

Is it possible to forge a European identity?

Recent events, such as the ongoing debate about Turkey's accession in the European Union (EU), have raised several questions which are likely to upset fervent proponents of a stronger European identity and integration. Why would Turks not be considered as Europeans? Are they notably different from other Europeans? If so, in what points does their identity diverge from the European one? In order for such questions to be asked, an important assumption has been taken: that a European identity does exist. It is therefore maybe not pertinent enough to ask if it is possible to forge a European identity, for recent events imply that that is does exist at some level. If is truly does, then it has major implications for the future of Europe: it will, as in the case of Turkey, affect the EU enlargement process, have inference with EU law, policies pursued by the Union and with the degree of European integration. When building Europe, one must not forget the question of identity. Hence in the prospects of EU strengthening, one may ask if it is possible to build a true, integrated and stable European identity: this is what must be assessed.

In order to do so, we shall first look at theories of nationalism which seem to undermine the creation of an integrated European identity From then on, we will be able to assess the extent to which it is possible, and what would be the tools needed to achieve this goal. Meanwhile, the analysis will be subject to a rather pragmatic/up to date approach, bearing in mind the relevance of the subject in today's political stakes.

Keywords: Europe, identity, nationalism, integration.

I. The impossible realisation: nationalism vs. European identity.

The very idea of identity may have very different significations. Some, claim that it must take into account history; others claim that it is a concept that refers to how an individual person characterises/identifies himself. While the former definition can be seen as a component of the second (i.e. history is a 'tool' with which an individual comes to characterise himself), it is more prudent to take the latter as a benchmark notion.

For a European identity to be formed, many barriers have to be overcome. The first barrier that the creation of a European identity may encounter is that of the nation. For the love of a country, people may not be willing to give up certain nation-embodied features. This is the critique of certain thinkers like D. Miller in the U.K and P. Thibaud in France. In 'On Nationality', Miller clearly claims that trusting a bigger entity than our very own government is simply nonsense. His view encompasses the conservative idea that the nation is perhaps the most politically significant of social groups. This in fact sets the basis for nationalism. Nationalism as a political idea was born during the French revolution. Before, people were subjects, as their political identity was formed not through allegiance to the general feeling of national identity, but rather to Kings and Queens. This general feeling of national identity can be created with, according to Miller, common beliefs and the existence of collective acts of imagining (transmitted via books, papers, movies and so forth). In other words, such common beliefs are forged through history, ethnic membership, religion, national symbols and myths: *"In a national community, people are held together not merely by physical identity but by a dense web of customs, practices, implicit understandings and so forth"*¹.

Out of these elements, there is a very important one, central to the discussion: history and subsequently historical continuity. Concerning that point, A. Smith argues in 'National Identity' (1991), that memory, derived from history is central to identity, for it is what separates individuals from others. I.e. it is an exclusionary concept. In that sense, European identity is an illusion: European history as a whole may be interrelated, yet each nation has its distinctive historical body. The existence of a nation through time is for instance the spine of a national historical continuity. A critique to this approach can be simply that in fact Europeans do share a common history, especially in the past century. While before it was less clear, one

¹ David Miller, *On Nationality*.

can acknowledge that both world wars brought Europeans together to some extent. In other words, countries interact at very different levels and one of them is history.

Within the nation, there are also other features, such as culture that must be considered. Nationalists would argue that it is also an exclusionary concept. David Miller claims that nations have a common public culture that will hamper European integration (and thus also identity building). Thus, sharing a common identity must be coupled with a common culture. This is also a view expressed by P. Thibaud. We are not culturally close enough to understand each other and communicate. Culture is a barrier to communication². It is this very reason that brings euro-sceptics to dismiss Turkey application to the E.U. This Turkish dilemma compels us to raise an important issue: justify that Europeans have enough common features to forge an identity, in the sense that nationalists see it. Not allowing Turkey in the E.U on the basis that we are culturally too different would imply (from a nationalist view point) that Europeans share an identity and thus a culture. One can say that Greece and Turkey are for instance very close culturally, since the former was under the latter's occupation for over 400 years. The same can be said about the cultural proximity of countries such as the UK and Malta, Greece and Cyprus, the Benelux States, Scandinavian countries and so forth. Culture does not necessarily always stop at country's borders. Kant wrote two hundred years ago that we are 'unavoidably side by side'. Adding Held's idea that 'we live in an overlapping community of fate' can thus undermine the nationalist 'cultural tool' for identity building.

In addition, from a cosmopolitan view, culture can be seen as a strength, and even somehow like a base for further integration. For instance Dominique Wolton argues that for a European space to be created cultural identities must be kept and preserved as constituting elements, for "*there is no communication without relations between mutually recognised identities*"³. In addition, J.M. Ferry claims that the political unity that the E.U needs must be supported with the plurality of national cultures: identity in general and more specifically political identity must not be a product of culture anymore. For example, a French farmer is closer to a Spanish farmer than to a French university professor.

One of the nationalist's strongest arguments is that of language. Language is often said to be the clearest symbol of nationhood, carrying certain attitudes and values that produce a certain sense of belongingness. Habermas proposes the idea that English should be used as a

² Ferry, J.M., and Thibaud, P., *Discussion sur l'Europe*, Fondation Saint-Simon, Calmann-Lévy, 1992.

³ Kastoryano, R.(dir.), *Quelle Identité pour l'Europe ? Le multiculturalisme a l'épreuve*, Presses de Sciences-Po, 1998, p. 33.

European language, yet this is not compatible with nowadays European political aspirations. Europe must thus find a way to go around this problem which is widening together with enlargement. It is however not an exclusionary concept, since for instance different languages may coexist within a nation, without being an obstacle to the creation of a national identity, like in Belgium, Canada, or Switzerland.

So far, different ‘traditional identity building’ tools have been analysed. These were in fact the main tools advocated by nationalists and that thus would seriously undermine the creation of a stable and strong European identity. Hence, knowing what cannot be used, we can now outline the remaining tools and assess the extent to which they can, or not, sustain the forging of a European identity.

II. The rise of a true European Identity: the proper tools needed.

Kymlicka argues that “citizens share a sense of belonging to a particular society because they share a language and history, they participate in common social and political institutions which operate in this shared language and which manifest and perpetuate this shared history”. This quotation seems to summarize all that has been said so far. However it gives the base for the way a European identity can be forged. It is true that means such as language and to some extent history cannot be used as we have seen. Then if we are to follow Kymlicka’s quotation, **we must base this European identity on means such as common political and social institutions**. For instance, liberals argue for a more ‘civic’ view of the nation that places as much emphasis on political allegiance as on cultural unity. While it seems that cultural unity is not Europe’s strongest point, it must then resort to political allegiance to create an identity. In other words, **Europe may not be able to use the traditional ‘identity forging tools’. Judicial, moral, civil, political and institutional techniques must be used**, as Habermas proposes. For example, in a timid attempt to bring Europeans closer, the EU has used some judicial ‘tools’: the Maastricht treaty keeps a link between nationality and European citizenship. It acknowledges all members as nationally distinct, yet calls them European citizens⁴. The role of institutions is to create a feeling of political allegiance to them. They are created in order to ensure a balance between member states. For this reason the European Constitution seems vital. David Held’s view of the world

⁴ Kastoryano, R.(dir.), *Quelle Identité pour l’Europe ? Le multiculturalisme a l’épreuve*, Presses de Sciences-Po, 1998, p. 29.

being governed according to universal principles of right and justice enhances the idea of common institutions. Such institutions hold certain values that are seen as common to all Europeans. They thus become a tool for identity building. For example, the ‘ECHR’ – European Court for Human Rights is based on a Convention that puts forward certain values (e.g. equality and equity, freedom and so forth) and the mere fact that the convention has been approved legitimately by all member states implies that they do embrace such values too. Other institutions such as the European commission or the European parliament, can in the long-run promote a sense of obligation towards them (just as people feel obliged towards their state) that is, as Habermas claims, devotion to shared, constitutionalised principles of justice and democracy in Europe.

Another tool, which would serve indirectly both political and judicial institutions, is education. This tool can in the long-run promote the very idea of allegiance to political and judicial institutions, in the same way it can be used inside nation states. This is a proposal for a use of education according to the communitarian idea proposed by Charles Taylor. Education being linked to the state, it is thus a way to set a path for the people: it is an “*authoritative horizon which sets goals for us*”. In other words, it will not be the state, but the entire European community that will drive the politics of the common good. Through education, European identity can be formed in the web involving a communitarian sense of attachment with a cosmopolitan respect for diversity, as the political thinker Bellamy points out. This consideration also entails a part of the Constitutional Patriotism theory (c.f. J.M Ferry, Habermas), in that European identity truly differs from national identity.

Finally, there is a final point that seems to be relevant to the current state of world politics. In The Economist of November the 27th 2004, the importance and desire for a certain bi-polarity between Europe and the USA by some European countries (France in the case of the article) was briefly mentioned. This idea can be in itself a promotion of a greater unity and sense of identity amongst Europeans. Some may argue that the USA has won the battle for the supremacy in world politics, but not the war, and support this argument by advocating France’s reluctance to follow the American lead on the eve of the Iraqi conflict, threatening to veto a U.N resolution for military intervention. Others see hope of victory for this ‘war’ in the European Union. This hope can be driven by a ‘Euro-loving feeling’ or some form of Anti-Americanism.⁵ Yet, in any case, it is an external factor that can encourage the strengthening

⁵ See article by Y. Arvanitis and J. Martinez, *The Ryder Cup Effect*, UWCADES, 2003.

of European identity. This bi-polarity may also be a tool that strengthens the feeling of European identity.

In this essay, the necessary tools for the construction of a European identity have been outlined, and allowed us to see that they may in the long-run be used to further the timid advancements already made. Traditional ‘tools’ based on the Nation, History, Myths, Culture and language seem to point out that a European identity is a utopia. Yet, it has been shown that other techniques can be used, such as civil, institutional, moral, judicial, and political, both internal and external. It is under such a perspective that we can value the European Constitution as a core tool. However, what has not been assessed since it goes past the scope of the paper, are the ideal conditions for these tools to work in the most efficient way. This can bring us to the analysis of the way European integration is to be conducted for a true European identity to be forged. A common fear is that the precipitated enlargement of Europe did not give time to the members to consolidate this identity, weakening the effects of the ‘tools’. However, it cannot be a short-run creation. Identity is to be born slowly, with both exogenous and endogenous factors. Having the tools may thus not be enough: they must be adequately tailored for the job.

Bibliography:

- Almond, G. and al, *European Politics Today*, Longman, 2002.
- Arvanitis, Y. and Martinez, J. *The Ryder Cup Effect*, The UWCAAd Economics Society, 2003.
<http://www.uwcaades.org/cgi-bin/uwcnpro/fullnews.cgi?newsid1051266721,88745>.
- Ferry, J.M., and Thibaud, P., *Discussion sur l'Europe*, Fondation Saint-Simon, Calmann-Lévy, 1992.
- Heywood, A., *Political Ideologies : An Introduction*, Palgrave, 1998.
- Kastoryano, R.(dir.), *Quelle Identité pour l'Europe ? Le multiculturalisme a l'épreuve*, Presses de Sciences-Po, 1998.
- Lenoble, J., Dewandre, N., *L'Europe au Soir du Siècle*, Editions Esprit, Paris, 1992.
- The Economist, November 27th – December 3rd 2004.