

Concept of collective identity



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Introduction:

Although the concept of collective identity is a post-colonial phenomenon, a few nations would describe themselves under a collective identity before the modern times. In fact, Europe is historically unique in terms that it has been the people living in the continent of Europe who have persistently described themselves as Europeans since the 17th Century (Pagden, 2002). Indeed, European Union emerged as the most important attempt for creating a supranational entity in the Continent and the best example of a Pan-European common identity as even the words Europe and the European Union are being used as synonyms by millions of people every day. Nevertheless, an uncertainty of a common identity has always been the case for Europeans throughout history and the physical as well as social borders of Europe has never been distinctly known for centuries which are full of wars, confrontation competition and blood.

Today, the same problem continues to exist and many believe that it is the major factor blocking the efforts for achieving a fully integrated Europe, as the definition and frontiers of a common European identity is still unknown. Indeed, one of the most important issues of the European integration from a socio-political perspective is the vague concept of a common European identity including prospects of European Union Citizenship. Although a common European identity has been long around for centuries, these are fairly new issues in relevance to the half a century long history of today's European Union. However, I believe how the common European identity is defined is very important for the future steps of the European integration project, as nowadays the EU is undergoing transformation towards a political

union with an aim to become a global actor in the international political arena. What shall be the elements of a common European identity, how shall it be formulized if it is to become a successful construct which would define Europe correctly to end the efforts that lasted for such a long time?

I believe a triumphant common European identity must include the concrete and symbolic realities and it must be rooted to the diversity of cultures which had been created by the long history of Europe (D'Appollonia, 2002).

Otherwise, if it remains as a form of “thin identity” suggested by Habermas (2006), the problems and uncertainties of European identity as well as the poorly functioning European Union citizenship is most likely to exist in the Union's foreseeable future. In fact, a common European identity can only be successfully constructed by taking into account all the ambiguities, contradictions and developments in form of a “unity in diversity” principle which can be applied to the reality of Europe rather than building a shallow and artificial construct as it seems to be today. Theoretically, a united Europe in political terms is made possible if a united Europe in cultural terms is established through formulating a collective common identity which may only be conceived as a collection of multiple and complex values created by complicated dynamics of Europe's long history. Nevertheless, a united Europe in cultural terms shall not mean to enforce a homogenous and strictly ordered European society; rather the European identity shall celebrate Europe's long tradition of diversity.

Another important question is how should European Union citizenship be defined and what should be the frontiers of cultural implications of such a political formulation. Considering the wide cultural diversity and long history

that the individual members of the European Union had share in the European continent, a collective identity may prove to be far too complex to construct, so one may argue that a common European identity is still an illusion. Although Europeans have a successfully formed a common economic and increasingly political union, they are still far away from the desired level of cultural unity and a common identity which seems to be an alarming factor for the next stages of the European integration. Nonetheless, European Union citizenship is an area open to developments and it might be used as a critically important tool by the European Union leaders to accumulate a common European identity, only if it is formulized correctly. The critical point on the debate of European Union citizenship is that the dominant Classical Model of Citizenship is based on the structures of nation-state and that is why this model cannot be applied to the European Union, as it is a whole different level of organization which cannot be compared to a nation-state. On the other hand, Post-National citizenship is a modern approach to the issue of European identity and my evaluation shows that it is a feasible solution suitable for today's Europe in order to reach its goals of unification and deepening through building a stronger common identity in the 21st Century.

This paper is organized in several sections. European identity from a historical perspective is analyzed in the first part; nationalist responses to the current status of European identity and the issue of national identities in contrast to the common European identity is discussed in the following part; a new European identity and suggestions for a new understanding of common European identity is suggested in the third part; a brief history of

European Union efforts and progress on building a common identity is examined in the fourth part; the current status of European Union Citizenship is discussed in the fifth part and finally, Post-National citizenship as a model for European Union citizenship is proposed in the last part of this paper.

After all, this paper argues that a common identity in form of a collective European identity is clearly necessary for the Union at this stage of integration, and it is a crucial element for the future of the European integration project especially as our world is getting smaller as well as more fragmented simultaneously due to the complex dynamics of international relations every day at the age of globalization. European citizenship is very much connected to the issue of European identity and it is the key to achieving such a strong common and collective identity when it is formulized as a Post-National phenomenon. The Europeans must derive their power from the diversity of their cultures by building a “thick identity” for Europe rather than a “thin identity” which consists of merely political rights; yet the Europeans shall not overlook the uniqueness of the Continent and the similarities they share in comparison to the rest of the world emphasized by the “Unity in Diversity” principle. Today, it is time for the Europeans to unite under one roof in socio-political terms, complete the long standing task of defining the boundaries of the European civilization by establishing a common and collective European identity in order to carry on the progress of the European integration project in a globalized world. Nonetheless, the question of possibilities of the Europeans to achieve such a high level of cultural as well as political unity remains a question and it is subject to a whole different level of research. However, often seen as a regional product

of globalization itself, I believe the European integration project cannot progress any further without achieving a common European identity which is more critical than ever today in order to overcome the challenges of globalization in the 21st Century.

What is Identity?

Identity has always been a problematic concept because it is uncertain, fluid and highly flexible. Identity is the way to define one's "self" and to differentiate from the "others". If taken literally, identity means equal; identical. Identity is not static but dynamic, and it can be defined in different ways in different circumstances. Identity is construct, which cannot be constructed immediately but only in time. It is not a fixed, constant and pre-given entity; while identity formation is heavily dependent on how one is perceived by the others. Identification implies belonging or membership, in turn which implies the exclusion of non-members (Bretherton & Vogler, 1999: 236). In other words, the sole purpose of identity is to separate self from the other in a sense. Moreover, identities are multiple in nature, or even "kaleidoscopic". A person may have a single identity, but it will be made up of many levels of loyalty and identification (Von Benda-Beckmann & Verkuyten, 1995: 18). Meanwhile, identities change, because they are based on perceptions, which themselves change over time and environment; as it is possible to identify one's self with more than one thing at a time such as class and gender, or religion and age. Therefore there are various elements of one's identity and which operate at different levels and these various elements in an identity may well be contradictory (Von Benda-Beckmann & Verkuyten, 1995: 12).

On the other hand, a “ collective identity” means the attitudes, which all members of that group have in common in their thoughts and behavior; which differentiates them from the “ other” (Munch, 2001: 137). Collective identities can provide existential meaning for people, thus they are primary means of unity in a society which give additional stability especially during periods of upheaval. Collective identities can generate a degree of continuity between individuals and their social environment, and can provide social recognition and approval (Von Benda-Beckmann & Verkuyten, 1995: 24). Therefore, collective identities are defined mainly by culture from a historical point of view rather than biological genes, ethnicity, nationalism or simple political rights. Finally, they are used to construct community and feelings of cohesion and holism, a concept to give the impression that all individuals are equal in the imagined community (Strath, 2002: 387). From the perspective of political science; there are two types of political identities: a “ civic identity” and a “ cultural identity”. The cultural definition of political identity entails a sense of belonging of an individual towards a particular group which can mostly defined by its uniform cultural or ethnic values. On the other hand, the civic definition of political identity involves with the identification of an individual mostly in form of citizenry with a political structure, which includes political institutions, rights, duties and rules (Bruter, 2004: 26). Therefore, a cultural European identity implies a reference to Europe as a continent, a civilization and a cultural entity whereas a civic European identity implies a reference to the political and institutional aspects of European Union identity largely in the form of EU citizenship.

European Identity throughout History:

Europe has always been more of a mental construct than a geographical or social entity (Lowenthal, 2000: 314). Europe has no natural frontiers both in geographic and sociological terms. Therefore it had never been easy to acquire a singular definition of European identity because the borders of Europe had always been dynamic, and no one knew where Europe started and Europe ended (Pagden, 2002). A European identity is an abstraction and a fiction without essential proportions (Strath, 2002: 387). The concept of a European identity is an idea expressing artificial notions of unity rather than an identity of equality. In this sense, the concept of European identity is inscribed in a long history of political reflection on the concept of Europe. From the perspective of history, Europe has been united as a singular entity in various settings for a number of times in its past such as the Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, the Napoleonic Empire, and arguably the Nazi Third Reich. However, identity was only conceptualized as a macro-level collective phenomenon by the intellectual elites of Europe; on the other hand, for the rural masses of Europe, identity was a local term associated with the micro-level, rarely the nation and never an incident as large as the continent of Europe (Pagden, 2002). In different period of history, a common European identity had been defined on different basis. In the Middle Ages, Christianity was the main defining characteristic of European identity, whereas in modern times, the emergence of the nation state, periods of nationalism and afterwards democracy and secularism has been the common characteristic of the Europeans. Meanwhile, Christianity lost its dominance yet it arguably remained as one of the important components of European identity.

Today, the European Union similar to the continent of Europe can be characterized by overlapping and unclear boundaries. From a geographical perspective, the EU has fuzzy boundaries due to the ongoing enlargement processes since the 1970's (Risse, 2003: 490). Although the geographical borders of Europe are not objectively defined particularly in the East, a state without a geographical relevance to the European continent cannot become a part of the European Union, even if it shares the EU's collective values and norms. Moreover what adds to the uncertainty of Europe's borders is that boundaries of the EU may change according to different policy fields such as the " Schengen" includes the non EU member Norway but at the same time it does not include the EU member state the United Kingdom. Therefore, before anything else the lack of solid geographical boundaries weaken efforts of the EU to be seen as a singular entity by its own people (Castano, 2004). Meanwhile, the geographic boundaries of Europe have suffered dramatic changes within time and even the recent years provide an image of changing boundaries in Europe considering the reunification of Germany, the break-up of Yugoslavia and collapse of the Soviet Union. Therefore, Europe cannot be defined solely as a geographical space.

On the contrary, Europe cannot be defined in cultural space either, unless European culture is associated with the Continent's long history of diversity itself. Indeed, diversity shall be the main characteristic of European identity from a cultural point of view. Religious and cultural heritages including Roman law, political democracy, parliamentary institutions, Renaissance humanism, rationalism, romanticism characterize the common identity of the Europeans (Smith, 1992). On the other hand, there are undeniable

socioeconomic, cultural, national and ethnic differences among the member states of the European Union. Nevertheless, the motto of the EU, “unity in diversity”, reflects this fact from a positive point of view and proposes a common identity for Europeans based on their peaceful diversity as a fundamental character of the European society at large.

A collective political culture is an important feature of the common European identity. The Greeks gave Europe the science and philosophy and the Romans gave it the idea of single continent and unity which created Europe's strong cultural and political origins. The diverse and multiple cultures of the ancient Europe shared a single identity as they were brought together under a common system of Roman law. The people of Europe also shared a common language, Latin, and after Europe slowly converted to Christianity they acquired a common religion as well. Christianity has been a crucial part of the European identity and it played a key role to create its internal cohesion and to designate its relationship with the rest of the world. Further references are made to Europe's identity besides its heritage of Greco-Roman civilization and Christianity; such as the ideas of the Enlightenment, Science, Reason, Progress, Industrialization, Democracy and Individualization as the core elements of this claimed European legacy (Wintle, 1996: 13-16). Hellenism, Romanticism, welfare society and cross-fertilization of diversity can be added to this list (Garcia, 1993: 7-9), while one may argue that Europe's core values include its commitments to an undivided continent, to individual freedom, and to the universalism of humanity (Havel, 1996).

However, this unity never reached to the point of sharing a common European culture up to this point in history of the Continent. In fact, a single

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body of citizenry or a common cultural identity could not be reached even in the peak of Europe's history of unity and solidarity. When the differences within Europe are emphasized, they are often in the form of "unity in diversity"; religious differences such as Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christianity, and linguistic differences including Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages are obvious; yet they are seen as correlated, Catholic-Romance, Protestant-Germanic, Orthodox-Slavic, and essentially are underlying the major ethnic cleavages and conflicts in the history of Europe (Wintle, 1996). Anthony Smith is among the scholars who are skeptical of the possibility of a common European identity because they could not find a common culture across the European continent, and even more critically they claim that Europe lacks of a shared set of myths, experience and symbols; these elements which they find crucial to create post-national identity (Smith, 1992: 72-73). Furthermore, Europe lacks of a shared historical and cultural content as which is the largest source of division among Europeans. Other obstacles to a common European identity include linguistic diversity and its tripartite religious division. In fact, a major difference among EU countries is the persistence of linguistic diversity, even though in practical level English has become the dominant language in Europe. Language does not only have an instrumental but also an emotional dimension and people's sense of nationality is often tied up with their mother tongue (Guibernau, 2001: 192). Finally, confrontation, wars and the effort to establish clear differences between peoples of the continent dominate the history of Europe, which is the exact opposite of what the European Union seeks to achieve today.

On the other side of the debate, scholars such as Michael Wintle are more optimistic on the possibility of creating a European identity. Indeed, the existence of the EU identity in the form of converging education standards, educational exchanges, and the organization of a European civil society is already established in most parts of Europe. Wintle argues that a European identity was previously already created during the high Middle Age (Wintle, 1996: 19-22), and it can be easily established today considering the forces of globalization. For now, the major success of the EU in fostering its identity has been limited with the increasing free movement of people across European borders, which has accelerated since the 1985 and formalized in 1990 Schengen accords parallelly correlated with the rising impact of globalization. Increased interaction among peoples of Europe would also encourage cultural exchanges and this could foster a stronger sense of a shared community. Education and high culture shall play a key role in European Union's cultural policy which has critical importance for building a "thick" European identity, because these two factors have an important effect on the creation as well as promotion of the EU identity. Education is obviously one of the crucial dimensions in any attempt to develop the future identity of the EU or at least more understanding and convergence among Europeans; high culture unites Europeans against the low culture which separates them. After all, the development of the EU identity will be the outcome of a long process in which bottom-up as well as top-down initiatives are likely to be employed (Guibernau, 2001: 183-184).

The idea of Europe as well as the identity of Europeans are constructed over time with processes of contention and bargaining. Gerard Delanty argues

that a “ European Culture” is not an entity with cohesion and fixed boundaries, but a floppy concept, with no clear borders and with internal opposition and contradictions, discursively shaped in contentious social bargaining processes (Delanty, 1995; 1999). In other words, the images of Europe do not exist as a natural phenomenon but are discursively shaped by internal as well as external forces (Strath, 2002). A basic step in the process of creating a collective identity is to defining itself in relation to the other. Central to one’s identifications are images of others. Likewise any identity, European identity necessarily contains an element of separation from the non-European. The boundaries of Europe can only be drawn and the identity of Europe can only be realized in the mirror of others. Indeed, Europe does not exist without non-Europe and that non-Europe does not exist without Europe (Wintle, 1996). Many centuries ago, the Europeans defined people living in the north as uncivilized and people living in the south as oriental (Pagden, 2002). Furthermore, the Greeks labeled the non-Greek speaking people as barbarians, even if that word would surely have a different meaning by that time. In nearer times, although the Russians shared many features with a European society including the same religion, it could not reach the formal limits of a Romanized civilization thus perceived as a barbaric empire or the orient, depending on the time. Moreover, European belief of its superiority relied on the common features of European societies such as science and liberal arts. Thus the rest of the world could only be portrayed as actors in relation to Europe, in other words always remained as “ the other”.

According to Delanty, Europe has been always invented and reinvented “ on the basis of division and strategy for the construction of difference” from the “ other” starting from Christian identity against Islam in the Middle-Ages, after that in the colonial politics to the New World, and to the ethnic minorities in the contemporary European Union (Delanty, 1995). Therefore, historical experience suggests that the new European identity may be constructed on the “ other” which may be the United States, the East, Islam or the European past itself. Samuel Huntington has argued that religion provides the best common means of historically distinguishing between Europeans and “ the other”, especially in terms of the confrontation between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam (Huntington, 1996). However, at the same time, the separation between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Western variations of Christianity has, for a long time, been crucial in establishing a division between Western and Eastern Europe; partially reinforced in the Cold War, divisions between Catholicism and Protestantism and separation between North and South (Guibernau, 2001). Therefore, history shows that peoples of Europe has been united against peoples of other civilizations at times such as global upheaval and wars while at other times Europeans get divided and separated due to the fact that they may perceive “ the other” internally.

Today, the European Union is frequently argued to be a fortress for “ the other” and the EU is often referred to as a “ Christian Club”, because historically all states on the continent of Europe had Christian societies. The Ottoman Empire was the greatest enemy of European states as well as Christianity in the Middle Ages; which made Islam the primary characteristic

of “ the other” for Europeans from the perspective of history. Today, the accession dialogues of Turkey into the European Union raise wide public opposition in Europe while the European Union officials make constant efforts to prove their allegiance to non-religious, non-ethnic but solely liberal and non discriminatory Copenhagen Criteria independent from historical aspects of “ the other” which has actually been extensively used to define the European identity. Finally, Europe is unique because it has possessed an identity as a cultural space which gave birth to political unions throughout its history;

however, it has never succeeded to constitute a single nation-state or a unified ethnic group. Although the European Union with its single currency and supranational political and legal institutions changed these historical facts to an extent, it is only possible with the means of a common European identity which will carry Europe to the next stage of integration that it always aimed but failed to achieve during its long history. Nevertheless, history has already proved that it will surely be hard to overcome uncertainties of a common European identity at the level of the masses.

Over the past millennium, the advancements of European civilization gave rise to the elites living on the continent of Europe who feel increasingly attached to Europe as a whole and shared dreams of a united continent. However, Europe as a realm sharing a common history as well as a common destiny has been largely abandoned by fixed prejudices on often nationalistic and ethnic grounds. National interests and biases at local, national, and global levels have prevented the masses of European people from viewing themselves collectively (Lowenthal, 2000: 315). However today, forces of <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-collective-identity/>

globalization, advancements in communications technologies and popular culture now promote the sense of being European among larger segments of society other than the European elites. Although a truly trans-European society is still far away, many of its essential elements are already in place this time largely due to the forces of globalization. Most European states are increasingly democratic; their economies are for the most part market driven; their popular culture grows more homogeneous as communication technologies expand under the forces of globalization in the 21st Century (Waterman, 1999: 23). Therefore, Europe is at the stage of defining its identity today; however which criteria are being deployed to define Europe, Europeans, Europeanness and their respective boundaries is critically important. A common European identity must be constructed by defining and understanding the historical roots of outstanding features of the European society in relation to the notion of citizenship, which will be discussed in depth in the following parts of this paper; developed in the past over the land of Europe. For sure, Europe is being redefined as a result of a complex set of processes, but an important question is what sort of Europe is emerging from them?

Nationalist Responses to European Identity:

There is certainly a structured symmetry in the perception of the European Union as the coincidence of a homogenized socio-political space, a unified regulatory space of an EU super-state, a singular European civil society surpassing existing national and regional differences in culture and identity (Hudson, 2000). In some respects there has been progress towards such an ideal of European common European cultural and a trans-national civil

society. For example, the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights have had an important role in defining acceptable standards across Europe. The issue of European identity and the criteria used to denote “Europeans” is clearly a critical one for the political and social integrity of the European Union. “Europe will exist as an unquestionable political community only when European identity permeates people’s lives and daily existence” (Demos 1998). Identity is a key issue which is continuously changing and that’s the reason why it is so hard to define especially in a world of fast changes in the 21st Century’s globalization. The member states of today’s enlarged EU have become multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies with various structural phenomenon ranging from the immigrant community of France to Post-Communist yet ethnic communities of the Central and Eastern European states. As the EU expanded eastwards in the last two rounds of enlargements, the issue of defining a European identity became even more critical for sake of integrity and stability of the Union.

One conception of a singular European identity would see it constructed through a process similar to that involved in the creation of national identities in the 19th and the 20th Centuries. Ironically, while the aim was to create those national identities in the past, the challenge that Europeans face today would be to transcend them for the creation of a trans-national understanding of Europeanness. However, the current trends at local European level are quite different from the interests of Europeanists at the supranational level. There are pressures from nation-states and their citizens to resist any further transfer of national sovereignty as well as erosion of national identity (Hudson, 2000). In fact, the success of extreme right wing

political parties in important European countries such as Austria and France in recent years may be seen as a sign of the reappearance of dangerous nationalist and racist ambitions which the peoples of Europe have most probably experienced more than any other continent in the world history.

Eric Hobsbawm has proclaimed that nationalism is dead (Hobsbawm, 1990). On the contrary, Llobera argues that national identities are certainly not eternal, but the time of their demise has not yet arrived (Llobera, 2003). In fact, national identities are still dominant in Europe as recent Eurobarometer surveys show that people in Europe prefer maintaining their national identity and sovereignty; but increasing number of people have accepted European identity in addition to their national identities. Therefore, European nationalism is another important component of a common European identity and it has been a major ideological tool for unifying nation states as well as the Europeans as a whole throughout Europe's history. To start with, the European Union, with its both intergovernmental and supranational characteristics represents a far different type of state-organization than a classical nation state. The main distinguishing characteristics of the EU from the nation-state are the absence of a shared language, a uniform media, common education system and most importantly a central state structure (Shore, 2000: 64). Furthermore, the powers of the EU rely on the sharing of sovereignty of its member states which may often have conflicting national interests. Indeed, the European integration project has mainly served as a tool for progressively limiting individual nation-states to practice any kind of harmful nationalism and this makes up an important part of the European identity. At this point, nationalist Euroskeptics may argue that building a

common Europe and an identity for it means destroying nations. However, a general feeling of “Europeanness” and loyalty to Europe in a cultural sense, does not need to conflict with national identities (Andreani, 1999).

A successful construct of European identity must include the concrete and symbolic realities created within history of the Continent but exclude nationalist ambitions of the past. Surely, the European states have not always been nationalist through Europe’s long history. The definition of nationalism counts on the idea of nation and territory; while the definition of a European nationalism depends on the historical and ideological evolution of the European nation states and aspirations for a post-national Europe. In fact, the aspirations that underlie in the roots of the foundation of the European Union are parallel to European cosmopolitanism in the 18th and the 19th centuries. From the Enlightenment to the beginning of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) after the Second World War; European nationalism found two separate meanings: one as an antinational Pan-European idea of a new united Europe that limits the sovereignty of the nation states, and the other as a pro-national ideology to create or legitimate new nation states (D’Appollonia, 2002).

Historically, cosmopolitanism reflected intentions for a European unity, and gave rise to anti-national European nationalism. European nationalism was characterized by the will to protect the European interests and its supremacy from non-Europeans as well as protecting Europe from itself by creating a federation. It can be argued that economic development, comme