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The ‘European (Union) Identity’: An Overview

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Despite being one of the most contentious themes recently, the discussion on European identity lacks clarity to a greater extent. Resting on a multi-dimensional ground, European identity is ambiguously used whilst denoting many unrelated phenomena. However, it is of necessity that ‘when speaking of “European identity”, one needs to state what exactly is meant, as each of these words taken individually may be ambiguous and confusing’ (Jansen, 1999, 27). Therefore, this obliges us to draw clear-cut boundaries of what to discuss regarding European identity. Depending on both the need for clarity and its special course of development, the main argument of this article is that the ‘European (Union) Identity’ has been shaped within the confines, and in line with, European integration. Therefore, this article specially focuses on the European Identity, rather than European identity. This also comes from the fact that although the search for a European identity is almost commonplace for social science disciplines for a long time, an enquiry on ‘an identity specific to that very new arrival among the ranks of political animals, as the EU’ is much tougher and complicated (Vignon, 1999, 111).

The article will proceed as follows. It will first start examining what the European Identity stands for, based on its primary characteristics and underlying motives. It will then turn into analysing ‘the European Identity in the making’, through providing a historical and political overview.

What the European Identity Actually Stands for?

Given its course of development, it is likely to speak of three prominent features of the European Identity, all of which come to confirm its official character around European unification. First, reminiscent of the image of Europe itself, the European Identity has been constructed and discursively shaped in the hands of European elites. Based on the binary positioning of ‘the self’, as Europeans, and ‘the others’, as non-Europeans, the European Identity has evolved, albeit resting on persistently changing assumptions. Once radical changes took place in the international and European contexts, such as the end of the Cold War, the reunification of two Germanies and the 9/11 event, those binary positionings were readdressed, with the European Identity being attributed new meanings. Yet, even those radical reformulations have not been enough to alter its discursively shaped nature.

Second, European decision-makers have always privileged their core objectives as to European integration in forging the European Identity. Though Europe-makers at times paid lip service to other objectives as regards the European Identity, the robustness and longevity of the EU usually came first. This evident linkage between the integration and the European Identity reflected on the motivations lying beneath the latter, as will be discussed later.

Finally, European elites have upheld a pragmatic conception of the European Identity. Whilst designating it as a problem-solving instrument, they have covered the European Identity among their top priorities, not least during the moments of crisis. That the idea of building up the European Identity emerged when a deep existential crisis plagued the integration during the 1970s again proves this point. Therefore, though generally examined in a positive light, the European Identity came into the fore when there existed anything but a European identity as envisioned.

Based on these general features, it is likely to talk about four main motivations underlying the evolving course of the European Identity. In fact, particularly due to the predominance of the officially held pragmatic conception of the European Identity, these motivations have more or less kept their influence over decades. Hence, it does not seem

plausible to put them in chronological order but to think of them as influencing the making of European Identity in differing degrees at different times.

First, European elites sought to find a place for this rather new supranational actor as the European Community (EC) in the bipolar Cold War setting through the European Identity (Bekemans, 2007). What follows was the Declaration on European Identity, drafted in the Copenhagen European Summit on 14th December 1973. Emerging as the concrete expression of this stated will, this Declaration officially introduced ‘European identity’. In this document, the Member States put forward three main motives as to the European Identity, namely reviewing the common heritage, interests and special obligations of the Nine; assessing the level of unity so far achieved among them; and reappraising the dynamic nature of European unification (European Commission, 2013). Added to this was the importance of a pan-European collaboration among nine Member States, in order to cope with the recent global threats. In combating them, rising reliance on core European values, such as representative democracy, rule of law, social justice, respect for human rights, and commitment to economic progress was highlighted.

All these points reveal that during the earlier phases, the European identity primarily served the external dimension of the integration. Besides, the clear references to core European values laid the ground for the later attempts to predicate the integration, so the European Identity, on cultural Europeanism.

Second, the European Identity was employed in resolving the long-running democratic legitimacy problem in Europe, manifesting itself as declining turnout rates in the EP elections and low levels of identification with the EU. The growing scope of the EU over the daily lives of Europeans is a commonly acknowledged fact (Duchesne, 2008). Yet, it has spontaneously spurred the ongoing criticisms directed towards the elite-driven nature of the integration, having almost no touch with European ‘demos’. In this vein, even the ‘permissive consensus’, denoting the tacit approval by the masses for the elite-driven integration process, is considered to connote the non-democratic nature of the EU, due to ‘the lack of involvement of ordinary citizens in European decision making’ (Mair, 2003, 62). It was against such a negative backdrop that the European Identity was embraced as a sort of effective response towards the democratic legitimacy crisis in the EU circles.

Whilst constructing the European Identity, European elites did not only seek to increase the low levels of public trust in European institutions. More importantly, they strived as well to strengthen the institutional basis of European unification by resting it on ‘people’s Europe’. This approach was not without criticisms, highlighting its failure to grasp the real roots of the democratic deficit problem around the EU’s representativeness and responsiveness (Schmidt, 2010). Yet, resorting to the European Identity as a means for bridging the prominent gap between formal legitimation and material democratic deficiency of the EU dominated the agenda of European elites in handling the legitimacy issue for a long time (Bruhagen, 2006).

Third, the objective of resisting the Eurosceptic surge, alongside breaking the effect of the Eurosclerosis wave, impinged on the evolution of the European Identity. At the time European integration almost came into a halt due to the intergovernmental backlash during the Eurosclerosis period, Euroscepticism simultaneously saw an unexpected surge. Making up one of the integral elements of Euroscepticism, ‘identity-based scepticism’ fuelled the propaganda that the national identity was posed the threat of absorption by the ever-growing European Identity (Riishøj, 2007). It was during this period of challenges that European leaders were at pains to find a working formula that would end this long-running turmoil. Hence, adhered to eliminating both the deadlock in the integration and any sorts of identity-related clashes, European institutions focused their attention on establishing the European Identity as the main safeguard of the integration.

The fourth and final motive behind the European Identity is the cultural impact of the widening of the Union, not least of the Eastern enlargement. During the Cold War period, ‘Europe was part of an American-led West in which it renounced its own discredited identity in favour of a universalistic Western value system’ (Delanty, 2003). Accompanying this was the primary status granted to Western Europe in representing European civilisation, whereas Eastern Europe came to be portrayed as ‘the seat of backwardness’ (Sträth, 2002). However, due to first the end of the Cold War, and then the aggressive expansion to the East in 2004 and 2007, the EU was prompted to redefine its position, as well as ‘the moral and spiritual foundations of its unification’ (Havel, 2000). That is, the geopolitical

enlargement of the Union prompted intense questions about the nature, reality and source of what Europeanness refers to (Tsaliki, 2007). In such a political climate, the European Identity was once again conceived as key to eliminating the divisions between Eastern and Western Europeans and unifying them on the culturally secure ground of ‘being European’.

The European Identity in the Making?

As of the late-1940s, when the idea of European integration emerged, European identity had already drawn attention as a contentious issue. According to Eco (2013), European identity has somehow been in the making since the founding of the University of Bologna in 1088. Regarding the European Identity, yet, although the Treaty of Paris and the Treaty of Rome had provided it with a legal background, it was not until the 1970s that the European Identity officially entered the EC’s agenda.

In the face of harsh challenges, such as the end of the Bretton Woods system, the collapse of the Keynesian interventionism, the global oil crises, and the Eurosclerosis wave, European elites were left indecisive over the future direction of the integration during the 1970s. As the European Identity took shape in line with the integration from the outset, this confusion inevitably affected its course. Therefore, changing preferences of European elites regarding the route of integration brought the necessity to readdress the European Identity as to its main purposes. With the Declaration of European Identity in 1973, what European elites mainly intended was to figure out both the international position of the EC and its responsibilities towards the rest of the world, albeit in a culturally hierarchical sense (Sträth, 2002). Looking from another perspective, yet, this Document marks the recognition by the EC of the failure of the ‘spillover effect’, leading the Community to compensate it through the active promotion of the European cultural identity (Pekel, 2011).

In line with this tendency, the 1976 Tindemans Report proposed establishing a community of citizens by actively raising the European awareness through visible symbols, namely standard passports, common social security systems, and mutual academic exchanges (Karlsson, 1999, 65). Nonetheless, as an evidence of the vicissitudes marking both the integration and the European Identity, the MacDougall Report, in 1977, offered to displace the nearly dysfunctional national interventionist schemes with a pan-European tripartite order of corporatist bargaining (Sträth, 2002, 389). Put simply, whilst not totally abandoning cultural Europeanism, the EC was simultaneously moving, albeit not unambiguously, to save the Keynesian macroeconomic model, related to the European Identity during the 1970s.

However, with the beginning of the 1980s, the EC found itself dominated by the neoliberal discourse, with European integration re-launched under this neoliberal compromise. This gave way to reframing the European Identity concerning its core mission and purposes. This means that after serving to find a proper place for the EC in the international context and establish a European tripartite corporatist order, the European Identity was now reconstructed in accordance with the rising trends of globalisation and deregulation (Sträth, 2002).

In compliance with this strategy, in 1984, the Adonnino Committee and a ‘Committee for a People’s Europe’ were founded to promote the European Identity and the public image of the Community. Following the adoption of a ‘Working Program for the Creation of a People’s Europe’, the European Commission set about practising European cultural identity politics from the mid-1980s. Based on the presumption that the EC/EU is a sui generis political entity, those policies placed the main emphasis on a supposedly common European cultural inheritance (Schmale, 2007). Depending on a historical and cultural interpretation of the European Identity, resting on a ‘commonly shared’ history spanning since Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, a set of European values were referred to. Those values roughly comprise respect for freedom, rights and dignity; rule of law, equality before the law, and political pluralism; separation of powers and democratic institutions; protection of minorities and respect for civil society (Sträth, 2002; Havel, 2000; Shehaj, 2015).

Informed by this logic, the Commission Presidency, not least during Delors’ and Santer’s periods, took many steps reminiscent of the nation-building process. Thus, this period extending into the early-2000s saw the introduction of many symbols conventionally associated with nation-states (Karlsson, 1999, 65-6), intent on reshaping the European

Identity in a culturalist sense.

Among those symbols are included the European flag, the EC/EU anthem (Beethoven’s Ode to Joy), Europe Day (May 9), standard European driving licences and vehicle registration plates, and European passports. With coming into force of the Schengen Agreement, the boundaries between most of the Member States were abolished. The Erasmus Educational Exchange Program, the Eurovision Song Contest, and the European League can be shown as other instances.

Figure 1: Cultural Symbols of the European (Union) Identity

In 1993, the Treaty of Maastricht marked another crucial milestone in the evolution of the European Identity. Together with establishing the European Union, the Treaty formally constituted the ‘European citizenship’ in a way of guaranteeing the rights of the European citizens within a legal framework (Jacobs and Maier, 1998). Pointing to the need of establishing firm links between European institutions and the people, the Maastricht Treaty manifestly favoured the civic dimension of the European Identity, highlighting the idea of ‘people’s Europe’ (Pekel, 2011). In the face of the culturalist/essentialist strategy’s failure, along with sparking a Eurosceptic reaction, this new approach sought to provide a citizenship-based content to the European Identity. Nevertheless, as the culturalist perspective retained its influence, this approach mostly remained ineffective.

Following that, the single currency provided a short-term impetus to rising identification of citizens with the European project (Benneyworth, 2011). However, this does not conceal that even whilst facilitating the European Identity, the political, economic, and monetary integration of the Union kept resting on a cultural sense of belonging to Europe.

Conclusion

From the very beginning, the European Identity has undergone many phases, full of ups-and-downs, during its making. That this process took place similar to, and because of, the fluctuating course of the integration renders it a construct emerging and flourishing within the limits of European unification.

Relying on its three inherent features, namely a constructed nature, an evolution parallel to the integration and a pragmatic conception by European elites, the European Identity took shape based on four main motivations. Applying differing degrees of influence during different periods, these motivations comprise finding an international position for the EC, resolving the long-running democratic deficit problem, defying the Eurosceptic surge and the Eurosclerosis

tide and handling the cultural impact of the Eastern enlargement.

Against such a backdrop, a historical and political overview of the European Identity suggests that the indecisiveness of European elites over the integration penetrated the course of the European Identity during the 1970s. This reflected on its wavering between cultural Europeanism, marked by the 1976 Tindemans Report, and a pan-European Keynesian macroeconomic model, marked by the 1977 MacDougall Report. As neoliberalism declared its triumph during the 1980s, the European Identity was reshaped to promote the agendas of globalisation and deregulation in the European context. Shifting to a culturalist discourse, the Commission led practising European cultural identity politics from the mid-1980s, which saw the introduction of many symbols as main component elements of the European Identity. As those policies proved ineffective, the Treaty of Maastricht adopted a civic paradigm that centred on the legal/constitutional dimension of European citizenship, but mostly to no avail.

All in all, developing in line with European integration, the European Identity has, for the most part, been characterised by persistent fluctuations. Given the numerous challenges facing the integration project now, it seems that this will continue to be the case for the European Identity for the years to come.

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