

**In defence of universalism** In a fragmented world, culture can help people to come together across divides. But only if this culture is diverse and tolerant. The author argues that Europe bears a particular responsibility in this respect. Europe is not a place, a government or an administration. It is a space for encounter.

*By François Matarasso*



**I**n *Les Misérables* Victor Hugo wrote: ‘La guerre civile? qu'est-ce à dire? Est-ce qu'il y a une guerre étrangère? Est-ce que toute guerre entre hommes n'est pas la guerre entre frères?’ (‘Civil war? What does that mean? Is there a foreign war? Is not every war between men war between brothers?’)

Hugo questions the habits of mind that seem to justify the designation of an ‘other’, saying that the way to go beyond ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is to reject the idea altogether. This is not a matter of piety or semantics. If we lose sight of the indivisibility of humankind, how can we defend concepts like the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights? The crucial importance of that text, however often we fail to meet its obligations, is that it makes no distinction between human beings.

The effort to establish universal rights was dearly bought. I am a child of those who suffered the massive exercise in self-harm that was the Second World War – the globalisation of violence before the term. My parents’ generation were the victims and perpetrators of unprecedented crimes. This was a civil war between people who had to convince themselves of their differences in order to kill one another. I regret bringing such sombre reflections into a discussion of culture and its potential for healing, but it is necessary because that conflict is the origin of the post-war settlement that is now falling apart. And the foundation of that settlement is the concept of universal human rights established in the UN Declaration of 1948 and the European Convention of 1950.

The present rise of nationalism is ugly and frightening. But the assault on the idea of universal human rights is worse. The signs are everywhere. Sometimes the attack is formal and legalistic, as in the UK government’s

proposal to replace the 1998 Human Rights Act with a British Bill of Rights – not universal, by definition. Elsewhere, it is criminal and chaotic, as in the extrajudicial killings taking place in the Philippines since the election of President Duterte. Murder is not new, but its celebration by a democratically elected politician of his own part in it feels unprecedented. The American historian, David Armitage, writes that ‘around the world, democratic politics now looks ever more like civil war by other means’. In such a context, is that really an over-statement?

### *Attacks on democracy*

I need not itemise the current attacks on democracy, the rule of law and, above all, the foundational concept of human rights. It is a global phenomenon that is all too familiar. Its causes are multiple but, insofar as it is enabled by democracy itself, the fear provoked by very rapid social and economic change is a decisive and a divisive factor. Many millions of Europeans now believe not just that their lives have got worse, but that their leaders consider their suffering an acceptable price to pay for prosperity. That is interpreted, not unreasonably, as making them less valuable than other people. Where then is the universalism of the human rights convention?

What is most striking about recent votes – whether you look at Brexit, the American and French Presidential elections or the Turkish constitutional referendum – is how close the results are and how much people’s choice

can be mapped on socio-economic conditions such as location, class, education and age. That sharp division makes thinking in terms of ‘us and them’ not just morally and legally wrong but dangerous too. To say it again, you cannot defend universal rights by dividing citizens into groups. I’m with Martin Luther King here. We must be judged for our acts, not our ethnicity, religion, culture or beliefs. Only our actions are a legitimate basis for distinction.

So how can we act well in such a divided world? And does culture have a role to play in the present crisis? Let me say first that I don’t believe it is the task of culture to solve such problems. Apart from any other considerations, doing so is completely beyond its capacity. But it does have a valuable role as a space of encounter, dialogue and – perhaps – greater understanding.

Let me share some examples of how artists – professional and non-professional – are searching for, and often finding, ways of reaching across those divisions today.

In Friesland, the agricultural heart of the northern Netherlands, Titia Bouwmeester worked with farmers to create an interactive theatre performance that celebrates their knowledge and labour in dairy farming as they coped with the abolition of EU milk quotas. Lab Molke took place on a farm and the process of researching, creating, rehearsing and performing together was an open dialogue about different lives between people from urban and rural communities.

In Porto, Hugo Cruz and Maria João work in theatre with people from different parts

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## Global challenges

of the city, including workers in the cork industry, the deaf community, old people, the gypsy community, refugees and children. After creating several productions with and for each group, they brought five of them together in *MAPA*, a spectacular community play about the city's past and future in which their different perspectives were presented at the Teatro Nacional in the city centre.

In Alexandria, Hatem Hassan Salama, brought intimate performances to neighbourhood cafes in working class parts of the city. Working with a storyteller, a photographer, a dancer and a musician, he created impromptu events in places whose traditional and masculine culture was unused to such modern art. But the result was to open such rich conversations about art, politics and morality that they went on for two or three hours after the show itself.

In Stoke-on-Trent, Anna Francis is using her visual art practice to talk with her neighbours in the run down area where she lives. Last summer, she created a temporary community centre in a derelict pub and about 600 people came to fifty different activities in the month: plans are now under way to make this a permanent facility. It will signal new possibilities in a very disadvantaged place that is not much heard.

### *Nurturing trust*

These projects, and hundreds of others in and beyond Europe, all see art as a place to begin conversations about where we are and

what we might do about it. But they are art activities, not political or even social interventions. They nurture trust, skills, knowledge, confidence and networks because they do not try to produce those things. Those things happen naturally when people are engaged in and by a shared artistic project that speaks to their lives.

Art is a space where we can still meet, especially when the other platforms for dialogue, such as politics, the media and the online world, have become so polarised that we can no longer hear – or tolerate – each other there. Art can be safe because it does not check our identity papers on entry. It does not separate us from them. Indeed, as these examples show, art welcomes difference, complexity, even conflict – within the protective licence of character, symbol, metaphor and non-reality.

### *Art has room for all*

Art allows us to enact our unspoken, even unconscious feelings and encounter other people, including the feared foreigner or despised neighbour. It encourages and enables reflection. Art has room for us all, and it can put up with all that we feel, think and want to say – not because it's all good or even acceptable, but because it's there and art knows that denying our feelings is more dangerous than doing something creative with them.

But this is just one vision of art. I know that. It is neither inevitable nor uncontested. I respect but I do not share the fears artists sometimes express about instrumentalisation. Art is not self-sufficient. I believe in art for people's sake because without people art has no meaning. It ceases to exist. But the trap of propaganda – especially well-meaning propaganda – is dangerous. It attracts those who

strip art of precisely the complex ambiguities I value and enslave it to their vision. The risk is real and best avoided by listening, really listening, to those whose voices we find most uncomfortable.

As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski wrote, 'toleration is best protected not so much by the law as by the preservation and strengthening of a tolerant society.'

If art is to reach across the divisions in our fragmenting world, it will do so only by being democratic, diverse and tolerant – a culture that lives up to Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.' That would be a truly universal culture.

Europe is not a place. It is not a government or an administration. It is a culture, whose greatest values have been forged in response to its greatest traumas. We needed it in 1945; we need it today.

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