



The impossible canon. Can “European Cultural Studies” curricula exclude exclusion?

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Across European universities, a growing number of educational programmes deal with matters of “European culture”. The curricula and canons developed for this area of research come with substantial challenges. “Post-philological” programmes can find themselves under pressure to produce shrunk versions of former “single-culture” curricula. Where matters of culture are integrated into European Studies, in turn, programmes run the risk of being reduced to mere decor for Europe’s political, legal or economic histories, or of being bent into an ex-post teleology towards what is considered Europe today. Curricula that claim to cover “European culture”, then, risk being exclusionary in several ways. They can exclude histories and people, and they can ignore complexity and diversity.

Concerning these risks, academia reduplicates core issues of other societal and political discourses about “European culture” in the past decades. At the level of EU policies, a common “European culture” has been defined as a key element to promote “active citizenship, common values, inclusion and intercultural dialogue within Europe and across the globe.” On the other hand, pledges to defend “European culture” have also increasingly been used by populist radical right parties and nationalist and nativist movements to promote exclusionary and racist agendas. It is thus no wonder that cultural scholarship has diagnosed an “urgent need to present the specificity of European culture” (Williams et al. 2011, 1). On the one hand, this need indeed appears plausible, also given the fact that specific definitions are currently lacking in both



academia and politics. On the other hand, pertinent questions are (a) whether such a “specification” and support for a further affirmative use of the term are actually desirable, given its clear potential for misuse, discrimination, exclusion and new constructions of cultural hegemony, and (b) whether such a specification is actually possible, given the equally obvious breadth of both components – “European” and “culture” – and particularly the uncertainty of what their combination is supposed to entail.

My contribution will address these questions and argue that a non-exclusionary “European Cultural Studies” curriculum must be based on an “impossible canon” in the utopian sense. A “European culture” can neither be strictly reduced to Europe’s geographical boundaries nor can it be a mere sum of “national-cultural” parts. Hence, a successful academic and political conceptualization cannot reduplicate hegemonic and exclusivist patterns of past constructions of “national cultures”.