formation*) which reads gardening books as a form of life writing that engages with place and sustainability as well as growth and creativity.