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Political Cohesion in the EU Possible Approaches

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Europe w Europe will indeed perish if it does not fight for its languages, local traditions and social autonomies. If it forgets that 'God lies in the detail.'

But how is to balance the contradictory claims of political-economic unification against those of creative particularity? How can we dissociate a saving wealth of difference from the long chronicle of mutual detestations?

George Steiner, *The Idea of Europe*

I

Introduction

Ernest Renan memorably remarked that a nation “presupposes a past but is reiterated in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is” he added, “a daily plebiscite”¹. Perhaps what Renan says of the nation applies to any sort of community. If so, that agreement need not be confined to nation-states alone, and can arguably be extended to the European Integration Project (EIP), as argues Michael Mertes when saying that Renan’s statement “also holds true analogously for the civitas of the EU”². As Biedenkopf, Geremek, Michalski and Rocard put it "Europe's political union demands political cohesion"³ to "function as a viable and vital polity"⁴.

Indeed, it is a sense of community that holds a political union together. But what exactly are the forces of cohesion that may produce such a “sense of community”, and “wish to continue life together” in the EU? The forces of economic integration have arguably proved unable to do so. In this sense, Biedenkopf, Geremek, Michalski and Rocard argue that “The original expectation that the EU's political unity would be a consequence of the European common market has proven illusory”⁵. Thus, the cohesion required to sustain a political union such as the EU must be tapped from non-economic sources as well. This paper will briefly discuss some of these alternative forces of cohesion, namely (1) shared values and the idea of a common identity; and (2) political solidarity based on common interests (A) as well as pluralism (B).

¹ Renan, “What is a Nation”.

² Mertes. “What Distinguishes Europe?”.

³ Biedenk, et al... “What Holds Europe Together? Concluding Remarks”, p.95.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

II

Shared Values and Common Identity: A Critical Analysis

The existence of divergent values among EU populations is often considered an obstacle to finding a converging axis capable of sustaining the European integration project. Yet, the notion of shared values”, albeit a necessary element for any concerted endeavour, may not only prove to be an inadequate force of cohesion for sustaining political unity in the EU, but it may very well contain the seeds of its disintegration.

First, a clear set of common values already lies at the foundation of the European Union. Article 2 of the *Treaty on European Union* states that:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

If each Member State has expressly committed to abide by such group of *shared* values, then the argument in question implies that there should be an additional axiological set: the so called “cultural values” – those around which cultural identities are formed. Since “morality,” as observed

John Kekes, “normally appears to us through the mediation of a particular tradition”⁶, cultural values tend to be accountable for the differences among cultures. However, as proposed by Kekes’s distinction between *primary* and *secondary values*⁷, cultures merely express values that are, for the most part, universal. The first category refers to the goods that are universally considered constituents of a good life; while the second includes both the different forms of practicing these values (which vary according to particular historical, cultural and psychological conditions) as well as to other goods that go beyond the minimum requirements of a good life.

Kekes’s classification implies that: (1) identities, be they individual, cultural or national, are based upon a conceptual framework of secondary values; and (2) axiological conflicts will arise out of the different ways in which primary values are pursued, i.e. between secondary values. Values thus play a central role in shaping identities as part of a broader tapestry of languages, beliefs, rituals, symbols, customs and traditions through which they are interpreted. Herein lies the appeal of the idea of making these core values converge. The aim, it seems, is to neutralise potential conflicts by homogenising the values sustaining different cultural identities.

⁶ Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 43–44.

⁷ *Ibid*, 38–44.

Yet, since primary values are universal, a shared moral conception is achievable only on the level of plural identities (which include language, creeds, practises and so on). In other words, improving the level of commitment of Member States' populations to the EU through "shared values" requires that a sense of a "shared cultural identity" be forged. The problem is that a shared European identity may be perceived as a potential substitute for national identities, therefore inimical to them, which delivers us the second problem of shared values as a force of political cohesion for the EU.

A European identity can scarcely be conceived of without the richness of the cultural diversity of each of its nations. Moreover, to amalgamate such cultural diversity in a single overarching identity contradicts one of the core values stated in Article 2 – "pluralism". Herein lies a paradox of the European predicament.

As notes Ute Frevert, contesting Biedenkopf, Geremek, Michalski and Rocard's optimism about a common European culture providing a source of cohesion, "The problem is only that the realm of ideas, values, and ideals is generally conflictual. Consensus is hard to reach here"⁸. She refers to the realm of culture as a "minefield"⁹, one that was, she believes, rightly avoided by the founding fathers of the EU in their favouring an economic approach to integration.

This is evident from the vulnerability of the conception of a European cultural identity to factional nationalist sentiment. Broadly conceived, the idea of identity is as inclusive as it is divisive, for it requires an element of contrast to maintain its relevance. *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD); the Dutch *Party for Freedom* (PVV); the *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP); *Le Front National* (FN) are notorious examples of populist rhetoric that preys on a sense of threatened identity. Marine Le Pen, FN's leader, epitomises the sentiment when speaking of two globalist threats – economic and jihadist – claiming that "both work towards the disappearance of our nation, that is to say, of France as we live it, as we love it, which is why the French have a feeling of dispossession."¹⁰

The nationalist attack on the EU arises from the perception that European Institutions threaten the dominant culture of each nation by promoting a cultural pluralism that disrupts the nation from within. So the true enemy lies within the nation – cultural pluralism.

In the current political arena, the divisive dimension of identity has tended to predominate, pushing that concept down a slippery slope towards homogeneity and uniformity, on both the supra-national and national levels, which in turn galvanise particular identities towards more

⁸Frevert, "Does Europe Need a Cultural Identity?", 124.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Le Pen, "Le Pen Launches Presidential Campaign: 'This election is a choice of civilization'".

assertiveness. In this sense, Murphy argues that such divisive dimension of identity has been dominant in Europe ever since 1870, when "a centrifugal tendency took hold, and over the next century nationality was invoked to divide, rather than unite."¹¹ In a specific reference to Italy and Germany, Murphy adds that "The older nationalism of 1860–1870 supported political unification; nowadays, nationalist sentiment is an agent of disunion."¹²

But what elements contribute to the predominance of the divisive dimension of identity over its unifying side? A perhaps unsuspected culprit is multiculturalism. In claiming that humanity is divided into clearly defined families, a specific strand of multiculturalism rests upon a supposition very close to that of 19th century scientific racism. While racism discerned such families in the "human races", which allegedly derived their differences from nature, multiculturalism discerns such families in human ethnicities, which allegedly derive their differences from culture¹³. For that multiculturalism to spawn a national identity it takes but a small step. Ethnicity thereby becomes nationality, henceforth united by the cohesive force of a national cultural identity, forging a sense of community and political cohesion.

In sum, the suggestion that sharing values will sustain European populations' commitment to the EU is (1) only relevant if sharing values entails the idea of a European cultural identity that supersedes national identities; (2) if so, the idea is paradoxical because the contrasting cultural and national identities are an essential part of the idea of Europe itself; (3) unifying ambitions are regarded as threatening to particular national identities which, if feeling inappropriately represented, will resist and possibly adhere to extreme measures in an attempt to assure their protection – an example of which is the growing appeal of populist rhetoric; and (4) populist rhetoric points against EU institutions for a threat they face within, not outside, the Member state – the threat of pluralism to its dominant culture.

¹¹ Murphy, "Solidarity and Freedom", 167.

¹² Ibid, 168.

¹³ Magnoli, *Uma Gota de Sangue: História do Pensamento Racial*, 92.

III

Alternative Approaches

A) Common Interests based Solidarity

An alternative to shared values or a common identity as a force of political cohesion in the EU is the concept of solidarity. Relative to the idea of a European cultural identity, solidarity is less controversial, more compatible with pluralism and more easily cultivated. In this sense, Biedenkopf, Geremek, Michalski and Rocard argue that the EU should be “a politically grounded community bound by ties of solidarity”¹⁴.

Broadly conceived, solidarity is a direct commandment of that ethical vision that conforms the model of European civilization¹⁵, but as a normative ideal, solidarity is a far more elusive concept. Katznelson cautions that “when we speak about solidarity, its content is not self-evident. Nor are the values on which it stands”¹⁶. Thus there are choices to be made about “the kind of solidarity we wish to have”¹⁷.

The type of solidarity this paper advocates as a possible force of political cohesion is not to be confused with charity or economic assistance. In corroborating said non-philanthropic conception, Kovacs recalls that “The words ‘solidary’ and ‘solidaristic’ hardly exist in English”¹⁸. Instead of being philanthropic in nature, the type of solidarity intended is closer to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition – a “unity resulting from common interests, feelings, or sympathies”¹⁹.

The proposed concept of solidarity is thus specific: it derives its cohesive effect not from a common overarching value (i.e. human dignity) or from a set of cultural traits common to Europeans (cultural identity), but from an awareness of common interests that breeds an ethically motivated willingness to build a common future. In a nutshell, it is a political form of solidarity.

As it does not depend on a shared cultural identity, political solidarity is compatible with pluralism. Instead of the divisiveness inherent in the idea of cultural identity, solidarity minimizes differences to focus on commonalities, thus breeding an attitude of tolerance and overarching cooperation. These common interests that produce political solidarity unite not around values but around a

¹⁴ Biedenkopf, et al.. “What Holds Europe Together? Concluding Remarks”, 95.

¹⁵ Geremek, “Thinking about Europe as a Community”.

¹⁶ Katznelson, “Reflections on Solidarity”, 137.

¹⁷ Ibid, 139.

¹⁸ Kovacs, “Between Resentment and Indifference”, 59.

¹⁹ Hübner, “Solidarity on Trial”, 128.

practically oriented will. Under this perspective, shared values matter only to the extent that they constitute the moral criteria Europeans employ to determine the interests they will act upon. They do not, in and of themselves, create political solidarity. In this sense, Bockenforde argues that “a community of values is important as a common basis and should be cherished as such, but it does not in itself provide the decisive impetus towards political solidarity”²⁰.

Indeed, the crucial factor for building political solidarity is the political will of all involved²¹. It is clear that such common interests must therefore activate the political will of Europeans in the direction of a political community. As Bockenforde puts it: “Political solidarity (...) In the EU, it involves living together in common with other peoples and nations in such a way that the community thus formed is, and remains, viable and able to act as a political community”²².

In that case, what are, at present, issues that could motivate a common interest eligible to foster a sense of a community, solidarity and political cohesion among European populations?

Arguably, for the purposes of European solidarity, the most consequential challenge currently facing EU countries is geopolitical. It has been summarized by the European Commission when it notes that “Europe's place in the world is shrinking, as other parts of the world grow”²³. Indeed, the relative political, economic, military and cultural power of European countries is being undercut by the emerging countries. And while this process unfolds, the realm of international relations has become increasingly unstable -- a context that aggravates the relative loss of Europe's ability to project power and influence worldwide.

While populations are usually only marginally concerned about international relations, it is believed that, when properly understood, the process of Europe's loss of relative power could serve as the background setting for concrete issues that could potentially motivate Europeans to cooperate in reverting that process, what could then generate solidarity and the political cohesion needed to help sustain the EIP.

All things considered, despite certain advantages, political solidarity appears to be a necessary condition, albeit most likely not a sufficient one for sustaining political cohesion in the EU. The closeness between the concepts of common interests and shared goals suggests that the degree of cohesion generated would depend on the intensity of the common interest, with more strongly-felt interests producing more intense political cohesion. One might recall that early in the EIP's history, the common interests of Europeans converged around a set of goals, most notably peace,

²⁰ Bockenforde, “Conditions for European Solidarity”, 39.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 32.

²³ European Commission, “White Paper on the Future of Europe”, 8.

security, freedom and prosperity.²⁴ But, in time, as the painful memories of World War II faded and the risks of Cold the War receded²⁵ the goals of peace, security and freedom began to gradually lose that “unifying force they contributed to the development of the European Union.”²⁶

B) Pluralism

The common identity approach to the problem of the EU’s political cohesion, as analysed in section II, contains a paradox: a single European identity cannot be conceived of without the cultural and national diversity which exists among its Member States. The concept of a European identity must necessarily acknowledge said diversity, as it is integral to the long history that sustains such an identity. Moreover, an overarching European identity might also conflict with one of the core values stated in Article 2 of the TEU – pluralism. This happens whenever European identity seeks to homogenise all the variegated and, at times, conflicting elements that compose that diverse panoply of national cultures by merely emphasising commonalities at the cost of differences. It is rather inconsistent to demand that nations scale back on their homogenising impetuses out of respect for the “shared value” of pluralism, all the while striving for an ideal of a shared European identity. If EU Institutions are representative of EU Member States, then the challenge truly lies in upholding the value of pluralism as an inherent part of the European identity, not undermining it.

Indeed, precisely because they derive their relevance from an element of contrast from others, identities tend to perceive any homogenising project, be it intentional or not, as a threat. Setting the distorting and disruptive nature of populist movements aside, the feeling of familiarity that arises out of national ties, predicated on a sense of shared history, shared language, shared habits, and, yes, shared (secondary) values is worth consideration. It is a natural and legitimate desire for an identity, national or otherwise, to seek recognition. Denying this in the name of homogeneity may foster a sense of oppression or neglect, that in turn spurs an identity’s defensive, possibly oppressive, self-preservation instinct – like a “bent twig,”²⁷ to use Isaiah Berlin’s analogy, that may at any time swing back uncontrollably against its perceived oppressive force.²⁸

In this sense, Rainer Baubock condemns any attempt to establish clear-cut cultural boundaries as he claims that Europe is “a successful model for overcoming cultural conflict through recognizing

²⁴ Biedenkopf, “United in diversity”, 13-29.

²⁵ Biedenkopf, et al. “What Holds Europe Together? Concluding Remarks”.

²⁶ Biedenkopf, “United in diversity”, 16.

²⁷ Isaiah Berlin attributes the analogy of the “bent twig” to Friedrich von Schiller.

²⁸ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 253–278.

diversity. And this is exactly the reason why any attempt to demarcate the cultural boundaries of Europe must ultimately endanger its unity.”²⁹ The challenge, therefore, lies in assuring the coexistence of different cultural identities against a backdrop of common roots and interests that defines a shared identity, without threatening their existence and triggering reactionary defences.

If it is true that European Identity cannot make sense without its national and cultural diversity, it also holds true that each state, nation or cultural identity cannot exist without acknowledging its European context, of which it is a part alongside others of its kind with which it has interacted throughout history. Acknowledging this provides a cohesive dimension favourable to the common interests-based solidarity discussed in subsection A. The combination of these two approaches could thus align the many identities that constitute a common European identity with the interests of each of the EU’s members. Instead of going down the slippery slope of nurturing resentments based on the notion that challenges faced by a few are burdening to the many, that some nations are superior to others, potentially turning differences into unbridgeable schisms; an emphasis on the advantages of collaboration, where furthering each nation’s particular interests is regarded as favourable to the interests of others is an example of how pluralism is compatible with political cohesion.

The brevity of this essay prevents the possibility of addressing the practicalities that such an ambitious approach would require. But, very summarily, a greater affinity between nations could be achieved (a) through national education programs and a more accountable media infrastructure capable of cultivating more knowledge and understanding of the history and reality of other nations, and how they’ve contributed to the shared history and culture lived across the continent; and (b) through political institutions that assure each state has the appropriate tools to promote and negotiate its particular interests in such a way that it feels a valuable and recognised actor within the wider European family.

According to David Miller, “it is an integral part of national identities that nations should be conceived of as actors, as collectivities that are able to influence events around them and determine their own futures”³⁰. Respecting national and cultural pluralism providing each nation with due recognition and adequate representation is favourable to an equitable approach compatible with the political cohesion the European Integration Project demands. In other words, the EU’s political cohesion lies in it being a *community of nations*, not without or despite them.

²⁹ Baubock, “Intersecting and Overlapping European Cultures”, 113.

³⁰ Miller, *On Nationality*, 156–157.

IV Conclusion

This essay set out to reflect on some of the potential forces of political cohesion that are required to bolster the European Union. It started by analysing the alluring proposal of expanding what are considered the “shared values” of the EU’s Member States; and the prospect of unearthing a common European identity. Section II, “Shared Values and Common Identity: A Critical Analysis”, concludes that a move beyond the political values already consecrated in the TEU’s Article 2 would amount to venturing into the realm of cultural (or secondary) values which are, by definition, plural in nature. Since these cultural values are mostly particular manifestations of universal (or primary) values, any attempt to homogenise them would threaten the multiple identities which they express. A common European identity is only viable if it does not entail the dilution of the plurality of cultural and national identities spread across Europe, because Europe is intrinsically diverse.

Upon observing the insufficiencies and inadequacies of these proposals, Section III examined the advantages and shortcomings of deriving political cohesion from a “Common Interests based Solidarity” as well as from “Pluralism”. The advantage of the first approach lies in being less controversial than a shared cultural values one. But its shortcoming lies in being circumstantial and thus failing to guarantee an enduring force of cohesion for a long-term endeavour such as the EU. Pluralism, on the other hand, though an essential ingredient of a European Identity, renders the multiple identities vulnerable to mutual hostility if they in any way feel threatened by each other or by a single homogenising European identity. Yet, so long as each culture and nation feels duly recognised and capable of pursuing its interests through political institutions that are part of the EU system, pluralism may be congenial to cooperation, thus furthering the political cohesion which the EU requires.

The analysis of all the aforementioned potential forces indicates that there is no one clear-cut solution for the challenge of European political cohesion. Yet, a combined approach among them could cement the bonds that are necessary to foster a sense of community among the different nations, all the while assuring that their place is not threatened by each other or by the institutions that represent them. A common European identity would thus serve to ground a sense of community between Member States, not as a unitary but as a “dual ‘sense of belonging.’”³¹ According to Böckenförde, such an identity “has a future only if this developing

³¹ Böckenförde attributes the expression “sense of belonging” to Lord Dahrendorf, to which he adds the term “dual”. Böckenförde, “Conditions for European Solidarity”, 32.

awareness of a nation of Europeans is regarded not as an absorptive, but as an overarching, concept, a shared common ground and identity that does not replace the particularities and identities of existing peoples, but preserves them as autonomous components.”³²

The European Union is the most ambitious project of its kind. It may look to other parts of the world for inspiration to deal with the challenges it faces, but it must not be forgotten that it has no precursor, it is unique and unprecedented. Its nations are ancient, even if many states are not. The cultural richness it displays today is deeply embroidered in its long and intricate past. It must, therefore, attend to its peculiar specificities as it charts its path into the future in a world with new geopolitical, economic, technological, environmental and security demands. It is as a community of many peoples with strong identities that share an impressive history and are willing to find common ground among their interests that Europe can persevere united. Only when it is many, can Europe be one.

³² Ibid, 38.

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