

European Identity
Christiane Olivo
University of Northern Colorado
christiane.olivo@unco.edu

Introduction

Identity Defined: Shared representations of a *collective self* as reflected in public debate, *political symbols, collective memories* and elite competition for power. Identities also consist of collective beliefs about the *definition of the group and its membership* that are shared by most group members.

Why is political identity important? Political identity plays a key role in *sustaining citizens' allegiance and loyalty* to their political community. Political communities, i.e., those that claim the legitimate use of force over their members, require some form of allegiance and loyalty. If the European Union is or is becoming a political community of sorts, *its stability and sustainability require that its members share some sense of being a part of it*. Loyalty toward a community is possible only if there is some strong element of identification that holds people together, beyond the mere fact of belonging to the same political community. In this sense, *political identification is always, to a certain degree, based on cultural aspects of mutual recognition*, and therefore European political identity is hardly distinguishable from a more general idea of European identity.

The History of European Identity

For over 150 years the primary form of identity in Europe has been identification with the nation-state or nationalism. And one of the central questions in the construction of a new

Europe is how national identities can be overcome. During the course of 400 years, political power in Europe became more concentrated. For example, in 1500 there were about 500 political entities in Europe; by 1900 there were only 25. During the 19th century political leaders saw the need to increase loyalty to the nation-state. A prime example of this process can be found in France. In the 19th century French political leaders tried to create republican citizens loyal to the French nation-state. Like many other European countries, France created a national system of elementary schools that were free and compulsory. These schools were vehicles for spreading a uniform national language as well as a shared history. History books taught the French Revolution as the most important event in French history and that the republic was the natural outcome of the Revolution. There were new rituals and public festivals, such as the first Bastille Day in 1880 and the Great Exhibitions in 1889 and 1900, along with the construction of the Eiffel Tower. Statues and monuments were built that glorified the republic. A national anthem was meant to promote linguistic unity and cultural integration. There was also frequent use of the flag and its colors. All of these things contributed to the creation of a French national identity.

Many scholars would agree that a single European identity has never existed in Europe's past; however, some have tried to articulate historical commonalities that have created a European identity. This identity can be characterized by a history of varieties and multiplicities of identification rather than the existence of one unchallenged, hegemonic idea of Europe. One scholar points to five different types of identification with Europe since the last 19th century. First, identification with a superior Europe, more advanced than all other societies of the world and in all fields of human endeavor:

economy, political institutions, warfare, technology, science, urban planning, education as well as the arts, lifestyle and social organization. Europe was seen as the harbinger of progress for the world. This was the predominant identification of the 19th and early 20th centuries. A second identification is with European inferiority—cultural, economic, political or moral—in the face of a threat posed by the outside world. It expresses fear of decline. It had already developed before World War I, become predominant in the interwar period, and only gradually weakened in the 1950s and 1960s. This identification has still not completely disappeared. The more recent rise of Asia and the Islamic world has elicited this kind of identification again. A third type of identification focuses on Europe as part of the modernized world and as an actor in a mission of global modernization. This was particularly common between the 1950s and 1970s. A fourth identification with Europe sees it as one civilization among several others, endowed with both positive and negative traits, engaged in friendly competition with other non-European societies and civilizations, learning from others and exporting its own ideas and practices to other parts of the world, appreciative of immigration from other parts of the world as an enriching experience. This identification already existed in the 19th century. It became important only after the fall of the European overseas empires and after the early decades of the Cold War. Fifth, there is an inward-looking identification with Europe that focuses on Europe's internal diversity, as summarized by the formula "European unity in diversity."

Given these varied identifications with Europe, it is far-fetched to assume that history has run its full course, ending with the emergence of a single identification. Three basic orientations toward Europe still exist: Europe as one civilization among

others; Europe as marked by great internal variety; and Europe as an inferior victim exposed to the threats posed by a globalizing world.

In 1996, Vaclav Havel, then president of the Czech Republic, gave an address to European leaders trying to convince them to open the EU to East European countries. The title of the speech was “The Hope for Europe” and in it Havel spends a lot of time defining Europe. His point is to prove that Eastern and Western Europe have a single destiny and belong together.

Havel looked back to European history to assess the positive and negative contributions of Europe, which included, he asserted, both Western and Eastern Europe. Havel noted that developments in early Europe “led eventually to unprecedented progress in Europe, and in the end brought humanity countless gifts and left its stamp on the entire planetary civilization of our time....Centuries from now, all European history may seem to have been no more than a single day filled with vigorous activity, magnificent human endeavor, great discoveries of the human mind, the release of enormous energies and the ethos of expansion related to it. From the secrets of Being and salvation to the secrets of matter, from the discovery of treasures hidden on faraway continents to political achievements like the recognition of human dignity and liberty, rule of law, and the idea of equality before the law—these are all remarkable European discoveries which Europe has then spread further, often to the benefit of the world as a whole, often to its detriment.”

But Havel went on to describe a darker side to European history: “The history of Europe has not only been a history of the spread of the ideals of salvation, freedom, progress, and humanity: it has also meant the brutal suppression of other cultures. It has

meant conquest, plunder, colonization, and some highly dubious exports...[such as] communist ideology....The double-edged European expansionism reached its sad climax in two world wars which our continent dragged the whole world.”

For Havel, Europe has three meanings: the first is simply geographic; the second refers to the western countries that made up the core of the EU before eastward expansion; the third refers to a common destiny: “This Europe represents a common destiny, a common complex history, common values, and a common culture and way of life...It seems to me...that the starting point of all our twilight meditations should be a discussion about Europe as a place of shared values, about European spiritual and intellectual identity or—if you like—European soul...”

“Europe, in the third meaning of the term, has always been and still is a single indivisible political entity, however immensely diverse and intricately structured it may be. This is not just a consequence of geography, that is, of the fact that many loosely related peoples are concentrated on a relatively small peninsula and its immediate vicinity. What is more important is that the millennia of common history shared by its peoples, who often lived in differently constituted multinational empires, have molded Europe into a single intellectual unit or sphere of civilization, interwoven by so many political connections that severing any of them might, in certain cases, lead to its total disintegration.”

Havel’s purpose in that speech was clear: convincing EU leaders to expand eastward. His means of doing so was equally clear: articulating a vision of European history that centered on commonalities and shared values and experiences.

We can see these same themes articulated by European elites, who many scholars would argue, are trying to craft a European identity. For example, the EU's Millennium Declaration of 1999 said: "The Union's citizens are bound together by common values such as freedom, tolerance, equality, solidarity and cultural diversity."

Former German Chancellor Kohl emphasized a shared culture: "Europe is more than just politics and the economy. Above all, it represents a magnificent cultural heritage: classical antiquity, humanism, the Enlightenment and Christianity."

In March 2007 during events to mark the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, German Chancellor Merkel (the president of the EU Council at the time) stated: "The source of Europe's identity are our shared, fundamental values. They are what holds Europe together. Let us not forget: For centuries Europe had been an idea, no more than a hope of peace and understanding. Today we, the citizens of Europe, know that hope has been fulfilled."

The Berlin Declaration of March 25, 2007, was a typical EU compromise that allowed all twenty-seven members states to sign despite various objections a few harbored. It outlined the EU's main goals: "We, the citizens of the European Union, have united for the better... We are striving for peace and freedom, for democracy and the rule of law, for mutual respect and shared responsibility, for prosperity and security, for tolerance and participation, for justice and solidarity."

We can see from all of these statements an emphasis on shared values and to some extent a shared history. Despite these kinds of statements by political elites, it is not clear that a widespread European identity has developed.

European Identity Today

For several decades supporters of European integration have seen the promotion of a European consciousness and the creation of a European identity as crucial policy goals. A common European identity was seen as an inevitable factor for the successful transformation of the European Community into a genuine supra-national political union. Although much focus turned to the single market and a common currency, the idea of fostering a European identity or consciousness was not removed from the political agenda. In the late 1980s this goal was translated into a large scale European public relations campaign and the introduction of a wide variety of Eurosymbolism. Different strategies, similar to those used to create national identities, were used to try to forge a common European identity. For example, as I mentioned already, there was the use of historical myths referring to a common Christian heritage, a common political and legal history going back to the Roman period and the tradition of humanism. Ideologies, such as Europe as a peaceful and democratic project and modernizing and civilizing aspirations, were promoted alongside the use of common Eurosymbolism, such as a flag, anthem, and common European passport format. In addition, cooperation programs between European states were introduced in education, research and the arts (for example, the Erasmus educational exchange began in 1987 with 3,000 students and now gives out about 135,000 grants).

Despite these efforts, many scholars would agree that cultural boundaries in Europe have not been removed. Most nations continue to highlight what marks them off from neighbors as well as from non-European populations. Europeans have strong

national or subnational identities and a weakly developed sense of being European. Only 3.9% of people who live in Europe view themselves as Europeans exclusively, while another 8.8% view themselves as Europeans and having some national identity. This means that only 12.7% of people in Europe tend to view themselves as Europeans. (This does translate into 47 million people.) An additional 43.3% of people view themselves as having a national identity and sometimes a European identity, while 44 % of people never view themselves as having anything but a national identity.

European symbols have remained far less potent than national ones. Only the European flag, the Erasmus program and the EU currency have fully succeeded as European symbols. Relative to national symbols, most other European ones have remained weak or ambiguous. The European anthem and Europe Day remain largely unobserved. A common European history, another symbol of European identity, remains to be written. European schoolbooks are the exception, not the rule. Lacking are the typical ingredients of national history—a common war of independence, a common period of defeat and suffering, a common period of subsequent reaffirmation of the body politic, a history of common frontiers, and a common historical memory. Europe lacks a symbolic capital such as Paris or London.

From a strictly political perspective, the debate about political identity has been dominated by the simple alternative between national and European identity. There are two main European identity projects. One can be called an outward-looking cosmopolitan identity project, which appeals to and is motivated by elite-level politics. European cosmopolitanism often refers to a growing acceptance of cross-border exchanges, not only of goods and services but also of Europeans. This approach to

identity can take different forms. On the one hand, European citizens are asked to change the priority of their political allegiances by identifying with a different territory and expressing loyalty toward different sovereign institutions. Hence, the EU and its institutions come to take the place of the nation and nation-state. On the other hand, a more radical conceptualization sees the EU, as a transnational entity, not simply taking the place of the nation-state, but effectively undermining the very principles of territoriality and sovereignty.

The second identity project is an inward-looking, nationalist-populist European identity project that focuses on the economic and cultural threats posed by the infamous Polish plumbers and Islamic headscarves. This conception of identity reflects and responds to mass politics. Populist European politics draw boundaries between “Europe” and the “other,” a fact illustrated by the highly charged debate over Turkish accession to the EU and, more generally, the difficult relations between Europe and Islam. “Europe for the Europeans” is a slogan that captures the nationalist backlash. Le Pen in France has captured the essence of this nationalist-populist identity and has been very influential on other right-wing political movements throughout Europe. For Le Pen’s followers political meaning can only be socially mediated through idioms of family, town and country, ethnic and linguistic assemblages, religious communities, occupational statuses, social classes and so on. Their faith and loyalty reside in experience reconciled through these collective entities. This approach to identity is embedded in family, faith and nation and cannot be transferred to abstract shared European values or history.

In an editorial, American conservative Patrick Buchanan expressed strong doubt about the possibility of developing a European identity: “The EU birthday party was

further proof, were any needed, that no transnational institution can elicit the love and loyalty of a country. World Government is a vision of elites no patriot will ever embrace. Men have died in the millions for Poland, France, Italy, England and Germany. Who would walk through fire for the European Union?” “Dry documents, no matter how eloquent, and abstract ideas, no matter how beautiful, do not a nation make. What makes a people and a nation is a unique history and heritage, language and literature, songs and stories, traditions and customs, blood, soil and the mystic chords of memory. The EU is a thing of paper, an intellectual construct. Unlike a nation, it has no heart and no soul.”

European Identity East and West

Despite the fact that the Iron Curtain dividing Eastern and Western Europe has been gone for over 20 years and many East European countries are now members of the EU, there are still obvious dividing lines between the two halves of Europe. Arguably, the legacy of communism manifests itself most acutely in the retarded economic development of the east. With the 1989 democratic breakthrough, the east was desperate to join European structures, adopt a market economy, build its material base, and begin to approach the living standards of core EU members. In 1989, the economies and societies of the West were predominantly service sector-based, postindustrial, and consumer-oriented. On the eve of its disintegration, the Soviet bloc was still wrestling with how to modernize its industrial and manufacturing juggernauts—not how to transcend them. Production for the consumer market remained a low priority....In the east, a remarkably high proportion

of the population—40 percent in some countries—still worked on the land in the late 1980s.

Some critics have been especially harsh in their assessment of the economic role of the east within the EU. Multinational corporations supposedly have an interest in creating a division of labor so as to keep labor costs to a minimum. In the case of the enlarged EU, a hierarchy based on a division of labor seems to have unfolded. Eastern Europe's part in transnationalism has been construed by antiglobalization and nationalist critics as primarily economic in nature: the region serves as a sweatshop for western member states. According to Naomi Klein, "Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are the postmodern serfs, providing low-wage labor for the factories where clothes, electronics, and cars are produced for 20-25 percent of the cost of making them in Western Europe." This is a cheap-labor substitution economy.

Besides economic differences, differing conceptions of a democratic community constituted the dividing line between western and central Europe. The two parts attached somewhat different importance to such factors as self-responsibility, solidarity, trust, and especially civic engagement (which was lower in central Europe). Scholars have recognized that no threshold can be identified between West and East, only a continuous decline in the extent of a democratic community, with the west more solidly democratic. This was enough, however, to signify that every eastward enlargement poses integration problems and increase the difficulty of constituting a European *demos*.

The Future of European Identity

Despite the statistics already mentioned about the relatively low numbers of people who identify as European, it is important to keep a couple of things in mind. We shouldn't overlook all the EU institutional developments that European citizens have accepted in the last 50 years and the success the EU has had in enrolling new members. In Europe, 56.2% of people in 2004 viewed the EU as a good thing for their country, while 24.9% viewed it as neither good nor bad and only 19% viewed it as altogether a bad thing for their country. The majority of the population supports the integration process despite identifying primarily as members of their nation-states. They feel comfortable with membership in the EU. There is certainly significant variation across countries; but supporters outweigh opponents even in "Euroskeptic" countries like Sweden, Finland, Austria and the UK. For example, in the area of foreign policy 83% of French and 82% of Dutch citizens support further integration. And while the majority of Europeans today do identify more with their nation-state that may change in the future.

One study has found that some people across Europe are more likely than others to adopt a European identity. The main source of such identity, according to the study, is the opportunity to positively interact on a regular basis with people from other European countries with whom one has a basis for solidarity. Those who have this opportunity today tend to be more privileged segments of the population: managers, professionals, white-collar workers, educated people and young people. And therefore demography may be working in the EU's favor. Young people are more likely to know second languages, be educated, travel and be more open to the EU. As older people pass away

and are replaced by the young, there should be more people who think of themselves as Europeans. As one British political scientist predicts, “Give it 15, 20 or 25 years, and Europe will be run by leaders with a completely different socialization from those of today. I’m quite optimistic that in the future there will be less national wrangling, less Brussels-bashing and more unity in EU policy making—even if that is hard to picture today.” As skill levels rise and education increases generally, people will be more interested in the cultural story of being with other Europeans. As education levels rise, one would expect that the European identity would become more widespread. Finally, as European markets continue to integrate, people will have more opportunities to interact with people in other countries. This could happen through work. Interaction will occur more generally as media coverage, tourism and the awareness of culture in other countries expands.

European identity is complex and pulls in many directions. We will have to wait and see how long the nation-state and national identity will retain their strength. Scholars and many political elites in Europe believe that the future of the EU as a political project rests on the creation of a strong European identity.

References

Checkel, Jeffrey T. and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds., *European Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Havel, Vaclav, "The Hope for Europe," Address given in Aachen, May 15, 1996

Jacobs, Dirk and Robert Maier, "European Identity: Construct, Fact, and Fiction," in Gastelaars and de Ruijter, eds., *A United Europe: The Quest for a Multifaceted Identity*

"Quietly Sprouting: A European Identity," *The New York Times* (April 26, 2005)

Taras, Ray, *Europe Old and New: Transnationalism, Belonging, Xenophobia* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009)