Europeans are divided in various ways, socially, culturally and politically. Many of these divisions result from differences, but not all differences lead to conflicts. Modern complex societies bring about ever greater differentiation. The resulting diversity is mostly a basis for co-operation and integration. Europe is a space of differences, but it also has a shared heritage. This is as true of the nations that make up Europe as it is of Europe as a whole. The nature and dynamics of what people have in common and what divides them can be easily misunderstood if we assume that the national culture is somehow the natural reference point, and that it is based on a congruence of cultural and political communities. But unity does not precede diversity. It is in fact achieved through it. It is also fragile and can easily become a source of adversity.

There can be little doubt that there has been a sharp increase in contestation over Europe in recent years. In the three decades or so following the end of WWII, the idea of Europe was a powerful integrative force that stood for a new age of peace and prosperity. These aspirations were essentially what held Europe together. New divisions have resulted from a changed situation over the past decade and half. European integration has stumbled over significant problems relating to the single currency, the challenges posed by Greece, debtor versus creditor countries, new flows of migration from the Middle East, the rise of the right-wing populist parties and the resurgence of nationalism, British withdrawal from the EU, and rising fears around terrorism. A superficial look would reveal a continent in crisis and a retreat to the comfort zone of the nation. This would be the wrong way to see the current situation. It is a misreading of the signs of the times to see cultural conflict as one between Europe and the nation. There are emerging tensions
to be sure, but these are more frissons within the national community than between nations or between the nation-state and Europe. These divisions are also underpinned by major transformations in the nature of capitalism and democracy.

I would like to make the strong argument that it is the idea of nation that is in crisis due to major cultural shifts within it as a result of changes in capitalism and democracy: national cultures no longer unite their increasingly diverse populations. However, Europe – whether as a reference point for identities or as a unitary space – does not offer an alternative as a means of uniting people. The ideals of the post-1945 context have faded. Nonetheless, the idea of Europe is still a powerful cultural orientation in contemporary societies and offers a model that challenges many cultural identities, in particular those marked by a high degree of closure. The real substance of the European heritage is not in some kind of supra-national order, but resides within nations and in the mosaic of cultural traditions and their narratives and memories, many of which concern aspirations for social justice. It is therefore necessary to understand better the nature of cultural conflict and what I call ‘two competing conceptions of the nation’, an open European-oriented one and a closed inward-looking one. It is not the case that one is the authentic one and the other, at best, secondary. Even in the closed inward one, there are also signs of latent Europeanisation and of cosmopolitanism. I argue that neither are able to capture the ground of social justice and that this results in a major source of division today. Social justice was once the main source of the success of nations but it is no longer the case. The future of Europe is very much a question of solidarity and social justice.

Cultures in Conflict

From a sociological perspective, cultures – whether nations, ethnic groups or urban communities – are diverse and stratified across different axes. There are three major cleavages in post-WWII Western European societies that have shaped the cultural field of the nation. Of these, it is the third that is now particularly significant since it effectively expresses a decline in the integrative capacities of the national culture.

The old cleavages in post-1945 (western) European societies were defined by right and left and generally underpinned by class politics in the context of a model of capitalism that has come to an end today.
These cleavages thus took the form of capital versus labour and concerned issues of social justice. Since the 1980s, as the older industrial economies gave way to increasingly post-industrial ones, new cleavages emerged, adding to the existing ones and in part transforming them. These new cleavages have often been referred to as the new politics of class and reflected cultural issues rather than the older ones of capital versus labour. The rise of environmentalism and feminism were two major social movements that led to a profound change in the political cultures of late 20th century Europe around so-called post-material values. Many of these developments have been associated with the political values of the university-educated middle class and the new values of individuated life styles. These developments emerged at a time of major change in capitalism with the rise of neo-liberalism and technocratic governance, on the one hand, and on the other the declining power of older cultural traditions, for example religion, and more generally of cultural authoritarianism that was founded on patriarchy and religion. In this context, which is also one of a changed relationship between elites and the masses, a new cleavage took shape which did not replace the older class one but added a new level of political contestation around cultural politics. It can be described as a cleavage between radical cultural pluralism and neo-liberal technocentrism. As a result, solidarity and social justice were eclipsed.

Since around 2001, with 11th September as a symbolic marker, a new range of cleavages arose which were associated with the emergence of security agendas and the rise of the populist right and xenophobic nationalism. This led to a much more complicated mosaic of cultural and political divisions in European societies, with the old political parties in many cases challenged by new right wing parties and no longer able to rely on the traditional sources of authority, such as religion, patriarchy and deference to the upper class. The progressive cultural left was also challenged in a new era of hyper-globalisation leading to a crisis in social justice. Since the worldwide financial crisis and a marked increase in economic inequalities and low growth economies after 2008, pro- and contra-EU became an additional level of political contestation and for the first time the very rationale of European integration was called into question.

To simplify, at the present time there are three main cleavages that structure the political-cultural field of the public sphere in Europe: a) the still strong capital versus labour cleavage that resolves around right versus left issues; b) the cleavage of neo-liberal techno-
conservatism versus radical cultural pluralism; and c) the emerging cleavage of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism. The first two reflect, respectively, the social critique and the cultural critique of capitalism and are largely to be contextualised within national settings. The third cleavage, which is my main focus, is driven, on the one hand, by nationalism and a populist reaction to globalisation as well as to radical cultural pluralism, but also draws on right and left currents. On the other hand is the diminishing influence of the national culture on many people whose habitus is increasingly more plural, if not hybrid, and whose world has been transformed by anti-authoritarian and post-material values. This value divergence is now very great and underpinned by very different kinds of work and increased diversity. This group is likely to be Europeanised in their self-identification and in their lifestyles, but will reflect different positions within the right/left wing divide. The Brexit Referendum is a vivid example of this division within the national community to a point that the very unity of the national culture is in question. In this case a cultural difference was amplified into a political conflict.

My first thesis, then, is simply the sociological claim that national societies are becoming increasingly divided around a new cleavage that polarises societies into two groupings: those whose orientations and social location are mobile, diverse and open, and those who are relatively homogenous and resistant to those who are different. It follows from this that differences between European societies may be less pronounced when one looks horizontally comparing different social classes than simply looking at different national cultures. There has been an extraordinary degree of Europeanisation of youth and in the lifestyles and value orientations of the middle class. While the rise of the populist right across Europe signals opposition to migrants and ostensibly opposition to the EU, it is also a product of Europeanisation, even if it appeals to very different people (i.e. those who have not experienced much diversity first-hand). In general, communities that have experienced a high degree of diversity and mobility will be open to others, while those who have not experienced much diversity will resist it. This is true not just of white working class communities, but also of ethnic/post-migration communities. Where this intersects with economic deprivation the level of resistance will be greater. It is rather this dynamic of a weakening of solidarity that plays out in a complex field of other cleavages than the objectivity of Europe or the objectivity of migration that is the source of much cultural and political hostility.
So, the tension is not then between the nation-state or national culture and Europe, but between two competing and more or less contradictory interpretations of the nation. In this view, nations are the carriers of European values and where we should locate the European heritage. It is not therefore a matter of defining national culture first as self-enclosed entities where solidarity is to be found and then seeing how much of it reconcilable with Europe or with other cultures. The major clash today is within the nation. It is no longer only a conflict of right versus left but an internal conflict. It follows from this that the wrong approach is to find a balance between diversity and a common culture, or seeking first to identify a common culture and then see how much diversity is reconcilable with it. In a context in which a common culture has all but fragmented, the only prospect is to build communities that are diverse and reduce the inequalities that amplify adversities. The key challenge here for Europe is to capture the ground of social justice.

While complex societies cannot easily build common cultures, if they are not to retreat into singular cultures they can strive to create a shared culture. A shared culture, in contrast to a common culture, is one in which there are shared reference points but not a homogenous cultural value system. Very different people can share a place, a city or a nation, but they do not have to have to be similar. The search for a common culture is not a solution to the problem posed by singular cultures. The idea of Europe should be seen less as a common culture than a shared one wherein different groups, themselves highly pluralised, achieve a degree of solidarity with each other. This is one concrete way in which to see Europe and its cultures as an epitome of unity in diversity.

**European Heritage as a Shared Culture**

Culture is very much about how people interpret their experiences. Different historical and cultural experiences will produce very different interpretations and thus will generate different cultural orientations. The result is diversity. But culture also takes shape from unifying traditions and principles, and does so at different levels. National traditions and wider transnational ones also have a certain force as do higher ones such as universalistic ideas (for example, peace, freedom, democracy and justice) and concepts that cognitively structure the symbolic narratives and imaginaries that make up identities and cultural traditions.
The European heritage is a carrier of such ideas, which should not be seen as unifying master narratives, but as reference points that will often have different interpretations. The idea of ‘Europe’ is a cultural model that has had a formative influence in the making of social identities and the diverse cultures of Europe. It is not a common culture but a framework of interpretation out of which a shared public culture is possible. I have argued above that this understanding of Europe is not contrary to national culture but is the basis of national culture.

The argument is thus that the idea of Europe does have this function of a larger framework of interpretation. The idea of Europe operates as a reference culture against which collective identities as well as national communities define themselves. On this level, the European dimension is akin to a repertoire of ideas, principles, modes of cognition and thought that crystallise in more specific national cultures, as well as in other more particularistic cultures. In this sense the specificity of the European heritage is less one of content than of form. It is simply a unity in diversity. The forms in question establish certain kinds of structures – similar social, cultural, political patterns – but with significant variation due to different interpretations made of them at different times and places by different social groups. In this view, Europe did not emerge out of a single culture, but out of numerous exchanges and interactions. Thus what are often seen as separated histories are in fact interconnected and entangled.

There are three dimensions to this: first, a feature of many collective identities and cultures today is that they intersect with other identities and cultures. This is not only a recent development – identities have always taken this form. However, there can be little doubt that there has been an increase in cultural pluralisation in recent times; identities (memories, cultural phenomena of all kinds) are not separate but interact with each other, and as they do so the encounter brings about a change in at least one of the interacting elements. Second, the intersection can lead to the mutual cross-fertilisation of identities and memories, such that it is possible to say that the cultures have become entangled. Entangled memories are becoming increasingly prevalent today in the context of transnationalised societies. Third, it is possible that entangled identities and memories will become embroiled in each other to a point that they lead to the creation of new syncretic or hybrid forms. It should of course be noted that not all entanglements will lead towards syncretism and it must also be emphasised that intersections, like ships passing in the night, do not lead to entanglements. I would
also add that entanglements are not necessarily to be seen as inherently good: they can and, very often do, entail clashes of culture. However, for good or for bad, it is a fact of cultural history that much of our past has been shaped by entanglements.

In conclusion, it is possible that a more explicitly developed transnational approach to the European heritage might reveal a different and more compelling account of the past that would give substance to the European cultural heritage as a unity in diversity. A transnational approach offers a double critical lens through which to view the European heritage: it draws attention to how national histories are interconnected and it shows that such interconnections must be situated in a yet broader and more global context. What are urgently needed today are ways to capture the inherent cosmopolitanism of the European heritage as a legacy that is integral to national culture. If this does not happen, there is likely to be an increased clash of cultures across Europe.

The political challenge that follows from this analysis is that public understandings of national culture should be fostered that affirm its European dimensions, and that national culture, like Europe more generally, should itself be represented as unity in diversity. Perhaps there should be more emphasis on the unity in diversity of national as well as European culture in the public sphere. But cultural arguments are not enough. Underpinning culture are social issues concerning solidarity and social justice. What is now needed is a fundamental shift in the very conception of Europe to more fully capture solidarity. This is more important than issues of mobility, markets or supranational governance. My analysis suggests that the nation is no longer able to deliver social justice without connecting with a larger sense of political community. This may be the best opportunity for both expressions of political community – nation and Europe – to reinvent themselves.