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On the Question of European Identity

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1 Preface

The concept of Europe is very controversial. There is no consensus among scholars on either the birth of Europe or the definition of Europe. Definitions have varied throughout history and the transition of the intellectual space and the geographical area. Only in the recent centuries, the Europeans started to construct a self-understanding of their Europeanness.

The idea of pan-Europeanness first emerged in the 19th century. Count Coudenhove-Kalergi predicted before the Second World War that Europe would be soon facing a new destructive war if the clash between France and Germany could not be avoided with the creation of a customs union. He had proposed a European nationality instead of the national ones. Despite the apparent equivalence with the idea of European identity, the European Communities were eventually not built on them. The architects of the European project found the common European ideal as a way of restraining the hostilities between Western European countries. The trite phrase of "unity in diversity" seems, however, much older than the Treaty of Maastricht. The recent integration into deeper economic and political union brought out a need for stronger togetherness through a common identity in order to gain legitimation for the European project.[1]

Along with deeper integration, the question of the relation between national identities and a common European identity has appeared. The identities of Europeans are still closely tied with birthplace and nation states. As the national identities undoubtedly face a form of crisis in the postmodern globalised world of fragmented realities, one should ask, what could the role of a European identity be? What should the common identity be based on? To what extent should we further the sense of togetherness? Is it absolutely needed for the integration process to keep on going? Will the European project be doomed to fail if the project of common identity fails?

The difference between legal-political citizenship and the narratively constructed identity must be taken into consideration. Although mostly concentrating on identity, this paper will address both of the concepts to some degree, as they are interconnected. We want to go anyhow beyond the legal framework of citizenship and to address the core premises on which to base the future Europeanness.

2 Basics

2.1 Identity and national identities

Identities are always constructed, evolving, unstable, and susceptible to change. Every identity is a complex and multi-layered set of feelings of belonging. Every individual feels belonging to several geographical identities. Identity used to be connected with the individual's persona, but nationalism connected it to the concept of nation. Now, the concept keeps widening away from national unity to include the whole continent. For identities, it is needed that something exists but even more important is that something is believed to exist or be true. As Heikki Mikkeli points out, identity is not substantial similarity as such but more like of what people interpret they are.[2]

Identity needs comparison of identity and similarity with the dimensions of locality and temporality. In the history of Europe, the Other has often been identified with hostility, e.g. against the Ottomans, Communism, Americanism, that need to be fought against. Identity needs both the otherness for external differentiation, and the internal

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[1] Mikkeli 2010.
[2] Mikkeli 1998.

coherence of the identifying group. Philosopher Julia Kristeva has, however, observed that the Other can also be found inside ourselves, in what is hidden, forbidden and restrained. Only restraining the Otherness in ourselves, we identify with and feel belonging to a group.[3] According to another Philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, the perception of the multicultural world evokes fear of losing the monopoly of our own culture and, therefore we feel threatened. We come face to face with the Other and realise the Otherness of ourselves to the others.[4] The danger, as Ole Waever notes, is that the national cultures may feel threatened while faced with the infinite otherness. According to him, when national identity feels safe only within the sovereign nation state, the chance for integration will be lost.[5]

Identities also have the tendency of striving for internal coherence, the integration of societal heterogeneity. Nations share symbolic codes that impose the characteristics of the national identity. The common past, that confirms continuity, becomes important.[6] Past is often also used as an identity re-creation tool, like in the case of the removal of the Soviet bronze soldier statue in Tallinn.[7]

Nation state was only a very recent invention and nations still need to do a lot to keep up the commitment of the citizens by imposing nationalism and nationalistic use history. All of that works against the idea of creating a European identity and European citizenship, according Professor of history Laura Kolbe. She would rather encourage criticism towards the nation state-based theories of Europe.[8]

Europe's history is truly multicultural: today's Europe itself is the result of Great Migrations. Through centuries, and only at an increasing pace until today, people have moved in and out of Europe. The 19th century nationalists went shopping in a great emporium of traditions and cultures while in the search for the true spirit of their nations, although, some of it they had to invent themselves. In today's Europe, national identities leave us in the trenches without means to face the challenges presented by the globalised world and the changing composition of European societies.

2.2 European identity

EU constituency lacks the will and motivation to involve itself due to the democratic deficit and the lack of knowledge and information on EU's structures and actions. Even though Eurobarometer-polls show that in general European Union has a positive (31%)or neutral image (41%) in the eyes of its citizens,[9] approximately the same amount of respondents admit that they do not know how the EU actually works.[10] As we can see, there is still a great information gap between EU-bureaucrats and the rest of the society.

Nevertheless, the economic situation is emerging once again as the most important issue for the EU, according to its citizens. The public finances of the member states have risen in importance, being now the second most important issue, followed by unemployment, inflation, and, only then, migration[11]. Despite the current economic and solidarity crisis, the Europeans still see the EU as the best actor to take effective measures

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[3] Kristeva, cited in Mikkeli 1998.
[4] Ricoeur, cited in Mikkeli 1998.
[5] Waever, cited in Mikkeli 1998.
[6] Mikkeli 1998.
[7] Kolbe 2010.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Eurobarometer 76, 2011.
[10] Eurobarometer 72, 2009.
[11] Eurobarometer 76, 2011.

against the financial and economic crisis[12]. It seems like Europe is first and foremost regarded as an economic unity, having a common currency, also stressing the freedom to travel, work, and study abroad, but leaving the democratic and cultural values slightly to the background[13].

When it comes to the European Union and the European identity, there is no clear answer what it is and how to best further it. Arguments for a common identity are numerous. Identity question is closely linked with the question of political representation: who is competent to represent us? While we have experienced integration fatigue for a longer time, the common identity could help to legitimize deeper integration, if the people felt European-wide emotional togetherness. Individuals of different national backgrounds would be motivated for closer cooperation and involvement in European affairs. At the same time, the democratic deficit, that plagues the European politics, would lessen and the EU institutions would gain more support. Therefore, the question of a common identity is essential for the legitimation of the European Union. A common identity could also help to define what Europe is, if there was a clear definition of who is European and how to become European? The fascination for nationalism would also slowly melt away.[14]

The identity-building is troubled by the lack of clear future vision for Europe. The integration is an ongoing and ever evolving process. We do not know what the EU and Europe will be like in the future. How many more countries will join the Union and how close will the cooperation with the neighbours, such as Russia, Northern Africa, and Middle East, be? The EU has a hybrid form, somewhere between a federal union and an organization of independent states. Voters are uninterested in the EU-level politics, and there is no common European public political space and nor a functioning party system. Where are we taking the integration and where is the deeper integration leading us?

Some could even argue that there is no need for a common identity and that it is absolutely impossible to create one. The common European identity does not necessarily mean the same thing for everyone around the Union.[15] The idea of "unity in diversity" suggests that European nations recognise each other's characteristics but meet under the same denominators. John Keane has noted that further pluralism of values and identities would contradict the "Thatcherian" Europe of one large market area. He thinks this would only lead to further unequal distribution of economic wealth and ecological problems.[16]

It has been argued that the EU as an intergovernmental trade network will flourish also in the current form simply from the processes of the enlargement: the benefits are "network benefits" that increase with size and not – as "the absorption capacity model" has it – benefits based on sharing out something with a fixed supply[17]. But, then again, what is the future model of the EU? It is often claimed that internal problems in the Union are solved by the enlargement, but where will be the limits? Identity demands, in any case, borders and boundaries – either physical or psychological. Is it possible to combine both tendencies of individualism and consumerism to the construction of European identity and a common society?

3 Critique

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[12] Eurobarometer 76, 2011.
[13] Eurobarometer 72, 2009.
[14] Mikkeli 1998.
[15] Raento 2010.
[16] Keane, cited in Mikkeli 1998.
[17] Emerson et al. 2006.

3.1 European identity

Heikki Mikkeli argues that the European population and cultures are not homogenous and will never be. This is a difficult starting point for creation of a European identity. Europe, as we know it, is mostly just a narrative construction. This means that there has never been and will never be one single essence of Europe. This is a problem for the enlargement discussion because there is no consensus of the nature and the width of Europe.

This perspective is one of constructionists who present that reality is a social construction and that the social world is not given: it is not something "out there", independent of the thoughts and ideas of the people involved in it.[18] The social and political world is a world of human consciousness: of thoughts and beliefs, of ideas and concepts, of languages and discourses, of signs, signals and understandings among human beings, especially groups of human beings, such as states and nations. A European and Europe itself are narrative constructions.

Europe can be seen as a narrative construction of different variations, e.g. Europe as a Christian community, as a group of national states, as a superior civilization, as an economic zone, or as a multicultural continent in the postcolonial phase but, what is important, always under construction. Reason (of Greek rational thinking), Christianity (clemency), and democracy (Roman law and justice) have traditionally been named as the foundation pillars of the European identity. A vast array of other things could be added, such as scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, and the tradition of dialectic discourse, to name a few.

According to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, deeper commitment to the Christian dimension of the European identity would reflect the realities of European history and tradition of law and would prevent lack of solidarity and motivation that have hindered the furthering of the European political project. It is sheer ignorance to think that Europe should be based on Catholicism and Protestantism, providing a weak model for the European feeling of solidarity and identification, as it fails to include large amounts of citizens who do not come from a Christian background, let alone any religion. Islam, Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, and atheism, all have influenced the history of and continue to influence the present-day European societies. Enlargement to the East and the Balkans brings even greater masses of Orthodox and Muslims to the community's table.

Mikkeli is opposed to the idea of building a common European identity for strengthening the citizens' commitment to the Union. He argues that it is foolish to think that we would be able create "a new European" out of the mixture of peoples, cultures, habits, and religions. Multiculturality is only going to increase through the large immigration flows.[19] The question should therefore be: how to deal with constant migration?

Scholars are haunted by the so-called territorial gap, Mikkeli argues. They easily become prisoners of nation states. In research, the concept of Europe has to be problematized, and researchers need to get rid of the essentialist thinking on Europe. The language, about how to speak about Europe, has to be deconstructed. The colonialist past should be accepted as an integral part of European thinking, and Eurocentrism to be avoided.[20] Current political division and historical-cultural divisions of Europe are further reproduced through unsynchronized education systems.

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[18] Jackson & Sørensen 2003, 164.
[19] Mikkeli 2010.
[20] Ibid.

3.2 Erasmus-experience

Erasmus neither strengthens solidarity among young Europeans nor does it truly create European identity. Quite the contrary, the national stereotypes are repeated through all sorts of theme parties and constant comparison of different nationals. Intelligent and educated Europeans content themselves with repeating nothing but worn-out nationally-learned cultural clichés that they in the end do not even believe themselves. At worst, the Erasmus-experience can be illustrated as a school class. Students from poorer countries want to seem no weaker than the rich kids from the West. The rich kids from old democracies wonder at the blue-eyed nationalism of the children of the former socialist countries, although fundamentally reproducing equally strong nationalist ideals in thinking and world-view with no more self-criticism to it.

The organisers are also often to blame because the picture they offer for the incoming exchange students fails to go beyond the common touristic outlook on the country. For most of the exchange year, the students spend time with fellow exchange students, in the so-called exchange student bubble, and barely bind any ties with the locals of the receiving location. Most students have mixed feelings going back home, sad to say goodbye to their new acquaintances (whom they will never meet again) and happy to return home to safe surrounding of which they can now be sure are the best place on earth for them. Despite spending a year abroad, students do not think very internationally, according to sociologists. Language and survival skills are learned, of course, but it seems like we do not think more outside "the national box", after all. Even though life styles may be very global, the national identities remain often very conservative. In Europe, we talk global but we think and feel national.[21]

4 Where to look for European identity?

4.1 Cultural identity

Julia Kristeva calls the European identity project "a counterpoint to the modern cult of identity" and "indefinitely surmountable." She finds multilingualism "the basis of cultural diversity which must be protected […]". She says that "In Europe we cannot escape the condition of being foreigners, this foreignness is tacked on to our original identity, becoming the more or less permanent lining of our existence." By learning other national languages, not only European, we can learn to listen to the Other. The European understanding of freedom and nation must also be reanalysed. She calls for strong and healthy national cultures – which, however, do not need to be defended by force against a foreign enemy – in order to revive the European cultural diversity.[22]

Nadja Stamselberg questions the identity project here and asks "Do we really need to attract emotional connection?" Habermas and Derrida emphasize the need for Europe to attract "emotional connection" out of its citizens and states, as the United States does. "Identity built on differences between European and the rest of the world has fallen in its own trap," Stamselberg argues. "The collective European identity cannot be limited to protective borders", and "it cannot be placed face to face with other identities in the world because no undisputed borders divide the historical and cultural area of Europe and the areas surrounding

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[21] Ylioppilaslehti 7/2012.
[22] Kristeva 2008.

it." "The danger of cultural fundamentalism" lies basically "where ethnic segregation is argued by cultural differences."[23]

National cultures tend to support the language of the majority, however. European identity should incorporate the already endangered minority cultures, both traditional and those new to the European societies. To encounter and to understand the Other, the different cultures, with an open mind is a way to learn to understand ourselves and the restrained otherness in ourselves. Moreover, the minority culture perspective can often offer a much broader world view than the one of the original population, because minorities are more prone to interact across national borders. This is where the positive side of the Erasmus-exchange and the likes come in. Amidst different nationalities students see from a distance how their national cultures are merely small minorities among the variety of cultures, and how there is much more to learn about humanity, the way, how every human being possesses the same basic needs wherever one goes.

4.2 Freedom and hospitality

Kristeva talks about two kinds of freedom as models for democracy. One, which can be connected to the American model, finds the individual free to adapt to "the logic of cause and effect, the logic of production, science, and economy", and "to reap profits from the chain of cause and effect and to play the market of production and profit." The other, freedom preferred by the Europeans, is expressed in the encounter of the Speaking Being with Another Being, presenting "himself to himself and to others, and in doing so, liberates himself."

She argues that "it is necessary to insist on this second concept of freedom." Especially the Europeans, in the face of globalisation and integration process, need to "revolt" in order to maintain their freedom without moving into the American model. European cultures are "the bearers" of the great "singularity", the "irreducible qualities" each individual "brings to the community."

> "[T]his singularity and the respect it engenders are among the most surprising acquisitions of European culture and which constitute the foundation as well as the intimate face of the rights of man. It is precisely this concern for the singular subject that allows us to hear and adapt political rights to the poor, to the handicapped, to the elderly, but also to respect the specificities of sexual and racial difference."

According to Kristeva, the European kind of "singular freedom" is endangered by the consumerism and the American model but she sees Europe united in the matter, despite differences between Eastern and Western parts. The diversity of European cultures must be protected in order to save "the humanity", defined as "hospitality" by her.[24] This is close to the theses Stamselberg presents as solutions for the identity building in Europe.

Stamselberg proposes the two key ideas that should be placed in the core of the identity project. Like Kristeva, she suggests hospitality in the encounter with a stranger, because people will move more and more between cultural spaces. The second idea is a Socratic conception of freedom and individuality. She comes close to Kristeva's proposition but emphasizes the importance of excluding predefined cultural identity of the Europeanness. "The European identity, now being built, should not rely in generality but on freedom and individuality," she concludes.[25]

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[23] Stamselberg 2009, 133-138.
[24] Kristeva 2008.
[25] Stamselberg 2009.

4.3 The Multitude

Italian philosophers, Paolo Virno and Giorgio Agamben, have criticized the domination of "the people" in the discourse, to which "the multitude", as Virno calls it, loses the political justification. This multitude should stand up to defend its political right.

Virno does not directly talk about identities in his book *Grammar of Multitude*. Connected to his theory of political economy and analysis of the labour process of the post-Fordist mode of production, there is a key concept of "the multitude" that comes to replace the outdated "people", which is clearly inherited from the national thinking, and thus offers useful tools in which to discuss the turn the European identity project is facing.

According to Virno, the multitude will continue to seek for and redefine "the One", the universality, which no longer is connected to the One of the people in a state. The multitude "is the form of social and political existence for the many, seen as being many."

"The multitude is an amphibian category: on one hand it speaks to us of social production based on knowledge and language; on the other hand, it speaks of the crisis of the form-of-State." He refers to Carl Schmitt who predicted the end of the stateness (Staatlichkeit) as the monopoly of political decision-making. The state political body fails to meet the needs of the contemporary multitude.

In this world, the "rise of a public intellect" has taken place. The general linguistic-cognitive capabilities of the humans, the "life of the mind" becomes "public," and the "intellect, even in its most rarefied functions is presented as something common and conspicuous." The unity comes "out of necessity, or because they constitute a form of protection in a society devoid of substantial communities (or of "special places")." It "is constituted by the 'common places' of the mind, by the general intellect." This kind of a unity is totally different from that of a state.

The element of safety plays a crucial role for the multitude as it did for substantial (traditional) communities, as shown above. In a contingent world, without safety net of customary, differentiated discourses tied to specific sites and contexts within society, the multitude must protect itself through "generic logical-linguistic forms," or "common places." In other words, substantial communities would unite and stabilize the inside fighting the fear of "the outside", while the multitude will be "united by the risk which derives from 'not feeling at home,' [a characteristic to the multitude] from being exposed omnilaterally to the world." It remains as the One despite being "the outcome of a centrifugal movement: from the One to the Many", while substantial communities are the result of "centripetal movement", from "atomized individuals, to the unity", the sovereign people.

The One does not try to seize power or "construct a new State or a new monopoly of political decision making; rather, it has to do with defending plural experiences, forms of non-representative democracy, of non-governmental usages and customs." It can be even more "universal than the State: public intellect, language, 'common places'[…]" He discusses the crisis of political representation of "the post-Ford multitude" that is "calmly and realistically searching for new political forms." Virno visions a "non-representative democracy based upon the general intellect […]" that would aim at "concrete appropriation and re-articulation of the knowledge/power unity which has congealed within the administrative modern machine of the States." The states' "monopoly of decision making can be truly taken away from the State only when it ceases for once and for all to be a monopoly, only when the multitude asserts its centrifugal character."[26]

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[26] Virno 2006, 37–43.

4.4 Immigration

Europe's influence does not end on the borders of Europe, nor does its responsibility towards the immigration flows from outside. Aging European population is in need for increased immigration flows to fill in the retiring workforce. The cradle of humanity and justice should be worthy of its values.

Giorgio Agamben states that "democracy, which is reduced to the paradigms of state of emergency and security, is no longer a democracy." The ideology of security is being used to justify any measures that limit the basic human rights.[27] Especially, the freedom to move has been unilaterally limited by several member states, most notably in the case of the Eastern European Roma, who are EU citizens using their rights after all. They are being treated as members of organised crime by the officials and even subjected to deportations.

Immigrants do not enjoy equal rights in Europe as original population. Refugees from the Third World countries are shunted between different countries as the governments avoid responsibility of protecting the weakest. Thousands of refugees die every year on the borders of the Fortress Europe trying to access it in hope for a better future. Immigrants without residence permits often end up being exploited by European industry. Protection of European borders is being outsourced under cover of the European Neighbourhood Policy in order to wash the Union's hands of the dirty work. Measures against human trafficking have not been effective enough even within the Union.

Ètienne Balibar argues, that natives are institutionally separated from the non-natives, which also makes Europe more prone to obsessions of identity. The citizenship excludes part of the population that is already well settled and participates in the civic society. This is a question of first and second class citizens. Second class is easily victimized by the native population, especially in the times of crisis.[28] As Sandro Mezzadra formulates, commenting on the works of Balibar, the detention centres in Europe are "a founding institution for an emerging European citizenship" and a form of European apartheid. The European self-criticism does not show a trace of attitude to migration. Community that boasts with freedom and equality to all discriminates migrants in legislation and practise. Mezzadra claims that the migration should be placed at the centre of European identity.[29]

4.5 European citizenship

French philosopher Étienne Balibar argues that the problems in Europe are linked to the decline of sovereignty. The sovereign and the people are obscured and result in crisis of the citizenship. He names three biggest obstacles that forbid the citizenship. They are the crisis of the European social model, the political and social division, and apartheid of the immigrants outside the community. The EU is trying to construct the citizenship anew but a constitution or a common political treaty cannot give birth to the citizenship. Neither can it be built on conventional notion of sovereignty of the people of traditional nation states based on certain ethnicity or culture. The question of "the constitution of citizenship" (including the political organisation) has not been solved, according to him. This would require material constitution, formed in the dynamic between power and counter power. In addition, the citizenship is detained by structural difficulties because of social protectionism. Political movements need to dissolve those obstacles, and by doing so, they would give content to the new citizenship.

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[27] Agamben, in La Stampa 2007.
[28] Balibar 2004.
[29] Mezzadra, cited in Stamselberg 2009.

European citizenship, in other words, needs to be built by its subjects through action and making way for a new togetherness. [30]

5 Conclusions

Habermas and Derrida wanted the identity to be built on the virtues of our common history. Great past does not, however, imply glorious future. Europe cannot solely rely on its past successes. More importantly, we need to think of what we want for the future, what the challenges are, and how we can best respond to them. The European identity will most probably remain as something fairly undefined, although common ground can be found.

The legal framework for European citizenship is only a starting point on which to build togetherness. The content of citizenship and identification to the community cannot be imposed top-down, but the citizens' active participation in the constitution of citizenship. The strength of a new kind of common identity, inclusive of true encounter with the otherness, lies in its transformative power of the European political space towards the promotion of forms of global democracy.

There is a lot of talk about the increase in the feeling of insecurity in today's European societies, but the solution cannot be closed borders and a turn to the inside, with protectionism and nationalism, as in Virno's traditional society, where fear of the outside is the strongest unifying power. It is not possible to build a European identity through same kind of means as the nation states have done. New Europeanness cannot thus be based on exclusive identity measures. National identities, as they are built on comparison with other nations, will continue to feel threatened by the increasing mixing of cultures while people travel more and more. European identity cannot be built on the otherness of something threatening and hostile towards the European community as theories of the clash of civilisations predict. Uncertainty of our contemporary world does not derive from any concrete enemy that could be disabled but from the nature of the societal change at hand.

Echoing Stamselberg, entirely new kind of thinking on European identity is needed, and it should be based on the basic principles of subjective freedom and hospitality. The new European unity needs to be understood as the multitude instead of the people in order to be truly democratic and righteous, as well as best respond to the new political realities and plural experiences of our multicultural societies. As Virno has shown, a degree of universalism is a characteristic of the multitude. Even today, the European influence does not stop at the borders of the member states. Through the exercise of European kind of singular freedom, as designed by Kristeva, opposing decisively the American model, the Union needs promote the good in the world, or, as Balibar puts it, Europe can now after colonialism "use its influence for civilising the world and the moral premises of its own construction."[31]

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[30] Balibar 2004.

[31] Balibar, cited in Stamselberg 2009, 139.

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