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4



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

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Publication Date
2012


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Paper presented 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.

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