

Unified in Diversity: Europe's Search for a Collective Identity

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Abstract

Despite the ongoing European integration process, with ever more legislative powers being transferred to the European level, EU citizens do not seem to have responded with a simultaneous, increased affiliation towards the Union. Especially since the rejection of the Constitution for Europe, the notion of European identity has been given particular attention. This paper examines the existence and prospect of a wider European identity in times of continuing strong national affiliations. It will be seen that human beings can have multiple identities, without them necessarily contradicting each other. Besides, identities are not fixed, but dynamic and thus subject to permanent change. Based on that, it will be shown that the creation of a collective European identity has already started and will be further fostered in the future.

Introduction

Since the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, the now so-called European Union (EU) has increasingly been enlarged and integrated. From initially six, the number of Member States (MS) has been extended to 27, with further enlargements yet to come. At the same time, the set of institutions and responsibilities has similarly amplified, from an organisation dealing with the integration of only two of the MS's industries to a complex network of authorities, interconnected with various committees, agencies and national governments, while competences have come to include economic, social, environmental, foreign and security policies as well as justice and home affairs. Yet, although the EU is increasingly influencing the life of its people, the latter have not responded with a simultaneous, increased affiliation towards the Union. This phenomenon has been indicated on various occasions: the voter turnout in European parliamentary elections, for example, has steadily dropped from 63% in 1979 to 45,6% in 2004;¹ moreover, in June 2005, the citizens of France and The Netherlands, two founding members of the EU, rejected in referendums the proposed *Constitution for Europe*. Keith Cameron, in his book *National Identity*,

¹ *Elections2004.eu.int*. Secretariat of the European Parliament. 12 July 2006 <http://www.elections2004.eu.int/ep-election/sites/en/results1306/turnout_ep/graphical.html>.

concludes the following reason for this development: “As the European Union becomes more unified through its legislation and interstatal trade and movement, there is a centrifugal movement in a number of Member States as individuals begin to feel threatened and to think that they are losing their national identity”.²

Thus, following the rejection of the Constitution, the subject of European identity has been given particular attention, although this does not constitute an entirely new phenomenon. In a speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on March 8th 1994, Vaclav Havel, then President of the Czech Republic, already pointed out:

*Many people might be left with the understandable impression that the European Union (...) is no more than endless arguments over how many carrots can be exported from somewhere, who sets the amount, who checks it and who eventually punishes the delinquents who contravene the regulations. That is why it seems to me that perhaps the most important task facing the European Union is coming up with a new and genuinely clear reflection on what might be called European identity.*³

This paper, therefore, examines the existence and prospect of a wider European identity in a time of continuing strong national affiliations. It first seeks to establish a general definition of identity, also considering to what extent multiple identities may exist, and whether new identities can be created without challenging existing ones. The paper then looks at the EU; it analyses why the creation of an overarching European identity should be aspired to; it attempts to determine to what degree this is already existent and, additionally, explores what its prospects are for the future. It will be seen that human beings can have multiple identities, without them necessarily contradicting each other. Besides, they are not fixed, but dynamic and thus subject to permanent change. Based on that, it will be shown that the creation of a collective European identity has already started and will further be fostered in the future.⁴

² Cameron, Keith. *National Identity*. Exeter: Intellect Books, 1999.

³ Havel, Václav. “About European Identity.” *A Charta of European Identity*. 1997. Europa-Union Deutschland. 24 July 2006 <http://www.europa-web.de/europa/02wwwswwww/203chart/chart_gb.htm>.

⁴ It needs to be noted that, in this paper, the term ‘Europe’ will be used as representing the EU and not in its geographic meaning.

Collective Identity: A Process with Multiple Layers

First, this paper will seek to define the term identity; ‘seek’ used here because identity “commands as many definitions as there are academic principles which study it, and which only tends to command attention when it is in crisis.”⁵ David Snow, in his paper *Collective Identity and Expressive Forms*, established the following definition:

*There are at least three conceptually distinct types of identity: personal, social, and collective. (...) Personal identities are the attributes and meanings attributed to oneself by the actor; they are self-designation and self-attributions regarded as personally distinctive. (...) Social identities are the identities attributed or imputed to others in an attempt to situate them in social space. They are grounded typically in established social roles, such as ‘teacher’.*⁶

With regard to the concept of collective identity, a definition seems a bit more difficult; Snow continues:

*Although there is no consensual definition of collective identity, discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of ‘other’.*⁷

Consequently, with regard to the theme of this essay, the collective concept is best applicable, as only here is identity defined by what individuals have in common. Nevertheless, for such a collectivity to be established, a reference point is needed to distinguish the *in-group* from the *out-group*; that is to say that the definition of *the other* is the prerequisite for defining *we-ness*. The same article also states that “collective identity is, at its core, a process rather than a property of social actors”.⁸ This indicates the dynamic nature of identities, that they are influenced

⁵ Wintle, Michael. “Cultural identity in Europe: Shared experience.” *European Culture*: 105-113.

⁶ Snow, David. “Collective Identity and Expressive Forms.” *eScholarship Repository* July 2001. 24 July 2006 <<http://repositories.cdlib.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=csd>>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

and thus created by various internal and external factors. Dr. Walkenhorst, from the University of Essex, confirms this interpretation by writing “collective identities that did not develop historically, like religious, ethnic or linguistic identities, can be ‘produced’ in order to legitimise power, [as it] occurred in the developing stage of national states in the 18th and 19th century”.⁹ Moreover, identities are multi-dimensional, reflecting their composition of different aspects of identification, such as gender, region or religion. This is emphasised by Carole B. Burgoyne and David A. Routh: “It is well-established in psychology that individual self-categorisation can be many-layered, including personal, social, national and supra-national sources of identity, with the salience of these identities depending upon the social context”.¹⁰

Top-Down and Bottom-Up: The Nation as a Construction

By now, it has been established that collective identity is the concept applying best to the theme of this work, with *out-groups* needed as points of reference to establish collectivity. Moreover, identities are considered to be a process, indicating their flexible nature, including continuous shifts as to their content and the prospect of actually producing them. Finally, they have been described as being composed of different layers, each attributing meaning to their overall character. Derived from this definition, this paper continues to investigate how identities can be created, using the example of the nation-building and state-formation process in the 18th and 19th century in Europe, as was suggested by Dr. Walkenhorst above.

In France, a political structure with well-established frontiers was existent by the time the French Revolution, with the introduction of the concept of citizenship, laid the foundation for the development of the French nation; thus the state provided the basis for the creation of a sense of French nationality. In other cases, e.g. Germany and Italy, a national identity had to be created first for any state-formation process to begin. Regardless of whether it was the emergence of the nation or that of the state that first functioned as the impetus for the other to develop, both examples indicate that “nations, on whatever principle they are

⁹ Walkenhorst, Heiko. “‘The Construction of European Identity and the Role of National Educational Systems’: A Case Study on Germany.” *University of Essex*. May 2004. 19 July 2006 <http://www.essex.ac.uk/government/Essex_Papers/Number_160.pdf>.

¹⁰ Burgoyne, Carole B. and David A. Routh. “National Identity, European Identity and the Euro”, in Keith Cameron, *National Identity*. Exeter: Intellect Books, 1999.

conceived, are indeed ‘imagined communities’, social, cultural and political artefacts.’¹¹

In the context of state-formation and nation-building, two mutually reinforcing concepts are of fundamental importance: *top-down* initiatives and *bottom-up* movements. *Top-down* initiatives are conceived of as the tools used by the authorities to form a state and encourage as well as foster the nation-building process among the people. According to Professor Wintle from the University of Amsterdam, these comprise:

*Constitutional definitions of the state by both internal and external authorities, the centralization or unification of the state carried out after the imposition of a generalized unitary constitutional order, and the introduction of a national political system, with gradually increasing participation on a uniform basis across the country.*¹²

In a different paper, Wintle extends this set to include “the standardization and unification of the coinage and currency, of language and linguistic usage, weights and measures, time, legal procedures of all sorts, and taxation; the centralization of armies, the police, and education; economic integration, and the copious use of national flags, anthems, monuments and the like.”¹³ On the other hand, *bottom-up* movements include a diverse number of initiatives driven by the masses, whose goal does not necessarily have to be the establishment of a collective identity, but by following their shared interests often automatically create such *we-ness*. In this context, for example, the various pan-European social and cultural movements obtain particular importance, in which people commit themselves to a common good, while often unconsciously generating an enduring connectedness amongst each other.

European-ness: The Indispensable *Something*

In the subsequent section, the above concepts will be applied to the EU, investigating to what extent a collective European identity already exists and how its prospects for the future may be regarded. First, however, it will be briefly

¹¹ Jenkins, Brian and Spyros A. Sofos. “Nation and Nationalism in Contemporary Europe: A Theoretical Perspective”, in *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

¹² Wintle, Michael. “Cultural identity in Europe: Shared experience.” *European Culture*: 105-113.

¹³ Wintle, Michael. “European Identity: A Threat to the Nation?” *EJOP* 1 May 2005. 20 July 2006 <http://www.ejop.org/archives/2005/05/european_identi.html>.

examined why such an overarching sense of *we-ness* should be desirable. In 1762, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his book *The Social Contract: Or Principles of Political Right*,¹⁴ coined the term *the common good*, a principle which demanded from each individual to put their personal desires under the interests of the society as a whole. Interpreted from another perspective, the principle requires politicians to take decisions in the name of the society without considering the interests of particular segments only. Now, for such ideals to be accepted by the citizens, they must think of themselves as part of an overarching collective. Therefore, the need for the existence of a European identity seems significant, as the legislative powers of the European institutions are steadily increasing. Dr. Walkenhorst has described the need for this identity with the following words:

*Legitimization of politics largely depends on the existence of collective national or political identities, following Habermas' notion: 'A legitimacy crisis is at the same time an identity crisis'. (...) Owing to the fact that in democracies the system must be legitimized by the citizens, it is comprehensible that a democratic government is interested in maintaining and strengthening national identity.*¹⁵

Now that the importance of a European *we-ness* required for further integration in the European Union has been outlined, it is relevant to examine whether some kind of collectivity already exists among Europeans; and, if so, what it is based on. In a Eurobarometer survey,¹⁶ conducted in 1999 among the then 15 MS, an average of 52% expressed having a broad European identity. Although the figures varied substantially among countries, with 30% of Britons thinking of themselves as European compared to 71% of Italians, they at least indicated that already at that time more than half of the EU citizens confirmed the existence of some kind of wider sense of *European-ness*. Moreover, it is to be noted that this vague feeling does not necessarily conflict with the national identities of the citizens, as in none of the states did less than 67% (Germany) consider themselves to be at least fairly proud of their country, indicating rather strong identifications on the

¹⁴ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "The Social Contract: Or Principles of Political Right." Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

¹⁵ Walkenhorst, Heiko. "The Construction of European Identity and the Role of National Educational Systems": A Case Study on Germany." *University of Essex*. May 2004. 19 July 2006 <http://www.essex.ac.uk/government/Essex_Papers/Number_160.pdf>.

¹⁶ Risse, Thomas. "Nationalism and Collective Identities: Europe versus the Nation-State?", in Paul Heywood, Erik Jones and Martin Rhodes (eds), *Developments in West European Politics*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002.

national side. This confirms that different levels of identity can exist side-by-side and do not inevitably exclude each other.

Yet, the above figures say little about what this broad European identity is composed of. Indeed, the question of what contributes to a specific *European-ness* seems justified, as many identifications of such an alleged *we-ness* are at least applicable to the whole of Western civilisation, including the nations of the Americas and Oceania founded by Europeans; examples are concepts such as liberal democracy, rule of law, but also individualism and rationalism. Even scientists are facing difficulties concerning a specific definition. “And yet, (t)here is *something*, recognized by many commentators, past and present, idealistic and sceptical, which brings Europeans together, even if only partially.”¹⁷ In an essay, Jacques Delors the former President of the European Commission, seeks to establish certain key terms with regard to this European *we-ness* and takes into consideration the importance of *the other* as a point of reference for the definition of identity:

*The European identity has taken shape in opposition to other entities like the former Soviet Union, the Islamic world and the USA. Europe is characterised by the widespread separation between state and church, the abolishment of death penalty, the restrictions on the possession of firearms, specific social welfare systems, more solidarity with Third World countries through more development aid, the emphasis on multilateralism in the UN framework, the ratification of the Kyoto protocol and the respect for Human Rights.*¹⁸

The above characteristics may be collectively described as a political identity, as they refer to principles underlying political systems and policies in the European context. Nevertheless, as they have been influenced and shaped by the people with their specific historical experiences, they do indeed reflect certain attributes of a shared identity. The emphasis on a European political *we-ness* is also indicated by Jan Fuhse from the University of Stuttgart: “The European unification process can (...) be viewed as the establishment of a supranational political identity which vies

¹⁷ Wintle, Michael. “Cultural identity in Europe: Shared experience.” *European Culture*: 105-113.

¹⁸ Delors, Jacques. “European Identity : ‘Aidez-nous à donner un peu plus d’âme, plus de cœur à l’Europa’.” *European Movement*. 16 July 2006 <http://www.europeanmovement.org/myeurope/downloads_a/philippe_adriaenssens.doc>.

for control in a complex network structured by pre-existing national identities.”¹⁹ Moreover, it seems important to note that the above aspects do not stand for an exclusive concept of collectivity, as they avoid references to any specific religion, ethnicity, etc., thereby providing it with a rather voluntary, inclusive approach. This model of collectivity may be partly derived from the experience with *National Socialism* on the European continent and could thus also be considered as essentially European. “We should indeed be reminded that Europe was, after all, not an altogether untarnished term, and that a European cultural identity was hardly worth the candle by the time the Nazis and other pogrom-leaders had finished with it.”²⁰ Considering this European historical experience, any exclusive approach to the concept of identity, including references to ethnicity, race, etc., seems inconceivable for the EU project, although voices suggesting the contrary continue to be detected occasionally.

The EU and its People: The Beginnings of Confluence

As the existence of a broad collective identity has been proved, it will now be examined to what extent *top-down* and *bottom-up* initiatives have been witnessed across the EU that might further foster the feeling of *we-ness* among Europeans in the future. First, the so-called constitutional definitions, the unification of the state and the political system will be analysed. Before, however, it needs to be noted that the EU does not constitute a state as such, thus making it difficult to apply the above terms one-by-one to the case study. Nevertheless, over its 55 years of evolution, the unique European project has given itself fairly clear constitutional definitions, based on a number of ratified treaties, specifying the Union’s composition, including the division of tasks and powers among its institutions, the MS and its citizens. Especially the introduction of citizenship by the Maastricht treaty, giving specific rights and obligations to the people, is of fundamental importance concerning the creation of a shared identity, as “union citizenship carries an undisputed political symbolism, which may entail far-reaching implications for the development of a common European civiness and the embodiment of a stronger *Gemeinschaft*²¹ element among the constituent publics.”²²

¹⁹ Fuhse, Jan. “Constructing a European ‘Demos’: A Struggling Identity with Fuzzy Boundaries.” *EpsNet Kiosk Plus* June 2005. 14 July 2006 <http://elib.uni-stuttgart.de/opus/volltexte/2005/2365/pdf/EuropeIdEpsnetKiosk_.pdf>.

²⁰ Wintle, Michael. “Cultural identity in Europe: Shared experience.” *European Culture*: 105-113.

²¹ ‘community’

²² Chrysochoou, Dimitris N. *Theorizing European Integration*. London: Sage Publications, 2001.

Besides, since 1979 the citizens of the EU have had the opportunity to vote for their representatives in the European Parliament, an institution with increasing legislative rights, giving the people the chance to actively shape the development of their Union. Moreover, symbols such as the official European flag introduced in 1984, a European anthem (the 9th Symphony of Beethoven as of 1986), the celebration of Europe Day on May 9th, as well as the official slogan *Unified in Diversity* have become conduits for the unity of the EU. This also applies to the Euro, introduced as a common currency in 13 MS so far, which, apart from its economic importance, can certainly be considered as a sign of unity and strength. Concerning education, the teaching of the history and functioning of the EU has been integrated into the national syllabi of the MS, while, at university-level, student exchange programmes such as Erasmus and Socrates have substantially helped to bring young European scholars together and to lessen the language barrier in the multilingual academic setting. These advances are also considered by Professor Wintle: “Education standards and syllabi are creeping slowly towards convergence, and the EU higher education policies have been an outstanding success in creating a European consciousness.”²³

With regard to *bottom-up* movements, it appears to be somewhat difficult to quote specific data proving the existence of strong initiatives driven by the masses; yet again Professor Wintle, in his essay *European Identity: A Threat to the Nation?*, concludes:

*As for the 'bottom-up' activities aimed at the realization of a European identity, or grass-roots co-operation, there has again been considerable activity at European level (...) A great many people are involved in all the pan-European sporting and cultural activities which take place, and in the education exchange programmes: these are all driven by active participation from below (...) These are the beginnings of a European 'civil society'.*²⁴

Based on the above evidence, it can be concluded that a lot has already been achieved with regard to the creation and fostering of some kind of collective European identity. However, this is not to deny that many inefficiencies have remained, some of which may never disappear. Concerning language, for example,

²³ Wintle, Michael. “Cultural identity in Europe: Shared experience.” *European Culture*: 105-113.

²⁴ Wintle, Michael. “European Identity: A Threat to the Nation?” *EJOP* 1 May 2005. 20 July 2006 <http://www.ejop.org/archives/2005/05/european_identi.html>.

Europe is unlikely to ever be a homogenous place, as, at this point, 23 different official languages are already recognised by the EU, although communication problems have lessened substantially due to increasing language education. Apart from that, the constitutional definitions and the political system lack essential features for an identity to develop faster and more strongly. Especially clear-cut borders seem to be of particular importance, as they help distinguish between *in- and out-group* and thus lead to increased identification within the territory. “To draw a symbolic boundary around nodes and relations means also to claim similarity and unity within.”²⁵ The European Union, however, has purposely not established exclusive boundaries around itself and, although the voices in this direction have become louder, is not expected to do so in the near future. This may have slowed down the development of a feeling of *we-ness*, as the question of what *we* means has become more difficult to answer.

With regard to the political system, deficiencies remain evident, particularly in the case of the complex division of power among the Union’s institutions. The Parliament, as the EU’s only directly elected body, continues to be restricted in its power to influence the decision-making process. The proposed *Constitution for Europe* would have enhanced its role substantially, but was refused by the citizens of France and The Netherlands, while the recent *Treaty of Lisbon*, partly addressing itself to aspects contained in the Constitution, is still undergoing the ratification process. However, increased democratic features seem inevitable, as they provide a system with legitimacy and would thus potentially lead to an enhanced identification with the EU, since citizens begin to consider themselves as part of the Union and having the power to shape it. This list could be extended further, but based on the above evidences it remains certain that a broad collective European identity is already existent and will further be fostered by both *top-down* and *bottom-up* initiatives. Considering the age of the EU, it appears justified to conclude that a lot has been achieved. This is also suggested by Professor Wintle: “How can we dismiss European cultural identity in the 20th century when the EU has only been in existence since 1957?”²⁶

Summary

This essay sought to set up a broad definition of the term ‘identity.’ It has been seen that the collective concept with its reference to *in- and out-group* suits best

²⁵ Fuchs, Stephan. “Against Essentialism: A Theory of Culture and Society.” Cambridge/ Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001.

²⁶ Wintle, Michael. “Cultural identity in Europe: Shared experience.” *European Culture*: 105-113.

with regard to the theme of this paper. Moreover, although a clear definition of collective identity appears difficult to establish, certain key features have been identified: first, collective identity is not a fixed, pre-determined feeling of *we-ness*, but changes over time and space due to various internal and external factors. Secondly, the term has been defined as multi-layered, meaning that it is composed of a multitude of different identifications, ranging from basic aspects, such as gender, to possible supra-national affiliations. Based on the above definitions, the prospects of further developments towards a collective European identity can be regarded as positive, as this would not necessarily conflict with still very strong national or regional affections, and can be fostered by authorities, seeking to establish a stronger feeling of *European-ness*.

Furthermore, it was seen that, because of the need to legitimize political decisions in democratic states, a strong collective identity is required in a Union with increasing legislative powers, affecting the life of its citizens. Yet, it seems evident that a broad feeling of *we-ness* is already existent, even if difficult to pinpoint. With ‘specific welfare system’, ‘tendency to multilateralism’ and ‘solidarity with Third World countries’, certain political aspects of this identity have been defined, partly in opposition to other western countries, such as the US. This inclusive, political identity may also be considered as essentially European, as it is based on specific experiences with *National Socialism* and its exclusive approach to collectivity, featuring notions of race and ethnicity.

Besides, it has been proved that various *bottom-up* and *top-down* initiatives, which already played an important role in the nation-building process of 18th and 19th Century Europe, have been established, ranging from the creation of symbols to extensive academic exchange programs among students across the EU. Although insufficiencies remain, such as the lack of democratic features in the political system, the above aspects leave hope for an increasing collective identity, based primarily on political, inclusive identifications. Its undoubted existence is probably best described by Kathinka Dittrich van Weringh, Chair of the European Cultural Foundation, whose words will conclude this paper:

Individually and collectively we are all on the move in Europe crossing physical and mental borders. The traditional rather rigid concept of identity has become less static, more open, more comprehensive and much more demanding on our capacity to judge, to evaluate, to choose, to acknowledge our many identities, to accept that identity building is a process,

*consisting of many and not only predetermined elements, to become aware that we already share and live this Europe of ours, this unfinished (maybe unfinishable) cultural project.*²⁷

²⁷ Kathinka Dittrich van Weringh. "Is there a European Identity?" *EJOP* 1 February 2005. 20 July 2006 <http://www.ejop.org/archives/2005/02/is_there_a_euro.html>.

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