Signifying Europe. By Johan Fornäs

Signifying Europe is the latest engaging English book of Johan Fornäs, Professor at the Department of Media and Communication Studies at the Södertörn University (Sweden), Director of the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden and Editor-in-Chief of Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research. His book’s main objective is to map out “the many meanings and identities linked to Europe through symbols developed for this purpose” (p.2). The study’s research questions are clearly demarcated in the book’s introduction and guide firmly the analyses of the well-defined topics investigated in the subsequent chapters. They are summed up in the main question: “How is Europe given identity through the meaning-making interpretive use of symbols in signifying practices?” (p.4). Although Fornäs sets as his starting point the European continent and selected mythical narratives linked to its identification, he is predominantly concerned with the European Union and so he examines the five official symbols, which “identify Europe as an idea, a geographical territory, a political-economic institution and a social community” (p.3), namely the European Day, as well as the Motto, the Flag, the Anthem and the Currency of the European Union (EU). Mainly focusing on signifying and mediating practices, the author applies a cultural studies and communication perspective. Supported by his research and publication background on modernity, identification, youth cultures, music and media, he also moves comfortably across disciplines using tools, among others, from history, politics, musicology, anthropology and sociology.

The composition is structured in 9 chapters, the first three serving to set the ground for the subsequent analysis of the five official EU symbols mentioned above. Chapter 1 is perhaps the most crucial as it explores basic myths connected to the European continent. It establishes a plethora of, sometimes conflicting, associations and narratives, which (as is shown in subsequent chapters) affect the meanings and interpretations attached to the EU symbols during the process of collective identification. Fornäs begins with an in-depth, gripping analysis of the ancient Greek myth of Europa, moving briefly over other myths “that have lately surfaced in EU-related discourses” (p.20) (Phoenix, Prometheus, Frankenstein, Faust and the Ring) to arrive to “Captain Euro”, a comic production at the end of the 1990s. Captain Euro was the EU’s artificial, “quasi-mythical narrative” (p.27), meant “to improve young citizens’ attitudes to issues of European identity and citizenship in the Union” (p.28), but it failed in its objective: in vain did it aspire to create symbols that would win public legitimacy, contrary to the usual process, where long-time collective experiences generate meaningful and widely accepted symbols. Concluding this chapter, Fornäs sums up the contrasts of the ancient Europa myth to the modern Captain Euro narrative, in order to categorise the inherent contradictions that characterise the European project. Accordingly, he argues that the main ambiguities within contemporary Europe are: (a) dislocation-mobility-migration vs. stability-sovereignty, (b) desire-pleasure vs. control-safety, (c) hybridity-diversity vs. unity, and (d) elevation vs. egality.

Theoretical definitions for the symbols studied in the book are offered in Chapter 2, which draws from established works on critical and psychoanalytical hermeneutics, semiotics, social
anthropology, structuralism and post-structuralism deconstruction, among others by P. Ricoeur, C.S. Pierce, E. Cassirer, G.H. Mead, H. Seagal, A. Lorenzer, S.B. Ortner. The polysemic, often clashing content of Europe’s contemporary symbols is stressed, underlining the fact that the establishment of identifications and representations of Europe and Europeanness is a contested process.

Following a brief historical preface on the emergence of the EU, Chapter 3 introduces the five official EU symbols. Their gradual creation is seen as the result of lengthy efforts (of doubtful result) to forge a shared European identity and is presented through a succinct historical overview of relevant official documents, emphasising on the difficulties, ambiguities and contradictions arising from these efforts.

Against this backdrop, Chapters 4 to 8 analyse in detail each one of the five EU symbols, namely the European Day, the Motto, the Flag, the Anthem and the Currency respectively, adopting a uniform inner structure. Initially, an overview of each symbol’s generic function is offered. Subsequently, the symbols’ specific purpose in the EU milieu is investigated in detail, enhanced by rich interpretations as well as by comparisons to other similar symbols of European or extra-European provenance. Each chapter concludes with the juxtaposition of the main interpretations of each analysed symbol to the four central, ambiguous elements characterising Europe that were explained in Chapter 1.

Finally, Chapter 9 summarises the main themes of contemporary European identification, while accepting the polysemic character of symbols, which enables the symbols’ “recontextualisation and articulation with endlessly new sets of values in new contexts” (p.256). Tying up the results of his analysis, Fornäs concludes by confirming the assessment of other analysts, namely that the struggle regarding the identification of Europe and Europeanness remains unresolved and that the European identity is far from fixed or uniform. On the contrary, it is strongly characterised by ambivalence, inner tensions and conflicts of interpretation, rendering the ongoing negotiations between unity and diversity, stability and mobility, control and pleasure, elevation and egality actual, as well as indispensable (p.265).

An index and a number of selected figures, which facilitate the reader’s understanding of the examined visual symbols, complement the book. A wealth of references supports the range of disciplines applied and of topics discussed, including (trans)national citizenship, (cultural) politics and integration, and, more specifically, works on the symbols of the European Union. Fornäs’s excellent use of citations throughout his book proves him well-acquainted with previous research on the field. More importantly, he builds on existing studies to offer additional interpretations, critique and points of view, as he does, for example, with the analysis of the symbolic meanings of the European Union’s flag. Indeed, Fornäs may have rehearsed some parts of his book in previous publications, a point mentioned in his notes (for example, for Chapter 8 on Currency, see Fornäs, 2007 and 2008. Regarding Captain Euro and David Černý’s sculpture “Entropa”, see Fornäs, 2009); however, he reworks these parts here, updating his assessments to reflect recent changes on the EU terrain, as well as adding new conclusions to address the book’s main research questions. Subsequently, the composition can boast internal coherence and contains a strong overarching argument that links chapters, supporting the book’s key aims.

Fornäs’s writing style and his work’s clear structure allow the gradual and methodical development of his arguments and ideas, guiding the reader through complex issues of identity formation and
symbolism in conflicting contexts. He approaches the topics he explores in a systematic and spherical way, presenting them concisely and with a critical mind, while giving voice to contradictory aspects. Offering a small example, the circle of stars on the blue EU flag may be read both as a closed, self-sufficient ring, prohibiting entrance and diversity and as an open, permeable circle, denoting by its uniformity the importance placed on equality and democracy (pp.126-127).

Having said that, the author’s detailed prose may facilitate the reader’s understanding, but it cannot avoid repetitions, an observation that becomes more prominent in the Symbols chapters. According to those chapters’ inner structure, the author first introduces the EU symbols and then begins to interpret them. Nevertheless, the boundaries between the two exercises are not always clear-cut and information seeps between them in a bidirectional way. In this sense, interpretations of the symbols cannot help but repeat elements from the introductory sections and vice-versa. Taking as example the EU anthem analysis (chapter 7), the objections regarding the adoption of Schiller’s lyrics for the anthem—despite them being originally an integral part of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* (the melody selected for the EU anthem)—are explained in the introduction (pp.156-157) and are repeated, albeit in more detail, in the interpretation piece (pp.178-179). Consequently, some segments of the book tend to be verbose; alternatively, they allow the gradual unfolding and better explanation of the author’s arguments.

In order to address his research questions Fornäs undertakes an ambitious, complex project: to investigate the antithetical aspects historically characterising Europe as they emerge out of selected myths and narratives; to present and critique the historical development and functions of the EU’s official symbols; to discern existing conflicts in the symbols’ interpretation; and, finally, to juxtapose the symbols to each other, to the myths’ main elements and to other symbols. Fornäs’s persuasive findings prove him up to this task. Still, some of his choices regarding the comparisons he makes are not always clear. For example, in the course of interpreting the EU symbols, he unfailingly compares each and every one of them to the main antithetical elements stemming from the narratives of Europa and Captain Euro, which are placed at the core of his general analysis. However, some symbols are also read through the prism of the Phoenix or Prometheus myths (for example the European anthem). Lacking justification, this choice, even though informative, seems arbitrary and the reader cannot but ponder whether the book could additionally profit from the consistent comparison of each symbol to every mythical or quasi-mythical narrative explored in Chapter 1. Indeed, the choice of narratives investigated in Chapter 1 does not seem to be sufficiently explained: other analysts have supported that contemporary Europe bears the cultural imprint also of other myths that continue to inspire the arts and affect “the individual and collective unconscious mind” (for example, see Blain, 2007: 9, reviewer’s translation). An interesting next research step, to corroborate, question or enhance Fornäs’s findings, might be to analyse the EU symbols also through the prism of other narratives.

Similarly, another future step to further enrich the analysis of the book’s main topic could be in-depth research regarding the resonance and rate of acceptance of the examined EU symbols by the civil society. Fornäs understands that symbols brand the EU “‘from above’, making it a home or critically problematizing it ‘from below’” (p.3) and glosses over this topic, by presenting some views of grassroots agents, as revealed in online fora, media, newspapers etc. These standpoints are often starkly differentiated from the official rhetoric (read, for example, people’s reception of the EU motto, pp.110-111, and, even more interestingly, the EU anthem’s resonance and the alternative grassroots views of the EU as they become reflected in pop music, in the “comparisons” section of Chapter 7). The author’s presentation of interpretations and uses of symbols by the civil society
is not extensive, but the reader has already been advised in the introduction that this is not the book’s purpose (p.4). Yet, Fornäs’s observations point out the field’s wide and fascinating research potential, which already concerns analysts attempting to shed light on the contradictions, conflicts and challenges that impinge on the EU milieu and which are linked to a number of essential issues, such as: identity formation; the meanings of diversity; the balance of power between elites and non-elites; the alternative arising definitions of the notion of the “elites”; the formation of active public spheres; the quest for democratic participation; and, the present and future state regarding the realisation of the EU’s declared values, which are partly mediated through the five official symbols (e.g., Bennett, 2001; Eder and Giesen, 2000; Guibernau, 2011; Herrmann, Risse-Kappen & Brewer, 2004; Mokre, 2007; Shore, 1993 and 2003; Staiger, 2009).

In conclusion, *Signifying Europe* can appeal to different sets of audiences, ranging from scholars and students to readers less familiar with the topics it explores, due to its rich and accessible content, which skilfully summarises and further develops existing research, while it ruminates about the signifying processes linked to the EU symbols: “The cumulation of interpretations has resulted in a rich symbolic web of signification with a number of main themes that point at key facets but also tensions in European identity. One such tension runs between the strong hopes that shared symbols would strengthen the European project and their striking lack of success so far” (p.251). Especially in the context of the current economic crisis storming the western world, which highlights the differences instead of the similarities of the EU member states and thus threatens the European project, questions about the “European identity” as well as the EU’s aspired self image and international positioning become ever more prominent, calling for fresh viewpoints and continuous deliberation. Fulfilling its intention “to start exploring this fascinating terrain and propose new perspectives on the ways in which Europe and Europeanness are currently reconstructed” (p.4), the book is suitably topical, as it allows a better understanding of meanings, power relations and aspirations that are explicitly or implicitly ascribed to the symbols employed to signify the European Union.

References


