

# Cultural Disjuncture in the European Union: a Narrative Approach to Integration

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## ABSTRACT

The way in which cultures interact has fundamentally changed in the post-colonial, globalized world which has submerged us. Theories have, since the 1980's, suggested that the cultural landscape has become one of rhizomic interaction (Deleuze and Guattari 1987); lacking in cultural material epicenters which predicate hegemonic power struggles. No longer is the story of culture one of domination and submission, rather it has become a history of diasporic populations. The term *diaspora* originally was used by the ancient Greeks to characterize those who would colonize conquered lands in order to assimilate them into the empire. However, today, diasporic populations refer to those who are driven or induced from their homelands. The story of culture today, specifically in the EU, is one of Diaspora in both the traditional sense and the newly emerged one. It is the interaction of various cultural platforms at various stages of influence and development that is now the goal of study, not the mere identification of the systematic root of cultural hegemony.

In December/January of 2006/07, I traveled to Brussels, Paris, Avignon, Strasbourg and Budapest over a period of 3 weeks in order to study the style of cultural integration the EU is currently undergoing. First I went to the Capital of the EU to see what the bureaucracy's representation of integration consisted of. Then, I traveled through France to get a sense of what a Western European and co-founder of the EU was experiencing. Finally, I traveled to Budapest to get a sense of what a country undergoing integration into the EU was like.

What I found, however, could not be captured by the traditional methods of ethnographic research I had been prepared to employ. A simple cultural analysis, rhetorical analysis, and the like could not capture the intense sense of cultural disjuncture that I witnessed. As a result, the following is an attempt at analyzing the cultural disjuncture present in the EU while at the same time, allowing for the personal narratives of the EU citizens themselves to tell the story of the new cultural development.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Fear and Desire*

Cultural disjuncture<sup>1</sup> is arguably the major shaping force behind the rhizomic flux of societies today, or what Appadurai called *imagined worlds*.

*The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense), the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense), and the French idea of the imaginary (imaginaire) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media.<sup>i</sup>*

My project is an exploration into the imagined world of the emerging EU ideology and its affectivity in the creation of an *imagined* EU cultural sphere. Originally it was to be merely an exploration of the rhetorical and ideological disjuncture which occurs through a supra-national integration (specifically the way in which the European Union integrates new countries into its ideological identity) but as I was traveling through six different countries for three weeks in search of material for this project, it became apparent to me that not only is ideological integration and therefore disjuncture occurring all around me but it was occurring to me as well. This is when I was struck by the fundamental necessity for a reevaluation of my approach to this study. I realized how narrow of a

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural disjuncture is the reaction by the subject to the disparity between the culturally referential world and the imagined world of possibility.

consideration a traditional political analysis of the ideological situation would be, where in effect, the observer is just that, merely an observer, removed from society at large, a stance that is at odds with the very nature of my research. In order to avoid this, I decided that the best way to approach any kind of cultural analysis was to posit myself within it and to try to tell the story of those within the developing, imagined worlds; a sort of anthropological narrative of becoming, if you will. Therefore, this project has since become what, in a way, it was always meant to become (seeing as it is an inter-disciplinary research project; English and Political Science), a look at cultural disjuncture and integration from the people that live it.

The theoretical framework from which I will analyze the stories I present will be heavily dependent on Appadurai's concept of ideoscapes mediated through emerging EU mediascapes<sup>ii</sup>. The idea of scapes as working descriptions of the channels of integration allows us to evaluate trends from within while avoiding the sort of analytical distance that removes the politician, the critic, and the anthropologist from the actuality of the situation.

*These terms with the common suffix –scape also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs [my emphasis], inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families.<sup>iii</sup>*

The EU provides for distinctly new scenarios of becoming and possibility to develop by reducing the restrictions on international travel, by making training for licensed professions equitable throughout the continent, and by creating an economic system that does not rely on a domestic economy but on constant intra-national trade of services and goods. These three symptoms of EU integration (by no means a complete list) are examples of how the EU's attempt to develop a physical closeness with its citizens allows for those citizens to delve into a world of imagined identities and possibilities. For example, a tale told on Romanian TV of an West European success story now has a much different connotation in that it has undergone a shift from a purely imagined possibility to one which gains significance and weight due to the sheer closeness of its possibility in becoming. It is the unique interaction between the physical world, or *referential world* and the world of imagined possibility in the EU which must be understood so that EU integration can be streamlined and done in such a way that avoids the more violent reactions to cultural disjuncture that result from the two main emotions driving cultural disjuncture; fear and desire.<sup>iv</sup> Underneath the movement of ideas and people, the emotions of fear and desire drive rhizomic cultures into imagined worlds of possibilities.

Desire as an image of possibility is derived from the interaction between the subject and the imagined world of possibility. For example, for a portion of this grant, I stayed with a friend of mine in Hungary. He was raised in an upper-middle class home and his basic exposure to America (though Hungary is one of the most Americanized Eastern European countries) came via his obsession with Frank Sinatra songs. Months later, he received a scholarship to study a semester in Kentucky. Within the first month he called me up and complained of how America was NOT a Sinatra song. He was shocked, dismayed, destroyed, in a way, his image of the America he always wished existed crumbled before his eyes. My friend desired the America of Sinatra (the imagined possibility), not the actual referential world of middle-class Kentucky which he was now in. However, desire is not limited to this sort of reaction. Desire is also the confluence of imagined worlds of possibility that the diasporic populations create as a matter of establishing a community. Desire itself can never really be obtainable, it is necessarily unobtainable and as such is always a force in becoming; however, pieces of the image can be mediated into the referential world of experience

Fear can take many forms in the realm of cultural disjuncture and is often predicated upon the distance between the imagined world and the referential one. Fear is most often reactionary in its stance in that it generally takes the form of fundamentalist style reactions to cultural flux in an attempt at preserving the subject's own cultural world of imagined possibilities. This can be present in any form of ideology, from governmental to religious, to familial.

First, however, it will be appropriate to give you, the reader, some of my background in order to better understand both my perspective and the personal networks through which I traversed in order to complete this research project.

Generally, I'm an American (of German, French, and English decent, a paradoxically important aspect of the American identity is predicated upon an imagined cultural heritage) from the Midwest (Wisconsin) and although I've never tried to tie myself to this or any other national identity, it cannot be helped and so, as much as I hate saying it, much of my perspective has been shaped by these two culturally-geographic identifications. However, I have also been given the opportunity to travel the world since a young age and by the age of 22 I had already made it to 22 countries (in Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and Australia) and these diverse travels have

shaped my mind, in many cases, much more than being at home. In the most cliché sense, I became a victim of wanderlust.

However, the defining experience among all of this was to be my year of study at Justus-Liebig Universitaet, Giessen Germany during my junior year of undergraduate education. There, I was thrown into a cultural mélange like I had never before experienced in my wholly homogeneous hometown.

I lived in a student apartment (WG) with 7 other undergraduate and graduate students. Only one of them was German and the rest were from various nations; Spain, China, Iran, Hungary, India, and of course the US. Interestingly enough, during the second semester, the Americans achieved a sort of hegemony of language and culture made complicit by the pro-western German who loved to practice his English.

If one has ever gone on an Erasmus program, or studied abroad with other Erasmus students, you know that they become the tightest group of friends; theoretically, limiting your exposure to the culture which you had intended on getting to know. At first I was wary, I had come there to learn German and experience life in Germany, not to speak the Lingua Franca (English) with other students in my own position; lost, disjointed, alone, and searching. However, it was not to be and I was quickly able to relate to students who were in the exact same situation as I, an island in a foreign sea. We threw parties together, we talked together, we went out together. A group of twenty to thirty students from around the globe and there we were, developing our own imagined world of a cultural identity out of necessity for a cohesive peer group. Any diasporic community must necessarily go through this process of normalization into a peer group. Luckily, the university I attended had different avenues in place that facilitated such integration. Had no infrastructure of integration been present to serve as propinquitic training wheels for the diasporic community, fear and desire would have played a much larger role in this experience though its symptoms are still easily recognizable.

As I said, when I first started thinking about this project; I was interested in showing the way in which a distinct EU ideology was in the process of creation by following its rhetorical traces and consequent appearances of cultural disjuncture. The immediate question that confronted me was something analogous to what Althusser's famous essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* explored, mainly the distinctions between the subject and the body politic. With the "electronic propinquity"<sup>v</sup> that has developed through the giant leaps in technological social environments (everything from the imagined social networks of Web 2.0 to the imagined communities of local TV news) the distinction between the body politic and the subject itself becomes further detached to the extent that the body politic is taking on the appearance of a trans-national body of subjects who belong to various other body politics as well. But before I can explore this question any farther, it is necessary to first pin-point that which makes the European Union different from other forms of globalization.

The EU is perhaps the most advanced form of globalization the world has seen in the modern era. First, integrated through a mutual need on the part of Europe and the U.S.A. for the development of a stable consumer society predicated upon an integrated economic community then further through protectionist measures taken during the cold war (NATO) and finally, fully integrated as an economic and social union which holds a common economic and humanistic policy as the defining element. It is the first example in which separate nation states have unified *voluntarily* under one economic policy and most importantly, one understanding of *human rights*.

### *Imaginaire Identity*

A blank cube, 12 feet by 8 feet, all white. Two windows on the outside corner. Childish, sloppy, pastel drawings speaking of understanding, of totality in the universe, of apperception. Old photos which I brought with me, all taped up to the white concrete wall.

As the weeks and months rolled along, I picked up small provocative images, representations which piqued my interest. They would go up on the wall, small constellations of identity began to form and expand across the vast white plains; postcards from museums, copies of great paintings, pictures of sad sculptures (their depth stolen), pamphlets announcing film festivals in obscure, Alpine cities and amateur modern dance presentations from the Giessen Dance Troup (which consisted of three Germans, two Russians and a Belarusian), tourist maps from classical destinations and lastly my own touristic photos began to dot the flat surfaces. Spiders of color crawled out in webs of meaning, constructing the interior walls of my identity, representing the outer surface of my identity as well. It was here that my imagined worlds of identity and possibility began to merge. The images surrounding me influenced my own creative production (primarily painting) and it became apparent that it was within those images of possibility where my identity as a Diaspora was taking shape.

### *Physical Propinquity*

I made my way into the Talys train car, the newest high speed train service between the various centers of the EU; but still not a good solution to one of the EU's greatest problems, the physical integration and

interconnectedness of states. I slowly waded through the diverse occupants that made their way to their reserved seats; North African, South African, Middle Eastern, Turkish, French, American, European. I finally came upon my designated seat, across from a mother and her two young children, one barely 6 months old. Naturally, my first thought was, "Great! A sleepless ride full of baby cries awaits me." I put my small bag on the floor in front of my seat which faced the two and got out my book. I considered putting my ear buds in but I had already listened to all my MP3's on the previous train.

As I sat there, waiting for the train to depart, up to the window came a man with a thinning, poorly done handlebar mustache and 007 *Tomorrow Never Dies* fluffy winter jacket, a blue plastic pen was stuck in a pocket on the side of his sleeve. At first glance, one would have thought he was a homeless man accosting a woman he had seen earlier that day and had not yet let go of. He had reddish-blond, curly hair, a thin frame, and was average height.

*Tap tap*, he banged softly against the triple-paned window, no response from the woman. A second time, *TAP TAP*, his sense of urgency communicated in the weight and purpose with which he struck the glass. She made a motion to quiet him, pointing at the sleeping infant next to her. This began a violently acted out battle of perceived words, ensued by her saying/motioning for him to go away. The woman was rather attractive for being a middle age mother of two, well dressed and composed though she obviously had her hands full. You would have never thought these two to have been a couple, but apparently, they were. Her breasts were small but still perky from feeding the newborn child who lay in the carrier in the seat next to her. She had short, styled hair and long legs made to look even longer by the fashion at the time of wearing long leather boots over her jeans. Her eyes looked tenacious, violent and somewhat majestic. In a way, she had the eyes of a bird of prey; cautious but vicious.

He went away.

The older of her two daughters was probably around two years old (being an only child myself, I've never been good at judging the ages of children; probably because I was never really around children at any point in my own rearing) and had blonde, curly hair that the mother had quickly tied up into poofs of thin, translucent golden fountains of hair, one on top of her head and one towards the back of her head. Her face was pudgy still and dotted with small freckles that would at some later date be considered beauty marks. She called out for her "papa" again and again and the woman comforted her in such a way that (though I couldn't understand) seemed just shy of complete disregard. At one point, it seemed to be just a game that the two would play. The little girl would ask where "papa" was and the mother would ignore her by saying in a slight Belgian accent something like "He's at his apartment" or "He's in Paris, working" but that little girl would never get why he was not there and never would the mother say what the real reason was. Maybe someday, the girl would get a definitive answer, a *real* answer, but that wouldn't come until the mother knew the answer herself. Besides, who would want to tell their child that they hate the other half of the person that created them?

The younger, which was now awake but calm, had dark feathers of hair which grew out of the top of her head. Her eyes were green and too large for her face. They searched about and found my own momentarily, I smiled, and her face lit up. But again, not knowing how to interact with children, I left it at that and peered back out the window.

After a few minutes, the man came back, holding a caramel in his hand and tapped on the window again. This time, he had to knock three times before the woman looked up from her project of situating the children. Again, he mouthed a plea and she shook her head no, citing, I imagine, various inconveniences that the scene would produce. He wouldn't relent however, and she finally told him to get on the train; sharply pointing behind her at the door. I watched him walk over to it, wait for the conductor to look the other way; then saw his head arise from down the aisle.

There were a couple people still boarding the train, putting their bags away and just loitering in the aisle, but finally, when the path became clear, he made his way towards us. Coming up from behind the woman, he reached his hand over her shoulder, holding his present for his little girl out as if he owed a tax, he didn't even say "hello," not to the mother or the little girl, it was just that thing which he presented that communicated it all. She said, surprised, "Bonjour!" The older child said "Papa!" and he handed the girl the caramel and a choco-crescent wrapped in tinfoil. He then quickly and quietly turned around, and got off the train. Not a word was exchanged and I could feel the weight of his burden, his love for that girl.

The woman unwrapped the crescent, picked pieces off bit by bit and fed them to the child. The child eagerly ate the bits and pieces of her father's affection and soon realized that he was no longer there. As she called out again for "papa", her mother wiped viciously at her mouth with a wadded napkin. Her fingers seemed frozen around it, a side effect of being a mother perhaps. At the same time, the infant sneezed, and the mother's hand clutching the napkin swooped down, swiping at the miniature nose protruding from the round face of the child. There, clean.

Again, he appeared at the window as the little girl began to ask about her papa again when the mother was preoccupied. The mother pointed and said “Voile!” He made some faces, and the little girl laughed, returning them. He then tried to tell her to make sure the little girl ate her crescent before the caramel, the woman nodded and gave a brief but radiant smile, which threw all my conjecture about this broken little family into a tailspin. The narrative I constructed was that of a family, the man French, the woman Belgian, the children in between. They share a dual citizenship along with dual parents. They had come down for Christmas vacations and were now headed back to Brussels, into another referential world, complete in its images, desires, and fears. These two little girls are the children of the EU in that their home community will always be spread widely, replacing geographic propinquity (which, often, they experienced only through the inch-thick plated glass of a Talys train window) with a cultural propinquity that will forever influence both their conception of the subjective self and the body politic to which they belong.

## CONCLUSION

### *Imagined Communities and Violent Cultural Disjuncture*

What do you do when life leaves you no other option? What do you do when you were raised in a ghetto, brought up on the fringe of “the most advanced” society? What do you do when your name has no meaning, when you have no perceived worth or identity in life? What do you do when you have no opportunity? What do you do when the worlds of possibility you hear about, see, all around, never are what actually is?

You fight back.

I had just checked in and was in the process of getting unpacked and cleaned up when the door opened and a black man, about average height, walked in and said, “What’s up?” Casually, poetically, and above all, in the slide of the tongue that is American English.

Now, when you’re in a foreign country, utterances of English, especially in an American accent become rare and are usually celebrated by a few minutes of conversation, a little commiseration between the ex-patriots. So Tony (his slave name as he aptly informed me) and I began talking, turns out he lived in Milwaukee for a while but knew little about Wisconsin. Tony threw his bags on the open bed and began to take out his random electronic belongings; an iPod, a G4 Laptop, and an external hard drive. “You want to buy anything? I got stuck here in Brussels, too much bitches and blow. Spent all my money and need to get to Egypt.”

“Why you going to Egypt?”

“I’m doing the Hajj and am stopping in Egypt on the way and then continuing on to Saudi Arabia and Qatar to meet with investors for a project I’m doing. I’m making a documentary on Islam and the Black Panthers and I need to gather up some money to get it done. But that’s not the major work. After I get this film done, I’m going to train to be the first American suicide bomber.”

My jaw dropped and my interest piqued. Was he serious? At once, I became afraid and extremely fascinated. After all, I knew this guy, or at least I felt like I knew him, like I could trust him. Hell! He was from the same geographical region as I. He seemed bright, intelligent, and passionate (the kind of passion that was beautiful because of its rarity but also dangerous in its unbridled energy).

“Are you serious? What makes you want to do that?”

“Yeah, you know, I’ve had a crazy life, and this finally makes sense.”

He then began to tell his story, how he got married to a Japanese woman in Hawaii because she offered him half a million dollars. He told about the following six months in Japan and his eventual escape from his wife. From there, he went to Australia where he became friends with some Muslims from Somalia. They taught him about fundamental Islam and accepted him into their community. He then went into the various conspiracy theories about a western hegemony controlling the world, keeping the black man and the Muslim down under heaps of materialistic propaganda and centuries of secret plots to ensure WASP domination. All of which he assured me could be proven through the use of ancient Masonic symbols used by the EU and American governments respectively.

As he’s telling the story, he shows me projects that he had done. On the screen of his phone, he brought up a rap video he had made; strippers dancing on poles, a rapper throwing money at the camera. He turned on remixes he’d made. The juxtaposition of his work and what he was telling me at the same time was amazing. The words “bitches and blow” kept running through my mind, giving a fitting undercurrent to the narrative of fundamentalism that he was expounding as his driving cause.

After Australia, he went to India, learned about Hinduism and Buddhism, then finally ended up in Amsterdam, producing music and directing music videos.

“So how long have you been a Muslim?”

“Well, I guess I just converted six months ago, but when I was little, one of my mom’s husbands was Muslim and she converted us to Islam when they got married. Then they got divorced and we converted back to Christianity.”

“What got you interested in it?”

“I always kind of identified with it. I’m an artist you know, that’s always been a big part of who I am. I’ve been meant for great things. My Muslim name, Ba’la, means call to prayer and I am going to call everyone to prayer when I blow some shit up.” Ba’la began to role a joint of hash and tobacco.

“Do you follow sharia?”

“Sharia?”

“Yeah, you know, the Islamic code of Law.”

“*Sharia*, yeah, ok. No, I’m still working on that one.”

Tony and I talked for another hour so, bantering about the relativity of religion and the meaning of life (I’m serious, when you meet someone like this, how can you help but try to get inside their head and see what makes them tick). Often, when his doctrines became confused and I would call him on the inaccuracies, he just reverted back to the doctrine and I began to see what made fundamental doctrinisms so dangerous, their absolute necessity to be correct and inflexible. I then told him that I was going out to meet some friends and get some drinks. He told me of the dangers of alcohol and a story about one of his buddies who got the shit kicked out of him one night wasted. He started rolling another joint and I left and met a friend in a Cuban Salsa bar in downtown Brussels. I took out my notebook and jotted down the following:

*When confronted with different interpretations, reverts back to purposeful use of life predicated upon doctrine. Started with a crisis of identity, disjuncture from ethnoscape and ideoscape of home identity; ran, found nothing to contain his desire, his hatred for the difference between his imagined reality and the referential reality around him. Its Islam’s go on the merry-go-round of fear for Tony.*

I sat for awhile, enjoying some fine Belgian Ales before I found myself joined by a Cameroonian man named Earnest, a Belgian woman, Anne, and a Thai man named Boi (pronounced boy) (this name bugged me, and I found myself laughing every time I said it, in a way, I found it ridiculous in the same way that Tony found his own name ridiculous). Earnest was studying political theory and aspires to be the president of Cameroon someday soon. Guy was working to keep bird flu out of the EU and Anne worked as a translator for one of the many EU bureaucracies and was obsessed with traveling to Africa (she was just about to make her tenth trip that coming summer). Naturally, I shared with them my profound little experience with Tony and as soon as I mentioned the word fundamentalist, all their eyes shot towards me, then around them and back again, their mouths dropped and Earnest said one thing, “Be careful. Those people are crazy.” I could tell that they were trying to protect the young undergrad student with whom they sat but that wasn’t quite all of it. *They* were afraid. It was as if I had mentioned some taboo occurrence in the world similar to scatological humor; a complete aversion based on the very existence of such a thing. I couldn’t believe it, these people were all highly educated, seemingly overly integrated individuals and yet they refused, *absolutely refused* to even consider Tony’s place in the world or how he had come to occupy such a perspective. They were being just as exclusive as any fundamentalist. Thus the danger of cultural integration; at once, when the desire of an expanded cultural definition comes into play, fear is immediately present dictating the bonds of desire.

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<sup>i</sup> Appadurai, p. 31

<sup>ii</sup> Appadurai, p. 33

<sup>iii</sup> Appadurai, p. 33

<sup>iv</sup> Appadurai, p 29

<sup>v</sup> Appadurai, p 29