

Toward a European Identity: Obstacles and Prospects of a Common Journey

The question regarding the existence of a European cultural and political identity is an important matter of debate in the social sciences and it will be unlikely, in the near future, to be able to answer in the affirmative or in the negative. Much of it depends on the institutional role and territorial enlargement of the European Union which according to some has helped reinforce this feeling of belonging while, according to others, has been mostly counter-productive. We will analyze both viewpoints concerning a potential European political identity.

In terms of a cultural identity, it is undeniable that Europeans share a common historical background, although we cannot go as far as to state that all Europeans possess the same identity since the very term has a patriotic connotation. As highlighted by sociologists Olivier Galland and Yannick Lemel, there are two major rifts, a religious and a geographical one, that trace the continent's cultural diversity.

The aim of this paper is to discuss both the cultural and the political dimensions of European identity through a number of studies carried out in this domain. We will delve initially into the cultural aspects of European identity, their origins and their portrayal in everyday life. However, we will also argue that we cannot yet establish the existence of an overarching European culture. Secondly, we will examine European political identity, the implications of

the European Union, and the link between legitimacy and identity. Furthermore, we will take into account the measure in which strong national identities affect the formation of a comprehensive feeling of belonging. Our final objective will be to demonstrate that a European identity is possible if we accept the theories of multiple and integrated identities according to which identities are not necessarily opposed, but complementary, to pre-existing ones.

Identity feeds on social interaction. The surrounding social context influences group identities which are the central aspect of an individual's self-awareness. Identity formation in regards to the EU is seen as dynamic and changeable because the traditional notion of identity as an essentialist, functionalist and delimited feature is inadequate for a realistic interpretation of Europe's flexible and versatile reality. Europeanization, the process by which the European Union increasingly interferes in the national sphere of politics and society, is reflected in the way in which Europeans view fellow EU citizens. On the one hand, there has been an increase in pluralism, solidarity and a willingness to cooperate; on the other hand, the EU has intensified racial and political animosities within eurosceptic communities. While cultural identity rests on a series of cultural landmarks and historical accounts, political identity is a recent phenomenon that unites the people of Europe through the integration project.

First of all, Europeans share a collection of cultural values acquired through centuries of coexistence. Given the unresolved and much-debated uncertainty on Europe's geographical boundaries, in this paper the concepts of "Europeans" and "Europe" indicate, respectively, the current 28 member states of the EU and its geographical demarcation.

Krzysztof Pomian traces the creation of a common European culture through three historical attempts at unifying Europe. The earliest one concerns Latin Christianity from the XII century onwards: after the Great Schism, Europe finds its unity by means of a shared religion, Roman Christianity, that spreads Latin throughout the continent and brings together a multitude of ethnicities that have faith in a single, universal Church. The second attempt is brought about by interrelated philosophical and political transformations, the Age of Enlightenment being the most important. From the XV until the XVIII centuries, intellectual and political elites use the same language, Latin and later French, to communicate knowledge and ideas. Their deeply-rooted humanistic culture and set of values – namely their trust in freedom, human rights, political representation and reason – have been one of the greatest innovations of modern times and fundamental in shaping European liberalism and democracy from the Glorious Revolution onwards. In this era, Europe is hence seen as a community of traditions, values and artistic stimuli. The third and, until now, last attempt at integration is the European Union, established with the aim of overcoming the rivalries and nationalistic excesses that had caused two World Wars in less than a generation.

Henri Mendras elaborates four cultural traits that define Europe's Western civilization: individualism, which stems from Christianity; the idea of the nation, aimed at abolishing local feuds in the hope of creating centralized states; capitalism, rooted in Calvinism and in the free market; and finally democracy, easily the greatest achievement of Western civilization. In order to support his thesis, Mendras argues that Europe's neighbors to the East, Russia and Turkey included, developed very differently, subordinating the individual to collective needs, managing large empires with no shared sense of community, forbidding private property and entrepreneurship, and ruling despotically. This comparison clearly illustrates the uniqueness of Western European culture and its distinctiveness from others.

In contemporary everyday life, Europeans share a set of values and interact accordingly. In business organizations, for example, European workers favor intellectual autonomy, egalitarianism and harmony much more than colleagues of other nationalities. In their private life, Europeans cherish their family, career and relationships. Despite this understanding, there are two major rifts, a religious and a geographical one, partly overlapping, that split European cultural unity between protestant and catholic states and between the North and the South of the continent. Protestant and Northern states tend to be more egalitarian and liberal; in addition, relationships amongst individuals are primarily based on mutual trust and independence. Catholic and Southern Europe, on the contrary, are more traditionalist, conservative and based on the principles of honor and obedience.

Secondly, Europeans have a political identity. A number of authors insist on European cultural heterogeneity to argue that the strongest identities that exist at a European level are legal and institutional. There is an obvious link between Europe's centuries-old political heritage and EU legislation in matters such as gender equality, freedom of expression and others enunciated in article 2 of the Treaty.

In fact, the greatest part of a rising European political identity rests on EU legitimacy, in other words on the ability of EU institutions to engage their citizens through active political participation and to successfully fulfill needs and expectations. Moreover, these institutions have managed to create a distinctive profile by projecting on the international stage a cohesive image of Europe, where barriers have become more permeable on the political, economic and social levels. In relation to this, the emergence of a European identity is also due to normative convergence, which has implied limitations of sovereignty and the direct applicability of new laws in all member states.

Symbolism and the media have also provided new meanings to pre-existing identities: for example, the introduction of the Euro – rejected, unsurprisingly, by the United Kingdom – was viewed as concrete evidence of a growing European integration. Today, European citizens feel “more European” when they are informed about the EU's achievements and are exposed to its symbols and values. Top-down messages are thus highly effective in recalling attention to EU decisions and reforms, as proven by the most recent elections (May 2014) in which there was an increase in EU-oriented propaganda and slightly more voters compared to 2009.

Finally, the formation of a political identity has been induced by the creation of EU citizenship which has allowed for greater mobility and contact among Europeans, and has incentivized the individual's involvement in the EU community by broadening the scope of democratic activity. European citizens have, indeed, alongside the right to move and reside freely in any Member State, the right to vote and to stand as candidates in elections to the European Parliament and to the Municipalities of the Member State in which they reside, and the right to submit a petition to the Parliament and to make a complaint to the Ombudsman.

Another controversial and much-debated subject has been the alleged rivalry between national and European identities. According to some, there is a persistence of national identities because the European Union lacks the very basic features of a nation and cannot aspire to become one. Several structural factors impede the creation of a supranational identity: the fact that the EU has claimed to possess a political substance whose nature remains unclear, as demonstrated by politicians' inclination to domestic issues; the EU's scarce public exposure given its communication deficit (EU news are usually subordinated to national ones); and the fact that future European citizens are raised and socialized within their countries' school

system where the programs' contents are almost always nation-centered and where little or no time is devoted to teaching about the EU.

Nevertheless, according to other authors, European and national identities can go together and giving up one's loyalty to the nation is not required for a European *demos*. According to the institutional approach, a European identity is more pragmatic if compared to national ones because it is built on the EU's growing interference in our life prospects and well-being and not on cultural elements. The constructivist approach argues that EU identity-formation is bottom-up and follows the evolution of globalization and social change. According to the theories of integrated and multiple identities, it is possible to conceive national and European identities in terms of reciprocity and pluralism instead of zero-sum terms. The individual is able to partake in several situations thanks to a number of independent “codes of conduct” that allow him/her to orient his/her behavior on the national and supranational levels accordingly. *Nested* identities require a hierarchy or an outer and an inner layer, while *cross-cutting* identities are overlapping and *marble-cake* identities blend with each other. Marble-cake identities have the quality of assimilating national cultural components in a wider and richer European identity, recalling the famous EU official motto “unity in diversity”.

In conclusion, although it is not yet possible to assert the existence of a European identity, the growing social and political activism in matters closely related to the EU is an unmistakable sign that EU citizens are shifting from a “permissive consensus” vis-à-vis the integration project to a more informed and confident stance. This activism is due to a number of recent obstacles and phenomena that have influenced, both positively and negatively, the way in which European citizens view their country's membership to the European Union.

The question of Turkey's accession to the EU is a crucial issue given its implications for Europe's foreign relations with Asia (Turkey being at cross-roads between the two continents) and for internal stability. Public opinion in the EU generally opposes Turkish membership, expressing concerns about human rights, treatment of women and cultural diversity as the leading causes. Paradoxically, however, those who object to Turkish membership are often also eurosceptic, since anti-EU ideas have found a home in right-wing, xenophobic and overly-nationalistic parties. Needless to say, there is an obvious contradiction between wanting to defend the status quo from "threats" such as Islam and working against EU cooperation.

Closely related to this issue is the rising trend of immigration from Eastern European and North African countries. On the one hand, immigration has strengthened Europeans' feeling of belonging and fraternity by pointing out a non-European *out-group*. On the other hand, this phenomenon has exacerbated intolerance and disdain within certain ideological environments. This political pressure has caused member states to turn their attention from EU goals to issues such as domestic security, public order and the legalization of immigrant workers.

Immigration has fuelled the ascent and ultimate electoral accomplishment of eurosceptic parties such as the French Front National and the United Kingdom Independence Party which are posing a great risk to European stability. In addition, secessionist aspirations, such as those in Scotland and Catalonia, have the potential to fragment Europe's political unity; predictably, news regarding the September 2014 Scottish referendum were sprawled on the front pages of all major European newspapers.

Nationalism can be dangerous for it evokes ancient rivalries and can be an enemy to peace. If pushed to its limits, as taught by history, it is a magnetic ideology driven by a firm belief in Darwinism. The fear of immigration, on the contrary, is short-sighted in a world dominated by

globalism and improved communication which have redefined both physical and cultural boundaries.

Given these up to date and highly pertinent issues, the controversial existence of a European identity has acquired enormous relevance on the international stage. It is undeniable that the maintenance of peace over European territory for more than half a century has been a remarkable achievement by the EU, and the fact that this organization has succeeded in adopting treaties, expanding its goals, and orienting Member States' legislation and administration makes it one of the most stimulating and advanced creations in the field of international relations. This alone goes to show that, if we have not yet realized it entirely, we are on the right path to building a genuine European sense of belonging.