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SUMMARY

During his stay as writer-in-residence at the University of Utrecht in February 2009, Claudio Magris engaged in a debate on Europe with the Dutch Minister for European Affairs, Frans Timmermans. This article gives the registration of this lively exchange of opinions. Magris and Timmermans discuss a wide range of issues, from the role of literature, particularly narrative, in contemporary European politics, the challenges of globalisation and the heritage of Enlightenment culture to the difficult process of European integration. On the basis of their personal experiences, they particularly dwell on questions regarding their identity as Europeans and on the public role of intellectuals and politicians in the process of understanding and mediating cultural differences.

KEYWORDS

Claudio Magris, Frans Timmermans, Europe, Politics, Intellectuals

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Debate on Europe

Claudio Magris, Frans Timmermans

University of Utrecht, Senate Hall, February 11, 2009

Debaters:

- Claudio Magris (CM), writer-in-residence University of Utrecht
- Frans Timmermans (FT), Dutch minister for European Affairs

Moderator:

- Harald Hendrix (HH), chair of Italian Studies, University of Utrecht

HH: Ladies and gentleman, welcome to this evening's debate on Europe between our Minister for European Affairs, Frans Timmermans, and our distinguished writer-in-residence, Claudio Magris. It will be a talk both on their lives as protagonists in the European project, and on their work as an author, in the case of Claudio Magris, and as a politician, in the case of Frans Timmermans. They will also discuss how these two realities merge, because not only Claudio Magris has been and still is politically very active, and Frans Timmermans is one of our few politicians who really has a strong passion for culture and literature in particular. We prefer to call it a meeting, not just because the two of them indeed just now met for the first time, but because we want it to be an occasion for reflection rather than for polemics, a reflection on the state of affairs we are in at this moment. This in fact is a rather particular moment in time, not only because of its symbolical value, being almost twenty years after the falling down of the Berlin Wall. It is a moment where we face particular challenges, challenges from the political side of world affairs, where we see shifting balances of power and where we have to reassess the position of Europe and of European culture. We also notoriously see changes, drastic changes in the balance of economical affairs, with the current financial crisis, which compels us to reassess our present situation not only as to its economical but also as to its cultural dimensions. That is I think what will be some of the issues in our debate.

But let me first say just a few words on our protagonists of tonight. Frans Timmermans, our minister for European Affairs, interestingly has a background in literature: he is in fact a literary man. He has a degree in French literature and has pursued that interest persistently. Actually, over dinner he has been talking about Camus and various other writers. And he is obviously a great admirer of Claudio

Magris. Claudio Magris is a writer, but also a scholar and a politician, and who specifically – also at this present moment –, is one of the strongest voices in Italian political culture as to the defence of certain moral values, values he cherishes and that he is really adamant about presenting. And just to cite you the example of yesterday, when we had the dramatic events around the death of Eluana Englaro: his comment, published yesterday on the first page of the *Corriere della Sera*, was a plea for nuance, advocating not just to reassess the obvious political implications of the case but also to take time for reflection. So we are here with two major protagonists in the current political and intellectual debate, and since the first move for having this debate was Frans Timmermans expressing his interest and admiration for the work of Claudio Magris, I would now like to invite him to illustrate how he came to admire Claudio Magris and then to interrogate him on the curiosities he might have on his work.

FT: Thank you very much, professor Hendrix, for this very kind introduction. Professor Magris, I have been an admirer of yours for over twenty years now, when your book *Danube* reached my desk, when I was just starting as a young official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It literally blew me away, because it was a narrative about the part of Europe where during my lifetime – I was born in 1961 – there was a clear division. I was brought up in – to quote Havel – a situation where East and West for me were political and moral, not geographical terms. And what you did with your book was to reinvent Europe, East and West, in geographical and cultural terms. What that river did to me, the personification of this river running as a person through different cultural spheres, is to really drive home this point that we are in fact one continent, regardless of the Iron Curtain that was still there at the time. And those of you who take the time to read *Danube* today would discover that perhaps today the book is even more true than it was when it was published in 1986, because it tells the story of us Europeans. My first point thus would be, my first question – I will just formulate a number of questions and it is up to you if you want to answer them or not – my first question would be: why, at a time when in literature the narrative was not something people chose – people chose structure rather than the narrative – why did you choose the narrative, the storytelling as the starting point of what you wanted to tell? Because what you did is simply tell the story of people and the river and the way they communicate. That would be my first question.

My second question is perhaps more a political reflection. Why in European history – and *Danube* is perhaps the best region, the best example, this fascinating area of the 'K. und k' double monarchy, this fascinating area of European intercultural experiments through the ages –, why on this continent do we change from this position where sometimes we are thrilled and fascinated by our cultural differences and we are open to seeing ourselves in the eyes of the other; and why at some stages in our history does that almost overnight change into a position where

the other, because he is different, is a direct threat to whom we are? Why is this always part of our history and how should the modern man cope with this to find an answer to avoid falling into this trap of seeing what is different as a direct threat to one's own identity? That would be my second question, and I hope you can give us an answer to that one, because that would solve many of our problems today.

And finally, in this perhaps first barrage of questions, finally: a narrative has a beginning and an end. Our lives have a beginning and an end. Many of us are fascinated by the end goal we want to reach. But living well is not, I would assume, formulating the exact end goal that you want to reach. Living well is probably making the right choices here and now, and then getting the end goal as a sort of an extra bonus when you reach it. This is how I read your novels. This is also how I read this fascinating novel, which is also a troubling novel, called *Alla cieca*, I think it is *Blindelings* in Dutch, which was published a number of years ago, that is perhaps a reflection on this world that has become too cynical and too little ironical for our own good. Could I ask you to reflect on these three questions, please?

CM: Thank you very much. First of all, I would like to express my really great gratitude for this opportunity of being here. I have spent some for me wonderful, very important days here in Utrecht, with students, with colleagues, and now this meeting here with Frans Timmermans is really something which gives a great meaning to this experience. And I am also in great difficulties, because one hour ago I asked Frans Timmermans, who is a minister, how he can find the time to read so much more books than I am reading, and I am not a minister. No, it's not a joke, it is really very important, because what we are seeing now, in Europe generally but particularly also in my country, is the loss of this concrete, real feeling of the great fundamental, necessary importance of moral values, of what literature can give us, to everybody, not only to writers, to critics, not only to scholars, but – I would like to say – first of all to the politicians: to understand how the great problems – ideological, economical, etcetera – are lived in the real, everyday life of persons, which is something that literature can show. I was really very moved by the importance given by great politicians to literature, something which unfortunately is becoming continuously more rare in our world.

I will try to answer the question concerning your so generous admiration that I fear I will go destroying because of my terrible English. Which by the way makes me think of a composition in English I wrote not so many years ago at the Regent School, some twenty years ago now. Because I was already more than fifty years old when I frequented the Regent School in London, to improve my English, and I had to write a composition on the likes and dislikes in the job of the milkman. I received a lot of red marks written down by Carol, our teacher, and then I published this composition in *Corriere della Sera*, with the red marks. So really thank you, thank you very much.

One of the things you mentioned is the geographical and historical meaning of Europe, and that is true. I remember I was surprised when at school I discovered that Prague is West of Vienna, because Vienna belonged to the Western world and Prague to the Eastern world: I was really surprised. And that is really interesting. I think that such discoveries, experiences, perhaps put me years later to try to write such a book like *Danube*. And certainly I think that this part of Europe was called at that time 'the other Europe', '*l'altra Europa*', and I think that a lot of things that I have tried to write, I have tried to write them also because I wanted to destroy, to abolish this adjective 'other', because it is 'Europe' and not 'other Europe' or 'Europe of a second class'.

Your first question: why story, why narrative? First of all, when I started to write *Danube* I had no precise idea of what I wanted to write. That happens to me with every book. Also my first book, about the myth of Mitteleurope, which was also the subject of my thesis, I didn't know exactly what it was about when I tried to explain to my professor the intent, and he couldn't understand the subject, because not even myself I could understand it. Only after having written half a book I know what I am writing; it has nothing to do with the results, of course. And I remember the day, the moment, when I had the first idea of writing this book.

Myself and Marisa – my wife – and some friends, we wanted to make a journey to Slovakia, that is to say the country, the name was Czechoslovakia at that time, but we wanted to go to Slovakia. And some kilometers, still in Austria but very close to the frontier – it was a wonderful September afternoon – we saw the Danube flowing, shining, it was so difficult to distinguish the shining waves of the Danube from the shining grass leaves in the so called Donau-Auen, the meadows of Danube, it was very difficult to say what and where the Danube was. It was a moment of harmony, of friendship, of happiness, when one feels oneself in harmony with the flow of life, rare moments in life. And suddenly we saw a sign, with an arrow, 'Museum of Danube', and this museum was so strange, only because the arrow says "are we too perhaps part of the collection in the museum"?, like a couple of lovers who discover being part without knowing it of an exposition about love. And then Marisa – who had almost always the first idea of my writing, I was very good in appropriating her ideas –, she said: "and what about walking until the Black Sea?" And at this very moment I got the idea of walking.

It have been four years of traveling, going back, of writing, counseling, changing what I had written, without knowing in the beginning what I had wanted or what I was going to write. I didn't know if I was going to write literally a book, a novel, because I think *Danube* is a hidden novel, in which the narrating I, although he has a lot of maniacal weaknesses in common with me, still is a character, and at the end he dies while I am still alive. And I think that to understand, to feel, to touch really the great history, it is necessary to see how the great history – the Iron Curtain, the Western world, communism, and so on – are lived in the life of people, in their

love stories, in their jobs, in their family relationships, in their childhood. And the only thing is to walk, to meet people, to listen to their stories, to understand what means for example communism in a certain moment linked with Catholicism, job or not.

I think this is the reason why the great founders of religions feel compelled to tell stories, parables; when Jesus explains what the love for the other is, he must tell the story of the good man from Samaria, and so on. So one can understand what means this philosophical or religious truth. I feel the necessity of touching things, and a small story is for me the only possibility of finding really the sense, the meaning of life. And this is the reason why I have in this book on the one hand a great love for precision – every detail corresponds to reality: if I talk about a carpet in Bulgaria, of its color, that means that this is really the color of the carpet –, but at the end, like in a mosaic, with these pieces of reality where every piece corresponds to reality, I make of course an image which is invented, which is fiction. And also this precision has sprung from a great respect and love for everybody.

For example, I really have made a small research to find out how many crowns a miller, a certain mister Wammes in Ulm, had received when he sold his trousers, because he wanted to give the money for the work on the church, the great cathedral in Ulm. Of course, it is absolutely not important to know whether he received eight or ten crowns, but it means that every other unknown mister Wammes has the same right on philology – a word which contains love, 'philo' – like the great moments, monuments and characters in history. I am professor of German literature, and when I write a biography of Goethe, I have to be precise in telling whether Goethe has kissed Frederike Braun for the first time on Monday the 17th, which is also not important, but I have to be precise.

And respect is something which is also linked with the story, because only narration, the narrative, can pay respect. The great history can't: if one writes the history of Italy or of the Netherlands it is impossible to pay attention to the trousers of mister Wammes. And I had also the great luck – literally speaking – of traveling these years in a moment which was, except for Romania, relatively quiet, normal, without burning great events. Because great events oblige oneself to concentrate only on great events. In that way I had the opportunity to descend like an archaeologist in the different layers of the history of Mitteleurope, to pay attention to a lot of not so important things, but whose whole is like a mirror, like the face, the figure of this world.

The other question you put, on the differences. Yes, we all love differences, diversities, especially diversities in the past, when they are not diversities anymore, when they don't give us anymore problems; like the historians who, as Thomas Mann said, love history because history is the past, because history is not so burning difficult like today's reality. I think we must of course also pay attention to the diversities that give us difficulties, because the diversity means meeting the other,

other people, other cultures, other religions. There is difficulty in every meeting: in every love story there are also problems, sometimes risks, and we must accept this risk, we can't undervalue the difficulties, and only if we are really able to accept this challenge we can become richer by the meeting of diversities. I think that diversity is a great enrichment, and for the first time in world history we now can have the possibility of building a universal civilization, which is not only European, but really universal, a civilization only as a result of the meeting of different cultures.

On the other hand I see also a great difficulty. We must try to reconcile a maximum of openness, of ethical relativism, of dialogue with other cultures and their differences, with a minimum, with a *quantum* of inalienable values, not more negotiable values, which are the basis of every civilization. There is a very interesting essay written by Todorov who says that now in face of globalization, in face of this enrichment of values, we must have a need for open comparison with other value systems, other ethical, religious, juridical value systems, but also establish borders of values no longer open for discussion, for example equal rights regardless of sexual identity. There are borders, which are not anymore negotiable. One of the great problems in our time concerning differences is how, when, where can, shall, must we build these frontiers. Because it is right: I must be ready to engage with other values, but there are some points, which I refuse to discuss. When somebody asks me: is it allowed to kill a child? I am not ready to discuss this. I have already decided, and here is the frontier. But here the example, a stupid example, is very easy.

This however would be the great political, moral and cultural problem for Europe: where shall we build this frontier, how can we reconcile the openness, the discussion with other value systems, and have absolute fidelity to some, not many, no longer negotiable values. It is not easy to answer this question, because the extreme examples are easy, but we can have situations in which it is very difficult to know whether the dialogue must remain open or must be closed. That is a great challenge. And I think that politics first of all, but also moral philosophy and also literature have, can and must have a great contribution in addressing this problem.

FT: I know – because you told me when we had dinner –, that one of your favorite narratives is the *Odyssey*, and if you look at that narrative – which is about someone learning to be himself by looking, by being confronted by differences –, if you look at 4000 years of European history, the defining of what Europe is or what the individual countries within Europe are was always done vis-à-vis the other, but it could only be done if you had a measure of interest in the other. It's like, you know, if you ask a fish to define water, the fish will not be able to do so unless you take the fish out of the water. Ulysses could only define his own strength, his moral fight, by being drawn out of his world, and my fear is that in today's Europe we lack the curiosity of what is different, apart from the dialogue that is necessary. Do you think

that we still have enough curiosity and openness to what is different so that we can learn about ourselves

CM: Curiosity is of course the base, we need curiosity. Concerning the average European mentality I think we have a lot of contrast: on the one hand a great and deep curiosity, on the other a curiosity only for strange things which has nothing to do with the discovery of the other, even sometimes recoiling in fear. Because I think the great danger in our time is not the danger of the leveling globalization, which destroys diversities, but this closed minded recoiling in fear, in refusing to celebrate one's own diversity and in refusing all other diversities. Because diversity is a value only if it is not a savage diversity, only if it is a diverse manifestation of something universally human. And it is a capacity of recognizing the universal humanity in very different forms, but still the universal humanity. Like Herder, the friend and enemy of Goethe, said: humanity is a great tree, and the tree has leaves, roots, branches and so on, but is still a tree.

We must have this feeling of a certain universal human essence. And now this attempt of closing is I think very dangerous, much more dangerous than the leveling globalization. I don't like absolutely the leveling, of course, I like diversity, but only if one recognizes, loves the diversities as expressions of the human. Like every child who is playing in his small court, and of course he loves his own small court, but it is this small court where he meets the adventure, the wind, the weather, the life, and thus curiosity. We need this curiosity. And now I see – I unfortunately agree with you because it is a pessimistic observation; the situation is not the same in different countries, in Europe, it is not the same in Italy as in Holland, but generally speaking – now I see this tendency to refuse the other. And that would be the end, the death, as we know from Albert Camus.

Camus is a great example of someone accepting diversity and refusing the totalitarian danger present in every diversity. At the time of the war in Algeria, he defended the people of Algeria against the French army, but he said as well to Algeria: I am also Algerian; your diversity is also my diversity. Like my friend Nadine Gordimer, in her wonderful fighting against apartheid also said: but this is my country, and she is right. That is diversity and unity. And her fighting against apartheid was also her fighting against the differences between black and white skins. She belongs to South Africa like Mandela does. She had the same right and duty to fight not only for the other but also for herself. Because the dignity of her country – which is to say abolishment of apartheid – is also a value for her, since it is her country, which became more human. That I feel is very important.

Now your third question: the end goal. It is the subject, perhaps the central subject of my writing. I have also written a novel, a small novel also translated into Dutch by Anton Haakman, *A different sea*, in which I tell the story of a friend, a great philosopher, Michelstaedter, who puts the accent on the necessity and – always, but

especially in contemporary time – on the difficulty of living in the present: the only life we really have. Using the Greek, Neoplatonic word, he calls this capacity 'persuasion / *persuasione*', the possession of the present life. Because very often we desire time to pass as quickly as possible, because we wait for the next week, we wait for the answer of a physician to know whether we are ill or not, we wait for this or that in our relation, and so we live not for living but for having lived, for being a little closer to death, for dying. I think this universal problem of human life became much bigger in the contemporary world in which the speed of societal activity is like pulling a carpet from under our feet, and we have sometimes the feeling that we never live. In their time Camus and Michelstaedter saw this as a great problem, because we need really to live in the present. This has moral aspects, and aspects of the individual life.

There is a wonderful page of Joseph Roth in his novel about Napoleon, *The hundred days*, in which he repeats the gossip about the great speed of Napoleon in loving. This speed in loving becomes for him a symbol of modern man: completely absorbed by the necessity of having already married, so that even the activity that should give the most present present – if I can put it like that – is already behind him. He doesn't want to make love but already to have made it, and so he never loves, he never enjoys, he never knows the pleasure of love. Roth has no particular interest in Napoleon, and perhaps it is not interesting whether this is true or not concerning Napoleon, but it becomes a symbol for this human condition. And this I find is a great problem, because sometimes we have almost something like a desire for having already lived, an anxiety which is like a poison.

Children, happy children don't know that. Michelstaedter, who was from a very religious family, once told me this wonderful story. While as a child of some ten years he was playing in the garden, a very religious uncle asked him: "what would you do when you knew that you will die in ten minutes?" He waited the answer of this very religious child that he used to praise: "I would play, I would continue to play". And that is very rare. I think that childhood is something, which our organization of the world is losing more and more.

I spoke only about the individual meaning, but what you mentioned is the political point of view in *Blindlings*. Revolution is a necessity for changing the world, for thinking a future, for reaching a goal. In this sacrificing of everything there is greatness. So this terrible story of those people that I have recounted in *Alla cieca*, of people who found themselves always in the wrong moments on the wrong parts of history but kept this capacity of sacrificing themselves for a universal goal, that is a story of human greatness. But there is always guilt, and the great danger of sacrificing themselves and others (also in this case: the sacrifice of a love story), and the exploitation of the present in the name of the future, something that can be necessary but is always dangerous. It is not a book against revolution, but a book about the terrible contradictions of the revolution.

FT: This is precisely what I wanted you to talk about, because if you read *Alla cieca / Blindelings*, it is a book about the consequences, good and bad, of Enlightenment. It is on the consequences of extreme human arrogance; because the extreme consequence of human arrogance after Enlightenment is to think that you can create the world in your image, and that that image becomes more important than your fellow man. That is the essence of any totalitarian ideology, whether communist or nazi or whatever, and you see people falling pray to that sort of thinking. The main character in that book, he thinks he is an actor in the service of this revolution or this ideology, where in fact he is being played by history and by circumstances and by this ideology.

So, what I would like to ask you is to reflect upon this eternal question, in Europe, since Enlightenment, of this I would say Icarus complex of modern man who thinks that he can shape and make the world in his image, regardless of what the other thinks of this, and even is prepared to kill the other and remove him from society if the other is in his way of his image, on the one hand. On the other hand you have a very individualistic society, individuals becoming free to the extreme in modern society, which in contrast to that other situation would essentially be something that is good. But a person who is totally free of anything is not free at all. Because as you said before during dinner, you don't want to be a soldier without a regiment, you need a sense of belonging. So where do we find the right measure between the temptations of this extreme Enlightened thinking on the one hand, and on the other hand the fallacy of thinking that you can live on your own in a world and be totally free, where at the end of the day if you are free of everything you are a prisoner of your own freedom. Where do you find the right measure?

CM: In his defense of liberty and democracy Norberto Bobbio, one the greatest Italian intellectuals who just a few years ago died in his nineties, defined himself as a man of Enlightenment but a pessimistic and ironical one. I think the Enlightenment is a great heritage. We must be men of the Enlightenment, because – and I underline that – in Italy but not only in Italy there is in my opinion a great retrogressive fighting against Enlightenment, against emancipation and so on. But knowing it is based on reason, and this is very important. It was a great representative of Enlightenment, I think it was Condorcet, who defined reason as a small, very small flame in a great dark night; but without this small flame, which is not the goddess of reason, we could not see even the dark of the night. And I think it is a terrible danger in the Enlightenment, you are quite right and I quite agree with you, to have this faith of imposing a digression to history.

I think that we must combine the feeling of utopia, that is to say the feeling that the world must not only be administrated – like ideology, especially American ideology and culture, told us in these recent years –, but the world must be changed,

made better, saved if we want to use a religious language. But without having the recipe for the solution. Every utopia which means either to be already realized – it's one of the terrible totalitarian faults, Soviet Union is one great example – or to have or to impose a recipe is false. We need also the enchantment, that is to say the experience of the correction of the failure, but this experience of failure in some direction is not the opposite of this feeling of Enlightenment, of making the world better. It is the consciousness that we can only try and correct, renounce on the pretension of having the recipe, but knowing that also this feeling of making the world better is real.

The greatest example is Don Quixote. Don Quixote is wrong when he thinks that the barber's basin is a magic helmet, because it is a barber's basin, as Sancho Panza knows. But without this urge of having something that is not strictly real and present, the world would not be complete. Don Quixote is wrong but also right. We must know, like Moses, that we never are in the Promised Land, we will never reach the Promised Land, but Moses did not renounce on going in this direction. And I think this is a combination of this strong faith in the Enlightenment with the ironical, pessimistic conscience that we are very often wrong. We must correct our ways, but never feel defeated, never think that we are completely defeated.

That is the reason why I absolutely don't like this attitude of – to give a great example – Friedrich Schlegel, a genius who brilliantly invented romanticism, who at the time of the French Revolution was like almost all writers and poets fond of the Revolution, including the Terror from which most writers and poets would take distance, but he didn't, no, Terror was not enough to him, and he waited for the Revolution. When he saw Revolution ultimately did not arrive, he immediately became a great reactionary, decided that the Revolution doesn't concern politics but love, sex, bed, literature. He invented romanticism and became an agent of Metternich, much more reactionary than Metternich himself or other intellectuals. Because of course Metternich tried to act like a responsible politician. Likewise it was Milovan Djilas, the great collaborator of Tito who first denounced the failure of the Tito society, who wrote when he was still the greatest intellectual at the service of Tito that without Stalin not even the sun could rise, a stupid sentence a politician like Tito would never had said. So very often great intellectuals can be worse than politicians. So I think this feeling of correction is essential, but without giving up hope on a better world.

FT: When you talk about this myopia, this impossibility to seeing things the way they are when you are stuck in an ideology, you also talk about people going from one extreme to the other. If you look at today's American neo-cons, they all started of as Marxists or Trotskyists, all of them. There is a link there, because they think they can make the world as they think it should be instead of as it can be with the help of others. A fine example of such blindness to reality and to the other was for instance

when Sartre went to the Soviet Union, and he came back and still thought this was the right way and also culturally a revolution – he always found reasons to justify mass murder –. But why is it that someone like Gide when he went to the Soviet Union thinking that he was going to paradise saw within a week that he was fooled, that it was nonsense, because he had an openness to humanity, he had an openness to see what was actually happening? And one of our problems, I believe, in politics, is that sometimes ideology blinds us from reality. And sometimes reality prevents us from believing in our ideology. And what we need to do as politicians is to avoid one and the other.

Can I take you to this interesting and very special European country called the United States of America? Because this is a time, as you know, where fear is a driving force in politics, where cynicism has taken over large parts of politics in Europe, and where irony is totally lost. And I think a society without irony is a very poor society indeed. Now, in the United States you see that someone has won the elections, who has consistently fought against cynicism, who has not been cynical in his own politics in no way, and who won a landslide election. I have just come back from the United States two weeks ago: in the midst of an economic crisis people are truly optimistic about their future. So it is possible – the phrase has gone dead because it has been overused – but apparently change is possible, also in the mentality of people. You think we can achieve this in Europe as well, if you look at your society, the Italian society which is in deep, deep trouble, if I look at my own society which is also struggling: do you think we can reach the same new levels of optimism and introduce a bit of irony to what we are doing, abandon cynicism?

CM: I don't know. In some European countries, certainly in Italy but also in others, there is a spiritual tiredness that could put me to answer no to your question. But of course we must, as Gramsci said, be pessimistic in thought and optimistic in the making, in the action. Pessimism is necessary to avoid easy enthusiasm, which risks falling back into cynicism. To overcome the cynicism one must know how powerful, how strong, how motivated cynicism sometimes is. Because only if we don't undervalue the negative aspects, the cynicism, we can hope of overcoming it, otherwise I think it is easy we will be losers.

FT: I would be fascinated to hear your answer to a question I am put all the time in this country at this stage. People would always ask me: tell me, are you Dutch or European? And you better choose, because you need to give us a straight answer. I would like you to answer that question, and I say this because this is a time where in politics you only can speak in exclamation marks, and I am fond of question marks. And if I show that I am fond of question marks, that I can doubt my positions, that I can change my mind, in the present day I'm a bad and a weak politician. Whereas I think there is no more strength than the strength of being able to reconsider the

oppositions and to have this question. And in this age of dichotomy – black or white, there is no gray – this question is often asked: are you European or are you Italian, what would be your answer?

CM: There are two aspects in your question. First of all: for me it is the same as if somebody asks me “are you father or son?” Both, I am son and I am father, and I have not to choose between these identities. In this case, I am certainly Italian, but I am also Triestine, and Italian. I would answer: I am Dutch and European, this is absolutely not a contradiction; it is the same thing. I am Triestine, I speak the dialect in Trieste – that is my habit – but I have nothing against the Italian language. I consider myself as Italian, as a citizen of Europe and belonging to the Triestine reality, which I know better than the reality of Sicily or of some other place. I know much better the reality of Italy than the reality of the Netherlands, but it is the same. We must not, we cannot accept this alternative. Because to be Dutch absolutely doesn’t mean not to be European, and also vice versa. Dante once has written that for so long had he drunk the water of the Arno river that he learned to love passionately Florence, but our home country – he added – is to the world like the sea is to the fish. There is no contradiction between his river, the Arno or the Rhine or whatever, and the sea; and only if we in a concrete way can overcome this contradiction we are realistic.

There was another aspect: question marks or exclamation marks? That is a problem, you are right, and very often good politicians that consider moral values when thinking about politics in their country are defeated because they can’t respond to the great, very often false exclamation marks of the others. I think we should be able not to renounce on our question marks but, and you are right, to speak with such energy, with such strength, with such conviction that should give the impression that the man of the question marks is not the Hamletic man incapable of decisions – very gentle and kind and noble, but not able to cope with reality –, but that his conscience of the complexity of reality is a great weapon. I know that is not easy, but what I advocate is to combine the strength, the energy, the moral authority if you want, sometimes the aggressive capacity of reacting to aggression, with the feeling of complexity. I am absolutely in favor of question marks, but I do not think it is necessary they are losing.

FT: Since your incentive is to tell a story to make a point, to write a story to make a point, to bridge past and future to make a point, how can we reinvent storytelling for a generation that might not be susceptible to reading but is very image oriented, is very susceptible to clear images, to testimonies, to stories they can relate to? Does that change the nature of literature or of art in general? Does that mean that literature has a different position, or should have different forms? Do we need to work more with audiovisual means, do we need to tell stories, to give the beautiful example of

Stephen Spielberg, who thought to retain the memory of the Shoah by having survivors tell their story on camera and having this in the library. Is this the new narrative? Or should we try to reinvent the culture of literature, the culture of reading to a larger public? This is truly an open question, because I'm struggling with it, also with my own children who perhaps might not be as interested – one of them certainly is interested in reading, but the others aren't. And how do I, how do you communicate an identity and a belonging in society if you can no longer do it with stories one reads?

CM: Narration is not necessarily a literary narration. For example, in the years immediately after the Second World War, the narration that in Italy gave the strongest image and told history was the cinema, with Rossellini and De Sica. Pavese said: the greatest narrator today is De Sica, and he meant *Ladri di biciclette / Bicycle thieves*. Of course, I am a writer, and my best capacity is linked to writing, but I don't think that literature necessarily is better or worse than other expressions. It is possible that in certain periods also painting could be suddenly most important in telling stories.

What is very important is another crisis: the tendency of losing every expression, this necessity of confronting oneself with life and reality, and a certain retrogressive renunciation on the attempt to find out what is life. And that is the reason why there are some bad novels or some bad films – which can be also very useful when we must dedicate one hour or so to relax –, but if we think that this is the real, new representation of contemporary life, that is a danger. But this danger is not greater in literature than in film or in television.

For me of course literature is closer to me, but that is another aspect. For example, in Italy, Marco Paolini in his mixture of narration, image, television, interviews with people, has narrated fundamental moments of the Italian life in a way that goes beyond and is much stronger perhaps than any literary description. For example about Ustica, in this case in collaboration with Daniele Del Giudice who is a very good writer in Italy. And it's well done, it is an artistic work. The problem is the meaning we have in what we want from any expression. It is not necessary to have masterpieces, sometimes also very simple stories can do. Saba told us it is not important how many carats there are in gold, but even a small piece must be gold.

HH: Up till now we have witnessed a questioning by you, Mr. Timmermans, of Mr. Magris, but perhaps time has come to reverse roles and get to a questioning of you, in relation to the questions that you have put. The curiosity that came to my mind is that you have been stimulating Mr. Magris to pronounce himself on the importance of sensibility for complexity, for irony, for reflection, which is obviously a typical characteristic of the world of literature. But coming from you as a politician, obviously the reflection is: what does that mean to you as a politician? Is there a

possibility for you, being a politician, to integrate these elements you advocate while questioning Mr. Magris in your own attitude as a politician?

FT: Well, of course my questions were not leading in any sense, because I really want to learn, that is why I was so fascinated to be able to have a discussion with someone whom I have admired for twenty years. But of course the background of all this is that what I see in day to day politics is a lack of narrative, in the sense of: who are we, why are we doing what are we doing, what is the society we are living in, where is that we want to head with this society. There is hardly any narrative on this in politics, because politics forces itself into a position where we formulate solutions for today's concrete problems: how much money into houses, how much money into healthcare, why are you giving this money to education, why do we do this or that measure?

The mistake we make as politicians in this very complex and very rapid time is to not take the time to step back and reformulate what actually is of central value in society. This I see especially in European affairs. Because I think in many senses our political systems in Europe are outdated and do not reflect today's society anymore. And in a way to be close to society, at a time when society is angry, insecure: many politicians have the tendency to kneel down and talk down to voters, thinking that to reconnect to voters you have to put things in simple terms. I find this very demeaning, and very disrespectful of people. Because I believe that people do understand the complexity of the world, if you have the courage to tell them about the complexity of the world. But we lack this courage, because we will not have the time to convince them, because we will be voted out of office before the time comes that our points ring through. So that is why I believe that art in general, and literature in particular are a condensed version of reality, in a much more narrative version of reality. If I put it in the Dutch context: the novel *Tirza* by Arnon Grunberg tells much more about today's Dutch society than any report by the Social and Cultural Planning Bureau or any other official institution.

One of the questions I also have is: why is it that literature has left politics? Churchill won the Nobel Prize for literature. De Gaulle should have won the Nobel Prize for literature. I think because we don't have the time, because we don't allow ourselves the time to reflect, because he or she who reflects is kicked out. And somehow we need to find to master the courage to face people with our reflections. And this is why I am inspired by Barack Obama. I'm not sure whether he will be successful, but his starting point, all the books he has written start with one very simple question: who am I? Why am I in this position, in this society, who are my parents, what is my surroundings, what does this mean for the society I want to be in, what does this mean for the proposals I have for changing things that need to be changed?

There is a very popular comedian in the Netherlands on public television, who has a Surinamese background, Jörgen Raymann, and when he interviews someone as a character – he transforms himself into the character of a Surinamese woman – the first question he always asks is: “*Wie is je vader, wie is je moeder?*” “Who is your father, who is your mother?”, and somehow this is a question we have forgotten to ask each other. Because if you want to know where you are in society and where you are going, you need to know, need to have a cultural and societal TomTom, you need to be able to know: this is where I am, and this is where the other is, and I am here because the other is there. That in my view is something we have sometimes lost. We so much value our freedom and individuality that we forget to relate. We can only be free if we grant others freedom first. This relationship, I believe, sometimes in the Western world is lost. It can be rekindled. Obama has shown it can be rekindled. Will it be successful? We shall see. But he has made a promising start. And I think this example should also be followed in European society.

HH: The question would be: how, and how to do it? I think this will be one of the questions that might pop up in the audience, because at this point I would also like to give the people in the audience the opportunity to address the two debaters of tonight regarding the questions raised or other questions pertaining to Claudio Magris’ work or to the work of Frans Timmermans. Just one curiosity. When you talked about your work as politician you mentioned just now Barack Obama and his books. Now thinking about other European realities, especially the French reality where all politicians that want to be successful have to write books: why don’t Dutch politicians write books?

FT: First of all, let’s be realistic. The French politicians have books written for them, most of the time. This is absolutely untrue for Barack Obama: he has written his books himself. It is a very personal style, he is a good writer, also from a literary point of view, he has written some remarkable stuff, and he has written it himself. The easy answer to your question is: it is a cultural thing, we don’t do books, because in our tradition there was actually only one book. That’s a Dutch tradition, and we need to get rid of that tradition, and we certainly will get rid of that tradition.

But there are a few politicians, I think: someone who has written some interesting books is Frits Bolkestein, he is a liberal, not a social democrat like me. But for the rest, many politicians, also in the Netherlands, if you see a book, then it is very often a book written by somebody else with the name of the politician. And if they write books it is more human interest than developing ideas. I think the only exception in recent years, or very recent years, is Femke Halsema who has written an interesting book about her ideas on how society should be organized. But for the rest: it is not really part of our culture. I am fond of political books, I read many political

books published in France, but in six out of ten of these books I never read more than twenty to thirty pages, because they are extremely boring and extremely self-gratifying.

HH: There is a microphone in the audience, so please come forward and put your question to our debaters.

Audience: My name is Anna Adamska, I am a Dutch citizen but I was born and grew up in Poland. This means that I experienced one of the great events of our time, the Fall of the Berlin Wall, from the other side. I can't tell you what we dreamt at that time, especially the intellectuals in Poland, that we were able and got finally the opportunity to build up a society of free, conscious citizens, conscious of their rights, and making rights and justice. But after twenty years we got quite disappointed – and all Europe seems to be disappointed in us in some way –, maybe because we underestimated the force of the power which was with us at that moment, the power of religion. I wanted to ask both participants in the discussion: what is the place of religion in your vision of Europe? Of course, the recent events in Italy are an extra stimulus for me to put this question. Thank you.

HH: Let's first ask professor Magris to answer this question, since you mentioned the Italian situation.

CM: I have been several times in Poland before the fall of the Wall, and have known a lot of the dissidents, and my friend Adam Michnik once told me: "I, as an anti-communist dissident in communist Poland, I have spent five years in prison; my father, who was a communist, in anti-communist Poland before the War, spent eight years in prison". If you ask me what should be the place of religion in Europe: I have nothing against the church, there is separation between church and state, of course, and the church has every right – like every church – to express her values but without having the possibility of exercising pressure. That is the problem. There are some cases in which we have had such problems, in Italy but not only in Italy, and not only the church but also other powers. There is only one question, which is difficult. Sometimes everybody criticizes the position of the church concerning politics, not because the church has expressed a position but according to the sympathy or the antipathy for this position. Two examples: in Italy, when the conference of bishops made an official protest against the decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to start a very harsh policy concerning immigrants, nobody protested against the bishops saying the bishops had no right to criticize the state, that is to say the government, because they agreed with the position in this case of the bishops, and I also agree. In other cases I quite disagree with a lot of the positions of the

church, but I can't give or not give the permission to the church or to another church to express its opinion only according to my opinion.

But there are some cases, where protesting against the position of the church is very important. For example, as a politician – I have been a member of parliament for two years – I am a strong enemy of any financial aid to private schools, and I have known one of the greatest jurists and antifascists, Arturo Carlo Jemolo, who was so religious that he took communion every day, but was the strongest enemy of any help of the state to private schools. In this case, for example, the state could and should defend its own position. But concerning the church's opinions, this is very problematic: only if this opinion is linked to the exercise of pressure it is not legitimated, otherwise it is legitimate, when we agree and when we disagree. Certainly, in Italy there is very often an absolutely unacceptable intervention of the church exercising some pressure. But nobody of my friends on the left protested against bishops who defended immigrants against the government, and this was also an intervention in the affairs of the Italian state.

FT: You could recall the interesting case of Tony Blair, who hid the fact that he became very religious when he was prime minister, who came out at a later stage, and the reaction in the UK was one of horror: my God, we've been in the hands of someone who has been working on the basis of divine intervention, goodness! When he went to the United States, recently, and confessed being very religious and inspired by God and the church, he was applauded: this was wonderful. I believe in the United States you probably have the opposite of people who don't believe in God but say they do in order to be elected. So there is an interesting contrast in the Western world between Europe and the US, certainly because there is, as Simon Schama put it, a passion for religion and a zeal for freedom, and it's always in a good combination. Now in European history, the passion for religion always led to war and bloodshed, so we have a different relationship to religion in general.

Is religion coming back? And the implication of your question is: are we going back to the bloody wars of the past, in extremism perhaps? I'm not that pessimistic. If I look at Poland – a country I love very much and I travel a lot there – I think the people are five steps ahead of their politicians on this issue. And also the hold of the church on society in Poland is diminishing by the day, this is my personal impression. And they will try to keep this hold, as they did in Italy and in this country. My grandmother – she never hesitated to tell anybody which was horrible for my grandfather –, but my grandmother said for sixty years that she was prevented of marrying the love of her life because he was a protestant. My grandfather always took this in a stride. Fortunately, if religion makes something of a comeback in European society, it is now very much more considered a matter of personal choice, whether you want to listen to the church or not, which is exactly your point. And this sort of very personal interpretation of religion is also linked

with this age of individuality, because also identity is becoming more and more a personal interpretation. You choose to whom you want to belong. Whereas for my grandparents and my parents that was not a matter of choice, they were Roman Catholics and they would stay Roman Catholics until the day they died. Therefore I'm more optimistic about this, even though I see more religion in society than perhaps ten years ago.

Audience [Rosi Braidotti]: Thank you to both speakers for a very thought-provoking session. My question is about why Europe doesn't make us dream, why Europe doesn't excite our students, what is it particularly about the European Union that puts everybody to sleep even before we started the debate? And I would connect it to the question of the social imaginary, and of missing narratives. We heard last year in the European Forum at the Centre for the Humanities Yves Mény, president of the European University, speaking about a deficit of a European social imaginary. Nothing there really makes us think: ah, this is Europe I can be excited about. Do you recognize this; do you have antidotes to this? That's more for Frans Timmermans.

For professor Magris: one of the great, of the many great merits of your writing is that it does make one dream, one actually can travel across Europe reading *Mitteleuropa* laid out along the Danube in your book. It is a sort of psychogeography. And this is my question: over the last ten, twenty years, the idea of a psychogeography, of a cultural memory – you travel through strange places using literature – has been very fashionable. I am thinking of Ian Sinclair, you can walk through London with his books and look at landscapes, which are not there; it is a sort of hallucination, you are looking at things, which are not there. Is this you think a way which we could construct a social imaginary, should we have more of this, should the people, the writers in this room go off and write a book called, I don't know, *Dordrecht*, imaginary landscapes of the mind which, as you put it, are very precise, very accurate, would this be a way to make us dream about Europe again?

CM: Two things. First of all: my European dream is the dream of the centralized European state. I dream of the day in which I can vote for a president whose name is not only Rossi or Verdi, but you name it. Because our problems are European problems. There is no important problem, which concerns only Holland or Italy and so on. Like in Italy, there is no crisis, which can concern only Trieste or Milan and so on. So we need Europe, with a real parliament, which makes laws that are obliging every European citizen. Really, I hope we will have a European state. It would absolutely not destroy or negate neither the Netherlands nor France and so on, as Italy has absolutely not destroyed Trieste and Florence and Piedmont and so on. We must fight for this. It is a very difficult process; we must one day in my opinion renounce the principle of the unanimity, because unanimity is not democracy,

unanimity is impossible, unanimity already brought Poland with all its aristocrats to its terrible crises in the past, and so on.

Concerning your question on the social imaginary, I see the danger of a certain literary complacency. To create European social imaginary which is only a literary genre is a danger. This social imaginary should be not only literary. Of course, I think that literature can give a great contribution, but without believing – this is a great danger of most writers and intellectuals who are involved in literature – that something good in literature has already found a solution for other problems. I think there is a great danger in a certain endogamy in literature. For example, I was in parliament, and other colleagues of mine – all writers – were in parliament who got disappointed and disillusioned.

FT: If you look at different European societies, I think people are positive about Europe when they are part of it, because they want to become part of it. People are positive about Europe when their outlook is on balance optimistic, because they think they can gain a lot. But people are pessimistic about Europe in a more general context, and we need to look at that context first. The problem of some, if not all Western European societies, is that the backbone of those societies traditionally called the middle classes has an innate belief of decline. Since the Second World War there was always a belief of progression. My grandfathers, who were coalminers, their dream was for their children not to be coalminers, and they thought they could make it if they worked hard enough and their children could be better off. And my parents had the same dream for me, and it worked.

Now at this stage we have this innate feeling that from now on it is downhill. We've reached the pinnacle, and our children will be worse off. Now, if that is the overriding sentiment in a society, that society is essentially conservative, because if you think that from now on it is downhill, the best you can do for yourself is to protect what you have. And to protect what you have is to avoid any change, because change by definition is negative. This is the conundrum Western society is often in today. If we cannot break out of that deadlock, if we cannot go into a new phase of constructivism in Europe, because that is what we need: new constructivism, if we cannot reach that phase you can talk till kingdom come about the advantages of Europe, you can have billions of euros in Europe promotion, you will not convince a single soul.

The question here is: are we or are we not optimistic about our future? If we are, we can develop a narrative that has a positive image of Europe. If we cannot break out of our pessimism, there is nothing we can do to create a positive image of governance in general and Europe in particular.

HH: Surely this is a very pertinent and appropriate closing note, because, as you already discovered, Claudio Magris in the end is a positive thinker. He is not only

someone who advocates complexities, but he always has remained fundamentally a positive and an optimistic thinker. Actually, I've seen also in your attitude tonight a kind of a shift from skepticism towards the hopeful optimism and positivism, so I would say, let's leave it here, and give a big hand to our two participants of tonight's debate. Your applause underlines that this was a very rich evening indeed. It was not only a thought-provoking, stimulating event, but it really has given us a good sense not only of what Magris does, but also how politics and literature can intersect. Thank you very much and have a good evening.