



Cultural Base

Social Platform
on Cultural Heritage
and European Identities

European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

AXIS 2. CULTURAL INCLUSION
TF3. Inclusion and identities

Anna Triandafyllidou and Ruby Gropas,
European University Institute

info@culturalbase.eu
www.culturalbase.eu

© 2015 CulturalBase

Workshop 1 – University of Barcelona
September 30th-October 2nd, 2015



This project has received funding from
the European Union's Horizon 2020
research and innovation programme
under grant agreement No. 649454



This paper reflects the views only of the CulturalBase consortium, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

One of the most difficult aspects in understanding Europe in the present but also in the past has had to do with the question of European identity. Does a European identity exist? Do the Europeans feel European? And if they do, how does a feeling of belonging to Europe relate to other important collective and political identities such as national identity or indeed ethnic or minority identity? This set of questions needs to be further examined and taken apart. First of all, we need to discuss *what kind of identity is or would be a 'European' identity*. A second range of questions that is of concern with regard to European identity is the *relationship between European identity, culture and diversity*.

Five Defining Points about European Identity

European identity like all types of collective identity, including the national identity, can only be studied through discourses, uttered by citizens or lay people, produced in public speeches of leaders or elites or reproduced in the media. Identity can also be observed through the actions of the individuals albeit we can only infer whether these actions are an expression of a certain identity. We can only for instance infer whether a certain protest march of angry European citizens in Brussels protesting against austerity policies is an expression of their national or European identity. This can be assessed through indirect indices such as the slogans they shouted, the way they were dressed, the stakeholders that organized the protest march and so on.

Unavoidably 'European' can only be one of many collective identities that people have, and that it is constantly in flux. There is no essence of a European identity that has always existed and that remains immutable; European identity is a multi-faceted and ever mutating concept.

European identity is part of a multiple set of identity features that may form part of an individual's identity. Its importance though may vary among individuals but it may also vary within the same individual's perception of their identity depending on the context and situation.

European identity like any type of collective identity must be more than the sum of the individual identities. It needs to have a group reality: a group of people that define themselves as Europeans and are ready to behave in specific ways in



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

function of their 'Europeanness', and within an institutional framework that supports this identity.

European identity has emerged as a subject of study in itself in the last 40-50 years as part of the overall emergence of identity and identity studies as a subject matter in sociology, political science, social psychology, or also contemporary history. Actually, the inquiry on European identity has been slow to emerge because more attention was given to what is Europe, who belongs to Europe, and on the differences and conflicts that characterize Europe rather than to the commonalities that bring Europeans together. The discussion over European identity has emerged forcefully in the public and political debate after the 1973 Copenhagen declaration of the then nine member states of the European Economic Communities about a European identity. Indeed, any discussion on European identity today is necessarily partly intertwined with the discussion over the process of European integration.

Can European culture provide the basis for a European identity?

The question of course remains whether European identity, beyond the specific European integration process today, should better be conceptualized as a wider notion of a civilizational identity. In other words whether it could be seen as a looser cultural category that points to an orientation of a wider set of values or to a set of historical events but does not have immediate political consequences. Such an understanding of European identity resembles what Smith has called 'families of culture'. While such a view has some historical validity and is concomitant to the notion that Europe is a historically constructed idea with different facets at different points in time, it would today risk neglecting the increasing importance of European identity. European identity was salient in the past decades even if it were for the simple fact that it is contested and denied by many of Europe's residents. Research on the public attitudes of 'Europeans' on Europe shows that there is an increasing effect of political socialisation into Europe through the European integration project (Risse, 2010), and that people build their national understandings and attitudes based on their perception of what Europe is (Medrano, 2003; Bruter, 2005).

Such a view brings us to probe the relationship between European identity and



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

European culture, seeking to unpack what is the cultural luggage that lies behind a notion of a European cultural or also political identity. Linking identity to culture of course opens a whole set of related questions, notably does a European culture exist? Under what conditions does it express itself, and how it is represented? What values are associated with it? Who defines it and what does it mean to them? And, what sort of power relations does it imply?

Europe and culture raise associations connected with the Enlightenment, belief in progress, freedom of thought and of expression, and tolerance. References to Europe and culture have become interlinked with the concept of democracy, human rights, the notion of rationality and free will. Europe and culture are also associated with education, as any reference to culture immediately ties our understanding of Europe with universities, science academies, libraries, museums and a rich humanistic cultural heritage in landscape, religion, the arts, in music, literature and film.

European cultural history weaves together the Greek, Latin and Germanic heritages of European civilization. Pagan and Christian traditions are layered together with the history of the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews and the Jewish Diaspora, and with the Muslim heritage that ranges from the Moors in Spain to the Muslim minorities that are part of the Ottoman Empire's legacy across Southeastern Europe. Narratives of European cultural history tend to commence with the Classical Greco-Roman period, and then trace the imprint of the Romanesque and Gothic architectures across Western Europe. The Renaissance and its humanisms, the Reformation, the English Revolution, the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment, and eventually the French Revolution all constitute the classical points of reference. More recent studies weaved into the narrative the ways in which the idea of Europe and its traditions have been influenced by 'the near others' and how these have contributed to European civilization's distinctive nature. Byzantium, the Ottomans, the Moors, the Levant, have been the most defining 'others'.

Studies in Europe's cultural history also explore the big ideas that transformed Europe, and the rest of the world by extension. Alongside narratives that linger on the trajectory of culture in the arts and religion – and particularly a Christian theocentric view of the world, we also encounter narratives of intellectual history



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

and of the achievements of science and rationality. This historiography traces the rise of Enlightenment thinking and secularity to the big '-isms', from the birth of German Romanticism and Idealism, to Liberalism and Marxism. The rise of modern culture, expressed in the surrealist and dada movements and in the Bauhaus school; the totalitarianisms of fascism and national socialism and the phenomenon of mass, popular culture; the bridge between impressionism and Soviet-inspired socialist realism all the way to pop art and culture, which have made the twentieth century the most fast paced, controversial, multifaceted and radical period of European culture thus far.

Yet these narratives essentially zoom in and out of the national levels. They present a fascinating mosaic of cultures, trajectories and stories that took place concomitantly or in sequence across the European continent. They focus on particular nations, and move from one local setting to another in order to show the same-time interconnections, the dialectical relations or the differences. So the question arises is there a European culture that can provide the cultural basis to European identity or is European culture the sum of national cultures and then by extension European identity can only be the sum of national identities?

An answer comes from exploring the possibility of narrating the national aspects of the continent's populations, institutions, cities, artefacts, traditions, monuments from a 'European' perspective. In which case, what would this 'European' perspective be? Would it be from a higher, eagle-eye perspective, or would it be from a point of view of synthesis? Or, would it be motivated by the calculated objective to derive support for a particular political project? European integration as defined through the EEC/EU's unification has certainly been the most galvanizing political project across the continent in this direction. It has triggered interest in rethinking, framing and debating European history as more than the sum of national histories and European culture as more than the sum of national cultures.

A way of superseding the question of what is European that is not national is to focus on diversity as a defining feature of both European identity and European culture. The following section explores what kind of or how much diversity is there in European identity.



Diversity as a European identity

European identity is not only contested and fluid, linked to different national projects but it also risks symbolising more a history of conflict and friction rather than a history of unity or similarity. The notion of European identity can be seen as loosely linked to the overall idea of Europe through the centuries and to this day. However the discussion of a European identity enters forcefully into the public discourse in the early 1970s when the then nine member states of the European Economic Communities signed the famous 'Declaration of European Identity' in Copenhagen in 1973. This document stated that:

The Nine member countries of the European Communities have decided that the time has come to draw up a document on the European Identity This will enable them to achieve a better definition of the relations with other countries and of their responsibilities and the place which they occupy in world affairs.

Indeed the introduction of the European identity discourse in the 1970s was a political action and any European identity was intended as a political one, even if its referents were cultural and rather vague. As Luisa Passerini (2002) and Robert Picht (1993) note, identity is like health: you become aware of it when it is threatened. Indeed that initial identity declaration at the Copenhagen Summit of December 1973 was brought into discussion at one of the many critical phases of the European unification project in the last decades. The failure to agree on anything led to launching the European identity as a face-saving tool (Schulz-Forberg and Strath 2010: 41), an "escape forward". Strangely, those views may seem out of tune today and highly contested even if the economic and political process of European integration has since deepened, expanded and enlarged to 28 European countries.

The values referred to in the declaration were broad enough to be considered also as overall western values and at the same time allowed for cultural variation within Europe. Thus they did not oppose a vision of European unity that was characterized still by the existence of nation-states with their separate and much deeper national identities. Rather, this view was further reiterated in many EEC



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

and EU documents which pointed out that respect for national and regional diversity and the flowering of the different national cultures of Europe was part and parcel of the valorisation of a common European cultural identity and heritage as mentioned in the Treaty of the European Union signed at Maastricht in 1992 (Commission of the European Communities, 1992).

Through the development of regional and related cultural policies of the EEC and EU in the 1980s and the 1990s (Sassatelli, 2002), the conciliation of an emerging European identity and of antagonistic national identities took a new turn. Internal diversity which embodied both migration related diversity and native minorities, as well as distinct national identities, hence a multi-levelled diversity with different civic or ethnic connotations in each European country, became the distinctive feature of European identity.

The discussion was no longer about how to reconcile unity with diversity but rather that the recognition and celebration of this diversity of Europe was a formative part of its unity. This is probably the concept that is embodied in today's slogan of 'Unity in Diversity', launched in the late 1990s. This view of diversity as constitutive of the new European identity signals the fact that the latter is neither a pre-existing quality nor a historical given, but rather a process in the making, an identity to be achieved.

There are several elements that come out of the conception of European identity as 'Unity in Diversity'. First and foremost, this slogan and a related set of cultural policies recognizes and valorises the existence of a plurality of collective identities within Europe. Such identities are not necessarily political nor only national in character. They can be local or regional and have culture as their main reference point. But they may also be ethnic and have seeds of political autonomy within them. The level of diversity that is implied is left purposefully vague and unlimited in terms of character and scope.

At the same time the slogan 'Unity in Diversity' implies a self-limitation for both unity and diversity. The unity is self-limited in that it can never acquire a higher level of similarity and osmosis to the extent that these separate and multiple identities are constitutive of the common identity, of the European unity-as-



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

identity. At the same time diversity is self-limited as the slogan posits that none of these interlocking and integrated identities will challenge the very existence of a European unity-as-identity.

Indeed the 'Unity in Diversity' slogan seeks to achieve a middle ground between a federalist view of a united Europe with a quasi-national identity that resembles a national identity in its features and functions, and a universalistic view of European identity as a set of moral values that would however fall short from distinguishing Europeanness from a universalistic culture of human rights (Delanty and Rumford, 2005, p. 63-64).

There are a few problematic points in this version of European identity that point neither to unity nor diversity but actually turn diversity into unity. First, this view risks reifying regional, ethnic or national identities by taking them as given and static. The contestation and amalgamation or tension is recognized only at the European level and the sub-European levels are taken for granted. However, this view overlooks important levels of collective identity contestation and transformation that take place at the national and sub-national levels (see also Spohn and Triandafyllidou, 2003). Such a vision of 'unity in diversity' elevates diversity to a constitutive element of identity (even if this sounds paradoxical), but at the same time makes this higher level of identity merely a reflection of the unity. This concurrently overlooks the capacity of the unity-in-diversity process to generate social change and further transform both European identity and the national, local or ethnic identities that are included within it.

A second risk that the 'unity in diversity' identity model involves is that it eventually completely loses its cultural content and remains an empty shell. It actually is a form of cultural communication and exchange or a way of engaging with cultural diversity but is void of any cultural essence. Such a view conforms to Habermas' idea of constitutional patriotism in that it signals a way of engaging with diversity through public critique and deliberation (according to Habermas). The risk arises that such a type of identity is too 'cold,' too culturally 'naked,' to matter for people. Hence, we run into the risk that European identity becomes irrelevant.

Third, it remains unclear how much diversity is included in the European diversity-as-identity notion. Ethnic minorities, people who may be citizens or long terms



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

residents of Europe, having moved to Europe two or three generations ago (often as part of post-colonial migration waves), put the 'unity in diversity' perspective to the test. How much diversity is included in this unity? Are people of dark or black skin colour considered as Europeans? Is 'Europeanness' a civic and territorial identity that can be acquired by anyone or are there some ethnic or racial boundaries that cannot be crossed? Are all Europeans white or Christian? And also what about minorities that are European for a thousand years, like the Roma and still not considered as fully European because they are seen as culturally deviant to the modern European way of life. In the following section we try to deconstruct some of these notions and cast light as to the 'colour' of European identity.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have argued that European identity is, like all collective identities, in the eye of the beholder. It is shaped by the socio-economic, national, both subjective and objective circumstances of the subject that expresses it. It can be enacted or simply expressed through discourses. It is one among many collective identities that people have and is in constant evolution. There is no essence of a European identity that has always existed and that remains immutable. European identity is part of a multiple set of identity features that may form part of an individual's identity and its salience varies not only among individuals but in line with a given context and situation.

We understand European identity as deeply intertwined with national identity and reject the conflictive model in which national and European identities are understood to be in an antagonistic or zero-sum relationship. The question of whether European identity is a primarily political or cultural one is something that can be answered only with reference to a specific historical moment. Thus, today European identity is predominantly cultural in character and not political. It goes hand in hand, sometimes in tension and other times in mutual support, with different national identities, but it is nowhere near substituting them. Actually it is the cultural connotations that make European identity today compatible with strong national identities.

To our set of questions on whether European identity is essentially open to diversity and inclusive, answers are more tentative. Dominant European identity



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

narratives today turn diversity into a distinctive feature of European identity. While this view entails a risk of reifying sub-national and national identities and neglecting important processes of national and regional or ethnic identity transformations, it is also promising because it remains open to diversity. However, there is a risk here that European identity becomes an empty shell and loses completely its cultural vitality. It becomes too 'thin' to matter.

Last but not least, a more careful and critical sociological inquiry shows that the type of diversity that can be incorporated into European identity is less open-ended than one would think. Minorities and immigrants, Muslims and Roma people have a hard time identifying as Europeans or being accepted as such. Indeed racism and ethnic superiority are strong historical elements that have in the past constituted European identity. Today, they are officially discredited but often creeping into the everyday encounters among Europeans as well as in political debates, especially those that centre around security.

Perhaps what is the most important conclusion drawn from our discussion in this report is that identity, not only national but also European, is a *dispositif*, it is a device for social or political ends. Thus more than what European identity is, one should pay attention to what European identity does. While European identity has not been inimical to national identities and actually has buttressed, indirectly, the development of regional national identities in places like Catalonia or Scotland (which saw in European identity their immediate referent bypassing the straitjacket of the multinational Spanish or British state), its effects on immigrant populations and ethnic minorities are ambivalent. While on one hand, European institutions like the European Union or the Council of Europe have taken a leading role in developing international law instruments for the protection of 'old' ethnic (mainly linguistic and cultural) minorities in the post-1989 period (Triandafyllidou and Ulasiuk, 2014), the European identity construct has rather marginalized and excluded 'new' minorities like Muslims of different ethnic origins, and particularly disadvantaged groups like the Roma.

Further readings

Bauman, Z. (2004) *Europe. An Unfinished Adventure*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press).



European Identity: What kind of diversity into what form of unity?

Bruter, M. (2005) *Citizens of Europe? The Emergence of a Mass European Identity*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Delanty, G. and C. Rumford (2005) *Rethinking Europe. Social theory and the implications of Europeanisation*, (London: Routledge).

Ichijo, A. and W. Spohn (eds.) (2005) *Entangled Identities. Nations and Europe*. (London, U.K.: Routledge).

Pagden, A. (ed) *The Idea of Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Sassatelli, M. (2002) 'Imagined Europe: the shaping of a European cultural identity through the EU cultural policy' *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5(4), 435-451.

Triandafyllidou, A., T. Modood and N. Meer (eds.) (2012) *European Multiculturalisms. Cultural, Religious and Ethnic Challenges*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).