

22 November 2018

15th ELIA Biennial Conference Rotterdam, Opening

Thomas D. Meier, ELIA President

Dear colleagues,

Even though the Biennial is officially opening now, it already began yesterday. We started with our new and exciting initiative - the ELIA Platform for Internationalisation - nick-named PIE. We also inaugurated the ELIA afternoon, a new format which focusses on the outcomes of the ELIA working groups that have been active over the past four years. Finally, we presented insights into two other important topics: quality enhancement and EU funding.

Saying that, it is my pleasure to officially welcome you to the 2018 Biennial here in Rotterdam.

This being the last ELIA Biennial I will be opening as president, I actually planned to deliver a good-humoured and easy-going opening address to get us all in a positive and forward-looking mood for this great networking event. But then the theme of the conference got me and made me change my mind. So please forgive me for being a spoilsport and welcoming you here in a somewhat thoughtful and concerned mood. You still will have time to party on Friday night.

Resilience is the theme of our conference. In a world that is not only changing rapidly but also not necessarily in a direction we would have expected or desired, resilience has become a key factor.

In my welcome address at the ELIA Biennial in Florence two years ago, I said - under the impression of the Brexit referendum and the Trump election: "If we look at what is happening in our own countries, we are witnessing and confronted with deep frustrations, fears, anger, and a shocking hatred among certain layers of society, all of which are being fuelled by populists."

If we look at the world today, Brexit and Trump seem to have been no more than a warm-up. In some countries, much of what most of us believe in has been swept away in elections that have put men like Bolsonaro and Salvini in power and that have confirmed authoritarian rulers in their positions. Today, the identitarian politics of the right is seriously contesting the identity politics of the left. Entrenched in nationalism and racism, the figureheads of the right claim to give voice to those who feel threatened by social and economic decline, triggered by globalization, migration, digital transformation and their manifold effects on culture and the economy. A recent survey in the US yielded the shocking result that more than 70% of young Americans would be fine with an authoritarian government. After World War II, this percentage was at around 20%.

Today, democracy, human rights, and open societies seem seriously threatened. In Florence, I also said that as HAE institutions we cannot ignore the fact that no matter how inclusive we aspire to be, we hardly ever reach the layers of society prone to populisms of all sorts. They are neither a social nor a cultural milieu we are familiar with. And they are hardly present at our institutions. This gives a completely new meaning to the term inclusion we have come to embrace so dearly over the past years.

Identity politics has aimed to strengthen minorities of all kind, to fight discrimination, and to foster tolerance and respect. But it has often enough turned a blind eye not only to the economy, but also to the threat of fragmentation and to overarching values, which could provide social and cultural cohesion.

Culture has contributed significantly to the resilience of traumatized societies in countries like the United Kingdom, Germany - and also the Netherlands - during and after World War II. And it has been playing this role again in economically challenged and politically humiliated countries such as Greece. But in these cases, unlike today, shared experiences, convictions and beliefs have formed and still form a common ground for the arts to successfully contribute to the resilience of societies. The deep divides in our societies have done away with much of this common ground.

So where does that leave us? Whose resilience are we talking about in our fragmented societies? I have no clear answer to these pressing questions. Prospects seem rather bleak. I am convinced that we can no longer afford to just defend what we have been doing these past years. Earlier this year, Francis Fukuyama, the political scientist who brought us "The End of History" in 1992, published a book on precisely these issues. Its title is "Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment." In a recent interview, Fukuyama said: "Deconstruction is bullshit. It is espousing a kind of Nietzschean relativism that says there is no truth, there is no argument that's superior to any other argument. If you really are a cultural and moral relativist, there is no reason why you shouldn't affirm National Socialism or the racial superiority of Europeans, because nothing is more true than anything else. This is a bankrupt way of proceeding." Moreover, he proclaims the necessity for some sort of new common ground, a common cultural framework, shared values or — as he puts it — even a creed to overcome fragmentation. While he also maintains that the fights to recognize the rights of minority groups are more than justified, he adds: "The problem is the way we interpret injustice and how we try to solve it, which tends to fragment society."

Thus, for Fukuyama, it is not about playing off the greater good against minority rights. For many of us, this comes as mere polemics and as provocation. Not to mention that there are many reasons for disagreeing with this position. Some of us might say that there cannot be a greater good because defining any such good would automatically lead to including the many at the expense of the few.

And yet thoughts along the lines of those proposed by Fukuyama might be useful for initiating a debate which I, for one, find unavoidable. I am convinced, moreover, that HAE institutions should embrace the challenge and play a role in this debate. If we want the arts to once again foster resilience in society, our graduates need to know what the bets are, and also what is at stake.

We will be thanking the people behind the proceedings over the next few days during the closing ceremony. Please don't miss out on Saturday's General Assembly. We will be electing a new board and a new president, so as to maintain the resilience of our network.

So without any further delay — I now declare the ELIA Biennial 2018 open!