Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?
Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

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Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'? Discourse, Affective and Rational Loyalties, and a Common European Identity

René Descartes famously asked himself the question 'What am I?', arriving at the conclusion that "I saw that I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world or place for me to be in, but that I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist."[1] It was this question, too, which led him to postulate his "*Je pense donc je suis*,"[2] an aphorism which this author believes appropriate within the European context. This essay thus borrows Descartes' question and holds it up to the European Union (EU). It suggests that 'Europe' *cannot* be primarily identified in terms of shared histories, cultures, or even geographies. Consequently, attempts to define the EU supranational paradigm as a teleological institution have failed, no European *grand narrative* of 'unity in history' (or culture, or religion) exists, nor can it exist. Of course, the EU is well aware that the promotion of a monolithic European identity rooted in a (constructed) 'common history' and a certain monism towards cultural homogeneity is anachronistic and would ultimately prove to be a vector for stagnation. In the past, the EU hence emphasised its *essence* as an agent who promoted a collective 'code of conduct', certain rules and principles established to safeguard against potential backlashes into earlier European patterns of barbarism, despotism, and totalitarianism (phenomena which were depicted as somewhat endemic to European society). Today, in a shrinking world, this explanation has become only one of many of the EU's *raison d'être*, yet what remains constant is that 'unity in diversity' is the only viable and enduring strategy for European peace and prosperity. This essay thus argues that a genuine and sincere European identity must distance itself from teleological and concrete explanations; it must acknowledge that it itself (as a concept) is ever-changing and always (re)inventing itself – yet simultaneously and in unison, it is always based on a particular *narrative* which emphasises this perpetually metamorphic character that is even so anchored in a framework of common rules, laws, institutions, and procedures. This identity, then, rejoices in all its essence the particularity and uniqueness of cultural pluralism, recognising that cultural diversity is a permanent and valuable part of European democratic political society.[3] Above all, however, it concedes that it is the product of discourses and articulations which reflect a continual struggle between conflicting European viewpoints which, nevertheless, always, and fundamentally so, accept and agree to the rightful supremacy of the EU legal and institutional order. This is its soul and purpose. This essay provides evidence for the aforementioned proposition by, firstly, analysing current (mis)conceptions of a European identity, and, secondly, by advancing the notion of a European identity as a fluent concept deeply rooted in the EU's institutional (and legitimate) order.

The Public Sphere, Affective and Rational Attachments, and Institutional Contexts

This section ought to be prefaced by stating that this article is limited in scope and capacity for reasons of space. It does not discuss such relevant notions as the democratic deficit, the obsolescence of the Western nation-state paradigm, or the influence of capitalist forces in engendering EU integration. These notions are important, yet they go beyond the practical purposes of this article.[4] Furthermore, as a point of clarification, and to escape misunderstandings, it ought to be said that supranational governance *does not* lessen *popular* sovereignty, its semantics remain unchanged. What is detectable is a shift in jurisdiction and a relocation of the legitimate authority structures – the source of sovereignty, however, remains within the tacitly consenting people in contract.

From the outset, it is important to understand that while identity *per se* is a congenital phenomenon (as I have

Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?

Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

established elsewhere[5]), at the level of the state or nation it is not. There exists no magic number of all-defining or categorical attributes that 'make' a state and its *demos*. It is based on myths of cultural, historical, and/or ethnic uniformity. As John Hutchinson avers, there is "no evidence that the masses before the nineteenth century were aware of a national identity."[6] This is based on the idea that authority was located within the absolute power of the monarch, and that the people within this demarcated territory were subjects rather than citizens. Within this context then, as asserted by Stephen Castles, "[t]here was no concept of a *national culture* [or identity] which transcended the gulf between aristocratic rulers and peasants."[7] Clearly, nations do not awake to self-consciousness through an inherently inborn and shared identity, but invent, interpret, and perpetually reproduce them where they do not exist. This is to say that identities at the mass level are *not* a natural phenomenon, they are in fact the outcomes of socio-political relations (and thus of discourse). The point of this political philosophical sidestep is to unveil the here-advanced epistemological point of departure, which clearly postulates that the genesis of identity is rooted in communicative social interactions (*zoon politikon*).

The above-advanced meta-theory is crucial in understanding the true potential nature of a European identity, which, as will be demonstrated, exists on multiple levels and in multiple realms. The foremost predicament for the EU[8] is how it can cultivate an identity that allows for the union's advancement as a *political* project. Fostering a supranational sense of solidarity and belonging, however, has proven extremely difficult. As mentioned in the introduction, the lack of a common (conception of one's) history is the primary obstacle. While it is beyond this essay to discuss all the hypothesised solutions to this problem, it is sensible to focus on the most promising one, viz. a 'civic non-organic form of identity'.[9] Weiler maintains that membership to the European polity can be non-organic insofar as it is based on 'legal rights' that are in agreement with "the foundational purposes of European integration."[10] This, as Littoz-Monnet suggests, is founded in the belief that "there is no necessary, conceptual link between an ethnos and democracy."[11] Jürgen Habermas' conception of *Verfassungspatriotismus*, or constitutional patriotism, is a helpful tool in this regard. Constitutional patriotism posits that *citizenship* must not be the result of a common history, a shared culture, or ethnic origin, but rather the result of shared *sentiments and values* of right and wrong, of governance and legitimacy, and of the polity's fundamental political orientation. It hence engenders a purpose-rational philosophy *vis-à-vis* political questions within the framework of a rational discourse (yet without entering a teleological ontology). Habermas thus promotes a decoupling of 'cultural identity' from the 'state', and hence opens up new possibilities for complementary loyalties.[12] Therefore, orthodox forms of allegiance are complemented by a firm commitment to, and identification with, the (constitutional) rules and norms of the particular polity ('the rules of the game', as it were). Moreover, there is a socially diffused recognition of the equality of all members. This is because *affective* identification is *not* precluded by rational notions of constitutional patriotism which, in fact, considers affective identifications as a highly desirable integrative force. Littoz-Monnet emphasises this correlation between rational and affective loyalties, stating that in "Habermas' constitutional patriotism,…vertical and horizontal dynamics of integration…" are mutually dependent on each other.[13] Accordingly, "once embedded into a liberal political culture, the democratic process can provide the necessary 'glue' that binds together citizens with different interests, cultural forms of life, or worldviews."[14] Ultimately, Littoz-Monnet rightfully maintains, horizontal integration is a function through which, "citizens grow to perceive each other as *equal* (via their equal participation to the democratic process, and, more specifically, to the public space of communication)…"[15] To this effect, constitutional patriotism may well (and contrary to popular belief) engender what Johann Gottfried Herder called *das Gefühl einer Nation*'[16].

Quite clearly then, if we accept the socially constructed nature of national identities, then we can also imagine the *naissance* of a European identity. The central objects of collective solidarity are thus not readily definable and the particular norms and *modi operandi* around which citizens congregate their loyalties must not stem from an *a priori* and organic entity. A constitution, as Habermas' suggests, presents a prototype for such an 'adhesional object' (physics: in the sense that it exerts an attractive force), yet, as suggested in this essay, a constitution is not the only method of securing the rational and ardent loyalty of a people. The EU is fundamentally epitomised by an unparalleled and unique supranational legal structure. These legal institutions embody the bedrock of this rule-governed democratic civil order, which encompasses the "rule of law, freely-contested multiparty elections, and growing citizenship rights, human rights and minority rights."[17] Most notably, the doctrines of direct effect and supremacy have effectively asserted the supranational character of the union's supreme court, the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Any European identity must manifestly be anchored in this supreme, authoritative, and powerful

Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?

Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

foundation, for this foundation provides an increasingly resilient infrastructure which undergirds the European legal maxims, liberal democracy, as well as an ever-increasing array of rights and freedoms. Additionally, as Bideleux asserts, the single overarching civil/legal order places all member countries and their citizens "on increasingly equal juridical footings and on increasingly level economic and social 'playing fields'."[18] Indeed, the justification for European integration, as it were, has always been the fact that it raises a 'body of law and certain operating rules' across socio-political cleavages, from the strongest to the weakest members. What is so remarkable about these developments is that this new social order is *not* based upon the prevalence of (and adherence to) a particular culture, religion, or nationality. On the contrary, as Bideleux proclaims, this civil order

"has been designed to promote the peaceful flourishing and coexistence of a rich, vibrant and ever-increasing diversity of peoples with a wide range of cultures, belief-systems and value-systems, rather than to favour a particular religion or belief-system and the associated culture and value-system."[19]

The capacity of the European order to *accommodate* and *respect* this cultural diversity, and then to *synthesise* and *converge* it within a juristic and normative framework, represents the essence of the European Union and of what it means to be a European. Such an identity celebrates this public 'equal footing' and cherishes the ideational realm within which debates and negotiations regarding societal questions and political prospects can take place. Indeed, economic integration has initially been the touchstone for all integration processes; today, however, economic integration is only one of many facets of integration and social solidarity. Jacques Delors famously declared that, "Europeans will not fall in love with a Common Market." And indeed, Europe has moved beyond a merely economically oriented society, and so have its people. From the outset, it was clear that something more exciting that 'Coal and Steel' had happened, something which would redefine conventional understandings of Europe, of stateism, of nationality, and, of course, of identity.[20] In practice, then, the EU has already moved far beyond what Europe's foremost intergovernmentalists – e.g. Churchill, Bevin, and de Gaulle – had envisaged after WWII. On the other hand, elements of incipient European federalism, "do not *resemble the types* of polity advocated between the 1930s and the 1960s by Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman and prominent European federalists, including Altiero Spinelli, R.W.G. Mackay, Lionel Robbins, Denis de Rougemont, Alexandre Marc, Konrad Adenauer and Heinrich von Brentano."[21] None of these thinkers, as Bideleux correctly claims, "attached much importance to the kind of supranational legal order which has become the bedrock of Europe's new civil order and which differs markedly from the much more 'political' and statist forms of supranational polity which they advocated."[22] New conceptions of Europe and of a European identity recognise the novelty of the superstructure. They advance an identity attentive and sensitive towards the nuances of existing identities and present themselves as a rational choice based upon a shared commitment to supranational legal maxims. Most importantly, however, they are complementary in nature. To conclude this section, Ferdinand Tönnies idea of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* might be useful analytical tools. *Gemeinschaft* refers to,

"a certain sense of belonging based on shared loyalties, norms and values, kinship *or* ethnic ties ("community"); it is conditioned by the feeling that this is a "natural" and organic association based on an *a priori* social unity, on the idea of "one people," and hence a clearly cognisable *demos*. *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, relates to the idea that people remain independent from each other as individuals, but may decide in a "social contract," or a "convention," to group together for the conduct of profit-making transactions ("society"); it remains an artificial construct which will only continue as long as its citizens find the contractual arrangements of common value." [23]

Many opponents of European integration have used this dichotomous binary to explain the so-called impossibility and unattainability of a European identity; however, where these analysts have erred is that they fundamentally presumed that affective loyalties cannot sprout from institutional and normative affiliations. Yet the above section made evident that the German word *Gemeinschaft* is not limited to an '*a priori* social unit', but rather that it is an inclusive concept in the sense that affective bonds can result from commitments to broader ideational structures. Citizens, as noted above, have thus began to perceive each other as equals "via their equal participation to the democratic process, and, more specifically, to the public space of communication."[24] In this sense, identities have transcended the monolithic stereotypes of the past. The next section explores the inestimable importance of discourse and mutating narratives in shaping and, as such, defining the true identity of the European citizen.

Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?
Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

The European Europe: Discourse and Identity

In May 1950, Jean Monnet wrote to Robert Schuman: "Europe has never existed…We must genuinely create Europe,"[25] and Henry Kissinger famously asked what number he should dial, if he wanted to telephone 'Europe'. Both of these examples hint towards Europe's blurred character, a fact which led Peter Burke to assert that Europe should not so much be thought of as a place but as an idea. While little doubt remains about the legitimacy and concreteness of the EU, especially after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, attempts to define its spirit as well as the make-up of its citizenry remain equally difficult. The most diffused error can be identified as the attempt to define 'European' as a single-layered, concrete, and transparent characteristic. This essay, on the contrary, suggests that recent EU attempts to define core concepts of 'European' will prove fruitless and indeed ephemeral as long as such identities are rooted in 'absolute values'. This essay argues that European identity debates themselves are actively constructing, contesting, and reinterpreting notions of 'Europeanness', they thus erect an identity of equals in a consented, sanctioned, and, above all, consolidated arena of colloquia[26]. This is based upon the conditions of the democratic process, which stipulate that an engagement in political matters necessitates a fundamental participation in discursive debates. European citizens acknowledge (and give recognition to) other (transnational) participants in European socio-political debates. As Littoz-Monnet maintains, "Participation in the discursive debate implies the identification of other participants to the discussion as equal and valuable partners in the deliberation process."[27] This conception of equality within the socio-political colloquium implies that citizens perceive themselves as *members* of the same political body and as 'inhabitants' and 'steersmen' of the same political project. They are the authors of their *collective* political future and as such must *debate* and *negotiate* the direction of the political mission. Yet the issue remains "How can a culturally and historically diverse people (or *demoi*) consolidate a plurality of identities around a political project in order to harmoniously steer a supranational union?" Fernandez-Armesto noted, "there is no such thing as a European civilization that is shared by all the peoples of Europe and is unique to them…We should abandon the illusion that a cultural basis is to hand for an 'ever-closer union'."[28] This raises an interesting issue. If 'Europe' should abandon the illusion of an ever-closer union because it fails to exhibit a conception of a 'European civilisation', then *how* can solidarity be furthered (or deepened) from the (rational and affective) identification with the legal order (as demonstrated in the first section)? Olli Rehn, EU Enlargement Commissioner, declared, "The map of Europe is defined in the minds of Europeans."[29] If we accept this notion, then it becomes quite clear that 'European' is a fabricated concept in the ideational, psychological realm. It hence cannot be contended that Europe represents a particular set of core ideas unique only to itself. A European identity embraces "a succession of contending ideas and competing values, norms and practices."[30] These contending ideas should in fact be regarded as the major brokers of concepts of 'European'. And while these ideas may most of the time deviate from one another, they almost never question the legitimacy of the body politics and its institutional power hubs. Moreover, it would be inaccurate to believe that ideas about what it means to be a European citizen stem from within the centre and radiate in form of concentric circles from the centre to the periphery. Such an understanding marginalises significant ideas about the concept 'European' and ignores the subtleties and complexities of European identity. Thus, due to the absence of a clearly identifiable concept of 'European' rooted in common histories, values, and/or customs, we are left with the realisation that "the idea of 'Europe' is no more and no less than a narrative, a narrative that has been told and retold, changing with the tellers and the listeners."[31] From this, then, it becomes clear that the 'idea' of a European identity "has been (re)formulated in words and images, (re)described, (re)invented, and (re)interpreted,"[32] from within the centre as much as from outwith. Language, whether in form of verbal discourse or signs and symbols, has been instrumental in shaping and reshaping a European identity, (re)creating and (re)constructing meanings and substance of different conceptions of the EU citizen (à la Roland Barthes). Consequently, it is the consciousness of a shared political fate, and the prospect of a common future, that enables the consolidation of diverse *demoi* within a collective European framework of identity. As Habermas notes, "The acknowledgement of differences – the reciprocal acknowledgement of the Other in his otherness – can also become a feature of this common identity."[33] Lastly, it must be conceded that while the aforementioned thesis appears internally consistent, because it is based on democratic processes and individual participation, *awareness* among citizens of this supreme common legal order and of a shared 'unity in colloquia', or discourse, remains minimal. It is for this reason, again 'à la Barthes', that emphasis must *also* be given to symbols and emblems that lay a groundwork to which people can refer to during their everyday-lives. They indeed need constant reminders of a consciousness form of belonging.

Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?
Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

Conclusion

In conclusion, Theodor Adorno was quite right when he asserted that "the concept [of 'Europe'] is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition."[34] However, what it does not refuse, and what has been attempted to provide in this essay, is an *explanation* of its perpetually metamorphic nature within the European system. Quite clearly, identities are complex and multi-layered, and as Ernest Renan once wrote, "Or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun,*et aussi que tous aient oublié bien de choses*."[35] Much like the nation Renan described (although the EU is an entirely different body), people within the European Union have to forget a great many things from the past in order to accommodate a European identity. However, what is different is that the 'things that ought to be forgotten' are not necessarily related to the state, or the nation, or a cultural identity, but rather to the*'hyper-nationalised'* conception of the *homogeneous nation-state*. Essentially, then, at the centre of the current debate stands the ideological legitimation of multi-level governance. For this purpose, education is imperative, for it is almost always given the fundamental task of instilling ardent loyalty to the polity in its citizens.[36] At the supranational level, then, the aim of cognitive regionalism "is to replicate a quasi-national construct at the regional level."[37] Yet its identity, as has been argued in this essay, must not replace or resemble existing forms of identity – indeed, this is its novelty. Moreover, as Stuart Hall vividly extrapolated, it is the hope of every ideology and of every identity, "to naturalise itself out of History and into Nature and thus to become invisible, to operate unconsciously."[38] It was suggested that a hybrid-form of constitutional patriotism (not inextricably tied to a constitution *per se*, as argued above) is one possible contender aiming to 'naturalise itself out of history'. It is unique in that it does not constrain solidarity to an *a priori* realm of identity, but rather posits allegiance within a shared conception of right and wrong and of governance and legitimacy. This, as was demonstrated, then engenders a purpose-rational philosophy *vis-à-vis* political questions within the framework of a rational discourse. Crucially, it was clarified that constitutional patriotism does *not* preclude affective identifications, as they are the effect in the causality of rational institutional affiliations. It was also demonstrated that the EU's unique and unprecedented legal order is a major bedrock for its rule-governed democratic civil societies (*demoi*). This structure places all its citizens on an increasingly equal playing field, which in turn lays the foundation for an arena of political discussion based on the perception of equal members. Lastly, this essay argued that identity debates themselves are actively constructing, contesting, and reinterpreting conceptions of 'Europeanness'. The 'European citizen' is in fact a concept that essentially boils down to "a succession of contending ideas and competing values, norms and practices."[39] Perhaps this is best captured in Bideleux' formulation; the European identity "has been (re)formulated in words and images, (re)described, (re)invented, and (re)interpreted…" from within the centre as much as from outwith. A European identity is thus always under construction, never complete, and eternally rooted in the prospect of a common future; it is consciousness of a shared political fate, yet it does not prerequisite a uniform worldview. It is not about *how* we live our lives, but about the context within which we live our lives. Above all, it recognises the unconditional legitimacy and supremacy of European legal norms, rules, and institutions. Put crudely, it is a narrative about the (re)invented essence of Europe. Thus, when Descartes asked himself "What am I?", he arrived at the answer that he was a thinking thing, the*res cogitans. In this sense, too, a European identity is nothing more, but also nothing less, than a thinking (or thought up) thing. 'Europe' exists within the minds of the Europeans, and it is because of this that its identity is of a metamorphic nature. But perhaps the German philosopher Novalis put it most fittingly:*

"*Wir sind nichts, was wir suchen, ist alles.*"

"*We are nothing, what we seek is everything.*" (Translation)

Endnotes

[1] René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Science*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28-29. The quote continues: "…; on the contrary, from the very fact that I *thought* of doubting the truth of other things, it followed *incontrovertibly* and certainly that I myself existed…" The notion of "thought" will be revisited and elucidated in the conclusion.

[2] "*Je pense donc je suis*" was originally stated in *A Discourse on the Method* (1637) but became better known as

Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?

Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

"*Cogito, ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am"), stated in *Principles of Philosophy* (1644).

[3] An interesting account on this topic can be found in, Peter van Ham, "Europe's Postmodern Identity: A Critical Appraisal," *International Politics* 38.1 (2001): 229.

[4] The bibliography should, however, provide a sufficient body of literature on this matter.

[5] Felix Ohnmacht, "Only Trees have Roots; But Men have Legs: Nationalism's 'Exclusionary' Effects and the Overcoming of Common Misconceptions," *e-International Relations* (October 2009): 1-22.

[6] John Hutchinson, Modern Nationalism (London: Fontana Press, 1994): 11.

[7] Stephen Castles *et al*, *The Age of Immigration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 40-41.

[8] When referring to the EU in such terms, this author always refers to EU proponents who share a common enthusiasm towards European integration.

[9] J. H. Weiler, "Does Europe Need a Constitution? Reflection on Demos, Telos and the German Maastricht Decision," *European Law Journal* 1 (1995): 219-58, quoted in, Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, "Will individual attachments amongst EU citizens turn them into Europeans? Mismatch between the EU institutional context and deliberative democracy," *Politique européenne* 26 (2008): 3-4 (word version).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Edwin Vink, "Multi-level Democracy: Deliberative or Agonistic? The Search for Appropriate Normative Standards," *Journal of European Integration* 29.3 (2007): 314

[13] Littoz-Monnet, 4.

[14] Ibid, 6.

[15] Ibid, 9.

[16] "The feeling [or emotion or sentience] of a nation." The term nation is here (by this author) employed in its original meaning, which is not intrinsically related to the state. It 'merely' connotes a people that shares a communal bond.

[17] Robert Bideleux, "Reconstituting Political Order in Europe, West and East,"*Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 10.1 (2009): 3-4.

[18] Ibid, 4.

[19] Ibid, 5.

[20] Ohnmacht, 11.

[21] Bideleux, "Reconstituting Political Order in Europe, West and East," 13.

[22] Ibid, 13.

Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?

Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

[23] van Ham, 229-230.

[24] Littoz-Monnet, 5.

[25] Jean Monnet, ''Memorandum to Georges Bidault and Robert Schuman'' (1950), quoted in *Building European Union*, ed. Trevor C. Salmon and William Nicoll (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 41–44.

[26] Here, colloquium refers to an arena of discussion in which political opinions and attitudes are actively contested and debated.

[27] Littoz-Monnet, 8.

[28] Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, "A European Civilization: Is There Any Such Thing?" *European Review* 10.1 (2002): 3–4, 12.

[29] Olli Rehn, "Values Define Europe, Not Borders," *Financial Times*, 4 January 2005, quoted in Catherine Lee and Robert Bideleux, "'Europe': What Kind of Idea?" *The European Legacy* 14.2 (2009): 165-166.

[30] Catherine Lee *et al*, 167-168.

[31] Ibid, 170.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Jürgen Habermas, "February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe," *Constellations* 10.3 (2003): 294, trans. Max Pensky, originally appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 31 May 2003.

[34] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 1997), 2, quoted in, Catherine Lee and Robert Bideleux, "'Europe': What Kind of Idea?" *The European Legacy* 14.2 (2009): 170.

[35] Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu 'une nation?'," *Oeuvres Completes* 1.0 (1961): 892, quoted in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983): 6. Note: "*Or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien de choses*" can be roughly translated into: 'Now the essence of a nation is such that all the individuals have a great many things in common, *and also that all [of them] have forgotten many things.*'

[36] Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

[37] Claire Sutherland, "Another nation-building bloc? Integrating nationalist ideology into the EU and ASEAN," *Asia Europe Journal* 3.2 (2005): 142.

[38] Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Hard Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 8, quoted in Alan Finlayson, "Ideology, discourse and nationalism," *Journal of Political Ideology* 3.1 (1998): 102.

[39] Catherine Lee *et al*, 167-168.

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Europe: 'What Kind of Thing Are You'?
Written by Felix Christoph Ohnmacht

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