

THEMATIC ARTICLES – NATIONAL IDENTITY AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY

From National Identity to European Identity

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Abstract. Since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and especially in the past few years, the European Union has been going through a mixed process of expansion and consolidation. In the last ten years alone there were two new waves of accession, the EU launched the single currency and failed attempts have been made to introduce a constitution. With all these transformations taking place, attention is more and more centred on the question whether a European identity is emerging. This article investigates this issue examining comparatively the patterns of national identity and of European identity formation and focusing on whether the relationship between the two is a zero-sum type. The aim is to show that although national identity is not necessarily an obstacle for the development of European identity, nationalism is.

Key words: *European identity, national identity, nationalism*

Introduction

An important issue of current debate about identity in the European Union centres on whether or not the process of construction of a European identity necessarily requires the 'erosion' of national identity to the extent that European identity would take primacy over it. The aim of this paper is to engage with such debates and to evaluate the relationship between national identity and European identity using an approach based primarily on nationalist theory.

I argue that, for theoretical and heuristic reasons, nationalist theory can provide a framework for the analysis of European identity formation. Comparing the patterns and processes involved in forging European identity with those that

have taken place in the formation of national identity could offer insights into the methods appropriate to European identity formation.

As in the case of the nationalist elites, the political elites of the European Union employ specific myths and values in order to rally support and to create a sense of belonging: there is a process of selection of these elements according to their potential to 'resonate' with people's consciousness. The selection of a European flag, a European anthem and even a European Day are but some examples for the creation of a symbolic discourse that aims to convey a sense of unity within the European Union.

This paper aims to assess whether national identity and European identity are to some degree mutually exclusive.

1. National identity and nationalism

What do we mean by national identity and how is it constructed? Without rehearsing the debates in the field of nationalist studies between various 'camps' (primordialists, perennialists, ethno-symbolists and modernists), I will state that my approach rests on the modernist claims that nations are modern constructs, that nationalism preceded (and indeed led to) the creation of nations, and that nationalism is primarily a political ideology concerned with power and the modern state (Gellner 1965, 168; Hobsbawm, 1992, 10; Breuilly, 1993, 1). National identity is a type of collective identity that gives allegiance to the nation. The concept of nation is an elusive one (Gellner, 1983, 6), which in minimalist terms can be understood as a community – an 'imagined community' as Anderson (1991, 6) argues – of equal individuals who share a set of common values. There is also some degree of agreement among critics that membership in the nation contains an *objective* dimension and a subjective one. The first has to do with aspects such as territory, mass education, and, more importantly, common legal rights and duties and a claim to sovereignty (Gellner, 1983, 7; Smith, 1993, 30). The latter refers to a common culture, which functions as the cement that unites the members of the community. It is important to stress the difference between 'nation' and 'state'. While the nation is the community of people that share a sense of common history and culture, the state is a legal entity that has to do with power and authority and possesses both internal and external sovereignty over its territory and its body of citizens, and is constituted in the form of laws (Habermas, 1998, 107). However,

the two concepts are conflated by the nationalist ideology, whose main tenet is that the nation should be able to fulfill itself politically through state power. This connection is reinforced even at the level of culture: national identity has to make reference to state institutions to the extent that culture – conceived in national terms – is produced, reproduced and transmitted within institutionalised frameworks. What makes a culture ‘national’ is precisely the fact that it is regulated through institutional constraints (standardised language, educational systems, etc.).

As such, the process of nation-building and of national identity formation is a political product: it is directed towards acquiring or maintaining state-power, and it is the product of elites who use materials from group cultures in order to rally mass support (Breuilly, 1993, 2, Brass, 1991, 8). Despite some critics’¹ tendencies to discount its role in the development of nationalism, culture does play a crucial role in the process of identity formation and it can also help to account for the often non-rational character of nationalism. The function of ‘myths, memories, values and symbols’ in nation formation becomes more visible with modernisation and the advent of ‘print capitalism’ (Smith, 1986, 15; Anderson, 1991). They are strengthened by the shift from an oral to a written culture. Their mass availability contributes, as “a crucial instrument in cultural reproduction”, to the creation of “means of allegiance on the basis of social identification” (Schöpflin, 1997, 21). Thus, Smith is correct in assuming that these symbols and myths of communal past are essential in binding communities together. However, construction of the nation should be seen as a top to bottom process, where nationalist elites select, modify, use and often fabricate such myths of common descent – as Breuilly (1996, 150-152) points out – in order to forge a sense of loyalty to national community they claim to represent². Whether these stories of communal past are genuine or fictitious is not particularly relevant for the study of nationalism: as long as the members of groups perceive them as real, and as long they are effective as means

¹ See Breuilly’s statement: “To focus upon culture, ideology, identity, class or modernisation is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and that politics is about power” (Breuilly, 1993, 1).

² In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade offers some good examples of how myths are created on a very loose basis of real events: on the one hand there are the real events (a young man goes into the woods, falls off a cliff and dies) and on the other hand there is the mythologised interpretation of the event (a young man goes into the woods, he is cursed by the witch of the forest, loses his mind, throws himself off a cliff and dies). The role of the myths is to offer models of conduct, which are dictated by supernatural powers.

of rallying support for the nation, they should be considered when examining nationalist discourse.

2. Pattern of European Identity Construction

In the case of European identity, one can notice patterns strikingly similar to those of national identity construction. Of course, as this process is in progress, some aspects are better developed, whereas other are less clearly shaped. Nevertheless, what we have in the case of the European Union – which is recognisable from the framework of the nation-state – is both the *objective* dimension: there is a territory, and there are sets of common legal rights and duties, which are manifest through the agency of institutionalised state-like structures, and the *subjective* one: loyalty to the political community is being constructed through the employment of the same elements for symbolic selection, reinforcement and reproduction (historical myths, symbols, etc.).

Equally importantly, the project of the European Union is fundamentally elite-driven, in the same way the national projects are, which spreads gradually from top to bottom, explaining why identification with and support for the construction of a united European community is higher among political and social elites and lower at the grass-roots level (at least in the initial stages) (Llobera, 2003, 164; Risse, 2005, 296).

At the institutional and legal (objective) level it can be argued that the European Union has already moved far beyond the initial project of an economic community (and a cooperation limited to coal and steel as the 1951 Treaty of Paris established) and has taken – to all intents and purpose – the shape of statehood. Various stages in the development of the European Union reflect the non-linear character of the project. Delanty distinguishes three phases in the evolution of the European venture, each corresponding to an important shift in focus (and to a change in name). In the aftermath of WWII, the European Economic Community (EEC) emphasised close economic ties based on cooperation between sovereign states. In the second phase – in the 1980's – when the adjective 'economic' was dropped (EC), there is a move from cooperation to interdependence, with an enhanced legal and administrative integration, but still maintaining the emphasis on sovereign states. Since the early 1990's, with the new phase emerging, the name was changed to European Union (EU) and the focus shifted to social integration, with increasing law and

regulatory policies and with the new legal concept of European citizenship (Delanty, 2000, 109-110). Moreover, the institutional framework of the European Union – the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, the European Central Bank, etc. are independent from national governments; the members of the representative institutions – the Council of Ministers, the European Council and the European Parliament have the double mission of acting as government and constituency representatives while, at the same time, representing the Union as a whole (Laffan, 2004, 84-85).

In parallel to these supranational institutional developments, deliberate efforts from the Union have been visible, especially in last decades, towards the construction of some sense of European collective identity, at least at the symbolic level. A range of techniques has been employed in this process. Powerful symbols, usually associated with the nation-state have been created: the European Union has a flag, an anthem, a Europe Day and a motto. Perhaps the most significant symbol of European unity is the common currency, the euro, which – besides its obvious value as a unified medium of exchange, “[has] been designed to appeal to a pan-EU audience [...] each of the seven notes bear[ing] the image of a bridge intended to represent different European architectural styles” (Dunkerley et al., 2002, 118).

The EU has also placed significant focus on education, creating programmes fittingly called Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus, Comenius and Tempus encouraging cultural exchange.

The goal of such projects is two-fold. On the one hand they have a formal, subjective value, which is to create a sense of solidarity by appealing (as in the cases of the anthem and of the names of the education) to personalities that have universal, but also European (especially through geographical location) value. On the other hand, there is a deeper level of substance at which they operate. These programmes play the role of exposing the younger generation to patterns of cooperation and cultural exchange between various parts of Europe, and thus, emphasise similarity (in diversity – as the EU strives to achieve) rather than difference.

Finally, the drive towards the forging of a European identity is also visible in the language employed in EU discourse. “Messages [...] based on such values as ‘peace’, ‘unity’, ‘friendship’, ‘harmony’, and the like [...] directly stress the desire

of European institutions to present ‘Europe’ as a human community” (Brutter, 2005, 128).

3. National and European Identities: Conflict or Mutual Recognition?

I have so far focused on showing the similarities between national identity and European identity in terms patterns of construction and articulation. This discussion, however, does not necessarily mean that the two identities are incompatible, that the relationship between them is a zero-sum type or that in order for European identity to develop, national identity needs to be at least eroded.

In examining whether national identity and European identity are mutually exclusive or at least hostile to one another, I will engage with two types of views: on the one hand with those claiming that national and European identities are in competition and that in the foreseeable future national identity is likely to endure (an opinion shared primarily – but not exclusively – by scholars of nationalism who argue for the pre-modern roots of nations, such as Smith). On the other hand, there is the view – defended by Habermas, among others – that the bases of identification with the European community are radically different from those with the national community; national and European identities are, thus, compatible and they can coexist peacefully.

Both these types of arguments rest on the generally agreed claim that people can have multiple identities. There are various models of observing any hierarchical pattern to how these identities are displayed as well as the interaction between them. One can distinguish between *nested* identities (conceived as concentric circles or Russian Matruska dolls), *‘marble-cake’* type identities (that cannot be separated on different levels and where components influence each other), *cross-cutting*, or *separate* (Risse, 2005, 295-296; Herrmann and Brewer, 2004, 8). Also, within the multitude of identities and individual has, it is important to recognise the role of choice in shaping the weight given to particular identities (Sen, 2006, 4).

This framework opens the possibility for national and European identities to coexist. Although individuals may have multiple identities, specific contexts and circumstances dictate which identity becomes more important (to the extent that it takes primacy over any other) at a particular time. The nature of the relationship

between different identities is dictated by the categories those identities belong to. One can distinguish between contrasting and non-contrasting identities: the first type accounts for the identification with groups belonging to the same category, while the latter refers to groups belonging to different categories (Sen, 2006, 28). On this basis, as national and European identities compete – as I have shown – over identical types of structures (both objectively and subjectively), it is conceivable that there are conditions that may cause national identity to come into conflict with European identity. Factors such as economic decline, migration, etc., can bring about such re-evaluations of identities.

Smith argues that such situations are important, and that European identity is not attainable at the expense of national identity. His argument is based on the claim that national identity, once established, is impossible to remove (short of genocide), as it reinforces itself on the basis of its links with the older cultural myths, memories, values and symbols of the core ethnies. By contrast, European identity cannot command such emotional commitment because it lacks such deeply rooted rituals and ceremonies of collective identification (Smith, 1992, 73; Smith, 1993, 30, 131-134).

Similarly, Shore points out that European identity formation fails where national identities have succeeded. He argues that Europe's common values such as "Greco-Roman tradition, Judeo-Christian ethics, Renaissance humanism and individualism, Enlightenment rationalism and science, civil right tradition, democracy and the rule of law, etc." are inadequate in providing solidarity; moreover, deeply rooted values such as language, historical myths, memories and symbols emphasise division rather than unity (Shore 1998, in Llobera, 2003, 165).

The other category of arguments suggests that European identity can be constructed and can function alongside national identities, because their markers of cohesiveness are different. Unlike national identities which are based on perceived primordial allegiances and are enforced by shared cultures and history, attachment to the European Union can be based on what Habermas calls 'constitutional patriotism'; this rests on popular sovereignty and human rights and is shaped by the emergence of a European public sphere, of a political culture shared by all citizens of Europe (Llobera, 2003, 166, Habermas, 2001, 16).

The empirical evidence brought forward to contradict the opinion that national identity and European identity operate in zero-sum terms is generally drawn from surveys (such as the Eurobarometer). Quoting Carey (2002) and Citrin

and Sides (2004), Risse suggests that such surveys show that national identification and European identification are not perceived as contradictory: people feel part of both communities (Risse, 2005, 295). Further survey results come to similar conclusions: a higher identification with the EU does not involve a lower level of national identity (Castano, 2004, 50).

I will now turn to these arguments and explore them. Smith is correct in pointing out that culture plays a crucial role in determining the nature of the relationship between national and European identities. He also concedes that if the nation is regarded as a civic construct, based on voluntary association of rational citizens, the conflict is less apparent, whereas when the nation is viewed as an organic, cultural unit, the contradiction becomes sharper (Smith, 1992, 56). The distinction between civic/political and ethnic/cultural nations, however, is not helpful, because it points to ideal-type cases that are not mirrored by real-life equivalents. Nations that are regarded more or less as models of the civic type (such as Britain, the United States or France) limit consistently membership in the nation according to 'ethnic' criteria. One needs to look no further than the immigration laws of such countries where exclusion from citizenship continues to occur on the basis of ancestry, blood, etc (Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 104-105).

Thus, it is difficult to conceive many communities that are – as Habermas argues – solely linked by abstract notions of civic duties and human rights. Underneath all this there has to exist some perceived sense of common culture, which provides an emotional bond to the members of the community. The emotional aspect is crucial in reinforcing identity, even when that identity rests on individual freedom and rights. Even when the latter (rights and duties) remain very important, the discourse of flagging of identity finds it necessary to go beyond them and to appeal to some kind of revered cultural baggage. In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln does precisely that, invoking the “hollow ground, “the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here [and who] have consecrated it [so] that this nation, under God³, shall have a new birth of freedom” in order to command loyalty to a nation “conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (Lincoln, 1863, online).

³ There is considerable scholarly debate whether the words ‘under God’ were part of the draft Lincoln used to address the Union. The version used here is the one inscribed on the walls at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

In contrast to Smith's argument, I have suggested that a sense of belonging based on such values has been constructed in the case of the nation-state, and there is no reason why it cannot be replicated – and indeed it *is being* constructed – in the case of the European Union.

In principle, the 'withering away' of national identity is not a prerequisite for the construction of European identity. People can have multiple identities. What makes the relationship between these particular two special is: 1. the fact that they compete on the same type of institutional frameworks; and 2. the fact that they compete on the same type of symbols.

Most importantly, national identity is the basis for the nationalist ideology, and nationalism claims that the nation should take primacy over all other forms of social identification. On that basis, nationalism is able to command allegiance and loyalty against anything that could threaten (or be seen as threatening) the nation (national sovereignty):

The stronger the bond that an individual feels towards the nation, the less likely that individual will approve of measures that decrease national influence over economics and politics. The growth in the scope of the European Union in the realm of economics, politics and culture, which have previously been under the sole control of the nation-state, impinges on this view of the nation. (Carey, 2002, 391)

The implication is not that *national identity* functions as a barrier for the development of European identity, but that *nationalism* does. National identity is flagged and emphasised on a daily basis through what Billig calls 'banal nationalism' and it is embedded in the daily routines through "words of linguistic 'deixis'" such as 'we', 'this', 'here' etc. (1995, 94). This everyday, yet hardly benign nationalism becomes habitual, yet the mysticism of the 'homeland' can easily invoke the loyalty and sacrifice of the people, when "competing visions of homelands draw different boundaries around the same places" (Billig, 1995, 78). Although survey show – as mentioned earlier – that people feel that they belong to both national and European communities simultaneously, when it comes to the transfer of sovereignty from the nation-state to the EU (i.e. when the two come into potential contrast), nationalism is able to influence choices, through its

emotive powers. It is the emotional force that plays an important role in evaluating identity in such cases rather than civic values or even profit. As Risse (2005, 297) points out, categories of people such as farmers and women should, in theory, be more supportive and loyal to the EU, the first group because the EU spends the largest percent of the budget on its common agricultural policy, and the second because the EU championed gender equality; despite all this, support for the EU is rather low in both cases.

A solution for national and European identity to co-exist is if national identity disengages from the nationalist claim about the necessity to be congruent with the state. The two can share their common grounds as well as recognise differences in a harmonious way only when they stop competing over the same institutional framework. In other words, for European identity to take off it is necessary to separate nationality and citizenship and “to extract the nation from the state and shape it into a more flexible cultural process independent of political institutions” (Prentoulis, 2001, 205). This is not to say with certainty that a European identity will develop; rather, that European identity construction is a long term process, which depends on various context (not least the decrease in nationalist support), but has the potential to realise itself because it contains an ‘objective possibility’, much in the sense Llobera (using Fouillée) talks about the concept of *idée-force* (2003, 156).

Conclusions

This article has examined the relationship between national identity and European identity, focusing on two directions of thought: one that claims that national identity and European identity are conflicting and that European identity is not likely to replace national identity; and the other that argues that European identity is constructed on an entirely different basis than national identity and the two can coexist.

On the one hand, it has been argued that European identity cannot compete with national identity because it does not have deep rooted memories, myths and traditions that can induce a sense of loyalty the same way national identity does. On the other hand it has been argued that national identity and European identity do not clash, because their bases for allegiance are different. Unlike national identity which rests on a common culture to bind people, European

identity is constructed around 'constitutional patriotism' and individual rights and freedoms.

There are reasons to believe that both these views offer a narrow picture of the relationship between the two identities. I have argued that the formation of European identity involves forging symbols, myths and memories in the same way national identity did. Because these myths and memories are not fixed (although they are often perceived to be), there is no reason to believe that these new constructs cannot become as powerful as the national ones and that, indeed, they can override national them. Second, although European identity is to a large degree based on principles of popular sovereignty and civic rights, it still needs a shared 'culture' to connect people at an emotional level. Finally, I have argued that although both European identity and national identity are created following similar patterns they do not necessarily clash. It is nationalism rather than national identity that could hinder the development of the European identity.

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