

Van Mierlo Symposium

Europa & identiteit

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Europa en identiteit

woord vooraf

Europa en Europese integratie hebben zelden zo centraal gestaan in het politieke debat als in het afgelopen decennium. Beginnend met de referenda in Frankrijk en Nederland in 2005, is vanaf 2008 de Europese Unie elementair geweest in het zoeken naar oplossingen voor de financiële en economische crises. De invloed van de EU is vergroot en wordt hevig bediscussieerd in het publieke domein. Hierin staan kwesties van legitimiteit centraal. Europa is ook een thema geworden in het populistisch discours en heeft geleid tot verenigen van diverse stromingen onder het anti-Europa vaandel.

[1] De voertaal van het Van Mierlo Symposium 2014 was Engels, in verband met de aanwezigheid van een niet-Nederlandstalige spreker, David Zepernick Munis. De bijdragen in deze brochure zijn daarom ook in het Engels.

De Van Mierlo Stichting organiseerde vorig jaar zijn jaarlijkse symposium, met ditmaal als onderwerp: 'Europe and identity'.¹ Voor pro-Europese liberalen plaatst dit onderwerp ons voor prikkelende uitdagingen, waarop de uitgenodigde sprekers het publiek inzichten en achtergrondkennis gaven. Met de verkiezingen voor het Europees Parlement in het vooruitzicht presenteer ik u graag een weergave van de gegeven presentaties. De inhoud van de teksten zijn voor rekening van de sprekers en weerspiegelen niet noodzakelijkerwijze de mening van de Van Mierlo Stichting.

VMS-directeur Frank van Mil roept in zijn gesproken column mensen op om het maatschappelijk debat over Europa en (de eigen) identiteit meer te voeren. Historicus Arnold Labrie geeft de lezer een uitgebreid perspectief op de lange Europese geschiedenis van nationale identiteiten. De Deense expert in politieke communicatie David Zepernick Munis bepleit een zoektocht naar gedeelde Europese taal.

De gedachte achter het Van Mierlo Symposium is dat op deze wijze een lopend project van de Van Mierlo Stichting in de etalage wordt gezet en bij een groter publiek bekend wordt. Bovendien levert het nieuwe inzichten op. De keuze voor een Europa-onderwerp was geen toeval omdat sinds 2013 in opdracht van de Stichting een projectgroep werkt

aan het essay Een verenigd Europa: voorwaarde voor vrijheid. De gedachtewisseling op het symposium droegen - zoals verwacht - bij aan dit project. Het essay is inmiddels gereed en zal op 5 april 2014 worden gepresenteerd. In Voorwaarde voor vrijheid laat de Van Mierlo Stichting zien dat het ideaal van een verenigd Europa - met het sociaal-liberale streven naar persoonlijke vrijheid in verbondenheid steeds als toetssteen voor onze keuzes - goede aanknopingspunten biedt om met de actuele vragen en uitdagingen van het integratieproces om te gaan. Het essay brengt in kaart hoe wij ons Europa dichterbij kunnen brengen door : 1) ons te richten op de wijze waarop Europese integratie aan persoonlijke vrijheid en verbondenheid kan bijdragen; 2) de zorgen, twijfels en gevoelens van verlies, voortvloeiend uit Europese integratie, te erkennen en doorgronden; 3) van hieruit te werken aan de randvoorwaarden voor vrijheden en zekerheden in Europees verband.

Sociaal-liberalen willen vóór alles een Europa dat bijdraagt aan het beschermen en vergroten van de persoonlijke vrijheid van haar burgers. Deze vrijheid bescherm je niet door een oogje toe te knijpen, de ogen te sluiten of weg te kijken, maar door met open ogen de dilemma's rond Europese integratie tegemoet te treden. Juist deze combinatie van optimisme en realisme en de twee – eenheid vrijheid en verbondenheid is kenmerkend voor de visie van D66. In deze visie staan mensen centraal – mensen zoals ze zijn, niet zoals we ze graag zouden zien. Mensen die vindingrijk en creatief zijn, en steeds weer oplossingen bedenken voor nieuwe problemen, nieuwe tegenmacht organiseren waar vereist en steeds opnieuw keuzes maken vanuit waarden die zij zelf belangrijk vinden. Sociaal-liberalen vertrouwen op deze eigen kracht van mensen, op de beslissingen die mensen nemen over wat hen aan het hart gaat. Waarom zou dit anders zijn bij 'denk en handel internationaal' en in het bijzonder bij Europa? Ook daar vertrouwen wij op de eigen kracht van Europeanen bij het vormgeven van hun gezamenlijke toekomst.

Ik wens u veel leesplezier!

Joris Backer

voorzitter Mr. Hans van Mierlo Stichting

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Frank van Mil

1

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for attending in such a magnificent crowd, the third annual Van Mierlo Symposium – this year in cooperation with Bureau Internationaal of D66, and with the aid of ALDE party in Brussels! Today, I will share a confession with you – but first, I will make a few comments on the topic of today’s symposium.

On March 9th 2013, the Van Mierlo Stichting organized a fringe meeting at the D66 congress in Eindhoven. It was about Europe, European integration and the way we discuss these kinds of matters. Framing expert Sarah Gagestein taught us about the variety of ‘frames’ in which the debate is usually set. The session concluded in a lively debate, concerning the frame of identity: How do we progressive liberals deal with matters of identity and from that: legitimacy in a European context? It is exactly this that is the topic of today’s meeting!

The young Dutch political philosopher Rutger Claassen, in his book ‘Huis van de vrijheid’ (p 314) remarks astutely that:

“Een volwaardige politieke gemeenschap op Europees niveau zou even democratisch georganiseerd moeten zijn en evenzeer in staat moeten zijn haar burgers tot loyaliteit te inspireren.”

These words have continued to resonate in my mind up until today. I completely agree with Claassen, and I feel that he addresses a point that is paramount for progressive liberals with a preference for European integration. It also, however, addresses a problem for us. It would seem to me that there can be no loyalty without identification. And us progressive liberals absolutely do not feel at ease with matters of identity in the political debate and the domain of government. In our view it is dangerously close to an interfering, meddling government, perhaps even ‘politics of identity’. As a result, many of us decide not to discuss these kinds of issues at all, and act as

if it just isn't something that is in the forefront of the public debate about European integration.

But there is also good news! Because we are liberals, we strongly believe that many of society's problems should not be solved in the realm of government. And, as 'social-liberals', we also see the merit and importance of the realm of civil society. Issues of identity, and identification, belong in precisely that realm: civil society. It is in this domain, that liberals, as individuals, can discuss everything and anything, without it necessarily having to lead to government action or concrete policy! As people, as citizens, we must discuss what binds us and what sets us apart.

It is this civil dialogue that develops identity, private ones and commonly shared. And that is what we are doing here today. This here is not a government meeting, with civil servants and all. We are private individuals, coming together from a shared conviction. I am convinced that only from these kinds of civil initiatives, any form of loyalty can come to being. And from loyalty can eventually come legitimacy; not just from more mandate for the European Parliament, or from a directly elected European Commission.

So, with all these remarks in mind, here goes. My confession:

I love Europe

Mind though, when I say this, that Europe does not equate 'the European Union'. After all, the wildly popular Dutch TV-show is also not called 'Ik hou van de staat der Nederlanden', or something like that, for a reason... When I say that I love Europe, it is obviously totally subjective. I find that this affection is the main reason why I feel a degree of loyalty to the EU, notwithstanding all its' imperfections and apparent short comings.

But now, that I've come this far, let me elaborate a bit on my sentiments. Having studied cultural history, I have become aware that Europe really has been one cultural area for centuries. Of course there are many differences within Europe as well, but nonetheless these differences are assembled somehow under a unifying umbrella of a larger European culture. We share the same stories, and have a shared

history. As a result, I truly feel European. What this is exactly is hard to express, as it is for feeling Dutch (as I also do, the two don't exclude each other).

What I can do though, is describe the occasions in which I feel European: Whenever I visit a city, anywhere in Europe, I somehow find my way – even without knowing it. Seemingly automatically, I find the delicious parks, the cute narrow alleyways and the 'gezellige' squares. I've only been outside of Europe a few times, but when I was, I always got lost in the cities over there: I entered the wrong streets, found no 'gezelligheid' and found out after I had left where I ought to have gone. I felt dislocated and yearned for a 'normal' European city.

I also feel European when a Dutch team plays the Champions League. Have a look at the news coverage of a European football match of thirty years ago: When Feijenoord played Inter Milan, it was an exotic event. Nowadays, European football is an interior affair, with Dutch players playing all over Europe. It makes me feel both Dutch and European.

I feel European when I'm in the company of people from all over the world and somehow I automatically end up hanging out with the Europeans. Despite all the differences, it would seem that we share a common outlook on life and on the world. A shared frame of reference.

I guess, this is how these things go: you aren't really aware of it, until it is contrasted with something else.

In conclusion: I'm naturally not saying that everyone should feel the way I do in these matters. All I'm trying to do is share my perspective. Because perhaps, it will shed a light on things that other people will recognize. It is my strong belief that any process of European integration can only be legitimate if it is matched by interactions like this. So please, view this afternoon, and all that will be said, not as merely an academic exercise on European integration. Rather, try to use it all as a contribution and an encouragement to engage in the conversation yourself!

Thank you, and I wish you a stimulating afternoon!

Identity and Identity Politics in Europe¹

Arnold Labrie

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[1] I thank my daughter Charlotte Labrie for her critical comments on this text.

Someone with an identity does not have to wonder about it. To be conscious of identity is already halfway to have lost it. Awareness of identity inevitably implies a sense of non-identity, i.e. of otherness. That insight has been perfectly expressed by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud: “Je est un autre”. Of course, our natural inclination is to try and overcome this rather awkward feeling, not to be at one with ourselves. In fact, this search for identity seems to be the essence of what it is to be modern. In this contribution I would like to make a few key points about identity and identity politics in Europe.

Identity as a historical problem

First, I want to make clear that identity is a historical problem. Identity only becomes a problem in times of rapid and fundamental change. And that makes it a typical modern problem. The pre-modern world is a so-called ‘categorical’ world with a fixed order and dogmatic beliefs. Stability is the norm; change is seen as a deviation from that norm. A person’s position in society is completely fixed by his station of birth, i.e. by his estate. Peasants – 90% of the population – lead the lives of their ancestors, as they know their children will do. In this relatively static world identity is embedded in the social structure. It is more or less fixed by external social constraints and therefore can hardly become a personal problem.

The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution have ended all that. We moderns live in a so-called ‘hypothetical’ world without a fixed order or eternal certainties.² That is because our society is not a society of estates, but a society of individuals. Our position in society is not fixed by birth, but is – at least in principle – determined by individual talent. Our society implies the possibility of social and geographic mobility. That is what makes it such a dynamic world. Since the beginning of the 19th century tens of millions have moved from their agricultural village to the city or from Europe to America. For them, the future was open, but therefore also full of uncertainties. Their position in society

[2] The conceptual distinction between ‘categorical’ and ‘hypothetical’ world-views is borrowed from W. Hof, *Pessimistisch-nihilistische Strömungen in der deutschen Literatur. Vom Sturm und Drang bis zum Jungen Deutschland* (Tübingen 1970), pp. 1-32.

was not fixed from the start. On the contrary, they had to find their right place in this world of change, where social roles constantly switch. This problem is prominently reflected in the European *Bildungsroman*, from Goethe's Wilhelm Meister or Stendhal's Julien Sorel to Thomas Mann's Hans Castorp and even Günter Grass' Oskar Matzerath.

This problem also explains why we attach so much value to education. A pre-modern peasant only had to watch his parents to see what the future had in store. However, to prepare oneself for our modern and rapidly changing society, one needs this long trajectory of school training. And this is especially true because our modern world is like a wide – at the very minimum: nation-wide – web of contacts and interdependencies. In this world communication is everything. Therefore each of us has to learn the same 'language': not just the same national tongue, but also the right codes of conduct – i.e. norms and values – in different situations. In modern society, it is culture and, more in particular, language that determines who we are. Let me conclude this part with a short quote from the sociologist Ernest Gellner:

“If a man is not firmly set in a social niche, whose relationship as it were endows him with his identity, he is obliged to carry his identity with him, in his whole style of conduct and expression; in other words, his ‘culture’ becomes his identity.”³

[3] E. Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London 1964), p. 157

Identity Politics

The problem of modern identity is both an individual and a collective problem. For each individual, social integration is an essential part of identity formation. Who we are can only be objectified in the complex of social groups that we participate in. However, these collective entities are also affected by the onslaught of modernity. Older social groups are broken up or transformed or replaced by new social formations.

All of them are faced with the problem of defining their collective identity in a changing world. This is the crucial problem for all modern political and social movements. I will discuss their identity politics, focussing on nationalism as the most influential of them all. In doing so, I will pay attention, first, to the role of the past and remembrance of that past, and second, to the role of difference and so-called *significant others*.

The role of the past

A nationalist derives much of his sense of personal identity from his participation in *this* specific nation. No doubt, he believes that his nation exists and that it exists in an objective sense, that there is some national core or essence or spirit that remains the same and therefore guarantees identity despite all seeming change. That is not how modern scholars look at the nation. To quote Ernest Gellner once more: “[..] it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round”. The anthropologist Benedict Anderson has made the same point, when he defined the nation as an “imagined community”.⁴

[4] E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford 2006; orig. 1983), p. 54; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York 1983).

According to this view, the nation only exists in this belief that it exists. But this faith, too, can move mountains. If millions are ready to descend into the trenches and sacrifice their lives for their fatherland, then the nation exists. If successful, the nation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and becomes real. However, not ‘real’ in the sense the nationalist thinks it is real. Contrary to the essentialist views of nationalists, modern scholars tend to speak of the so-called *construction* or *invention* of the nation. And contrary to the idea of a unitary nation, one and undivided, they tend to stress that the nation is always *contested* and should, for instance, also be viewed from a regional perspective, i.e. as a *local metaphor*. The question is then: how does the nationalist succeed at convincing himself and others that the nation really exists? Or, to ask this same question from the point of view of modern scholars: how does he succeed at constructing the nation?

Well, what is required first is to create a national past. Identity is, like György Konrád has observed, just another word for ‘history’. Indeed, that is at least part of the truth about identity, both at the individual

and at the collective level. A person who suffers from amnesia does not know anymore who he is. Similarly, the nation cannot exist without a past, preferably one that is lost in the mist of time. For the older the nation is, the more respectable it becomes, the more legitimate its claims may seem to be. Following this devise, intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries have made an astounding effort to reinterpret and transform the past into a national past. A past full of national heroes and national big events that could serve as so many realms of memory: as so many *lieux de mémoire* that became the subject of novels, operas, monuments and commemorations and that could function like a mirror, in which the emerging nation would recognize its own image. Thus, German nationalism discovered Hermann the Cherusk, leader of a tribal confederation that defeated the Roman army in the Teutoburger Wald in the year 9. Of course, Hermann did not know he was German; the words *deutsch* and *Deutschland* did not even exist at the time. He thought he was a renegade Roman citizen, who had turned against Rome, because he was a Cherusk at heart. But for German nationalists he could serve as an ancestor to be proud of. In this same way the French would look at Vercingetorix and the Dutch at Julius Civilis, while Rumanians, who had never known they were Rumanians before, were quick to trace their lineage to the Dacians of the 2nd century.

In all these cases, the past is transformed into a prehistory of the present. History, which is chaotic and full of change, suddenly seems to have an objective and to follow a pattern. The objective is the nation state; the pattern is the process of national becoming that will take us there and that is usually described in biological terms, i.e. as 'growth' or 'development'. Continuity is a basic requirement for historical identity, which remains the same despite all change. Without such an identity no group can exist or act as a group and legitimate its political demands. What is true for nationalism is true for all modern political ideologies. Confronted with the discontinuities of modern reality, these ideologies have offered us their so-called 'grand narratives', all of them to suggest a deeper, hidden order as the precondition for a stable sense of identity.

The role of the Other

This brings me to the second component of identity politics: the role of the Other. According to the traditional view of nationalism, the nation is a monadic entity; as if the group exists *an sich* and its identity can be positively defined in isolation, without consideration of external constraints. This view has been criticised by the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth. In his view it is not about what people are, but what they think they are. In other words: identity is all about perception and ascription of meaning. Most important of all: we cannot perceive ourselves without consideration of others. Identity is much more about the borderlines between us and our significant others, than it is about what is supposed to be contained within these borders. Moreover, such borders are fluid and permeable and can shift over time. Identity is, in Barth's famous words, an "evanescent situational construct, not a solid enduring fact".⁵ In the ethnic melting pot of the early Middle Ages loyalties could easily be transferred to new groups, even despite significant ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. Huns are (partially) absorbed by Ostrogoths; Marcomanni and Quadi become Sueves who will subsequently merge with Visigoths. These groups simply seem to vanish from the historical scene. But that is not because these warrior bands have disappeared themselves, but because they have amalgamated with a more successful tribe and have adopted its name.⁶

But although fluid and permeable, these borderlines are sometimes maintained for a long time, even for centuries. National stereotypes that emerged in the so-called *Völkertafel* at the end of the Middle Ages have often lasted into the modern age. Germans are *treu*, but also uncivilized peasants, notorious for their drunkenness and *furor teutonicus*. The French are elegant, but frivolous, and the Englishman is phlegmatic, but also (especially according to the French) perfidious. The North is cool and therefore rational; the South is warm and therefore sensual and lazy.⁷ Old images die hard. According to the nationalist, these are not just perceptions. In his view, such cultural differences are determined by objective factors like geography and landscape, religion, language or ethnicity (a rather vague notion that varies between "culture" and "race"). Of course, in

[5] F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Oslo 1969), pp. 9-15.

[6] This view of ethnic identity underlies – among others – two excellent studies: P.J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations. The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, N.J./Oxford 2002); and P. Heather, *Empires and Barbarians. Migration, Development and the Birth of Europe* (London 2010).

[7] See for instance J. Leerssen, *Spiegelpaleis Europa. Europese cultuur als mythe en beeldvorming* (Nijmegen 2011). This elegant essay may serve as a good example of the constructivist view of Europe, where image and representation are crucial for identity formation.

reality the Alps do not suffice to explain the existence of the Swiss nation. It would be easier to explain our admiration for these mountains as a product of Swiss nationalism (and English tourism). Similarly, we may concede that Catholicism helps the Irish and the Poles to distinguish themselves from their neighbours. However, Catholicism did not stop the French and Spaniards to fight each other for centuries at regular intervals.

The nationalist's trump card is language. Language is, to follow the words of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the "Seele der Nation". However, in pre-modern Europe most states contained many ethnicities and many languages. Elites and peasant population often spoke different languages, without anybody complaining. Even at the end of the 19th century most people still could speak no more than their local dialect. In 1880 only 20% of the French population could actually speak French. In Italy things were even more dramatic. In 1861, one year after political unification, minister Massimo d'Azeglio described the situation: "We have made Italy: now we have to make Italians".⁸ Seen like this, our national standard language is far more the product of nationalism than it is the cradle of the nation, to which nationalism claims it owes its existence. If the nationalist were right, the Swiss nation should be denied that status and we could hardly explain the simultaneous existence of both England and the United States: "two nations divided by a common language". Indeed, language has often played a role in the national self-image. But it is certainly not a necessary, objective condition for the nation to exist.

[8] Cf. E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Cal. 1976), pp. 67-94 and 308-309; P. Alter, *Nationalism* (London 1996), p. 15.

If language has become much more important in modern society than it was before, that is because modern society is a society in which communication plays a vital part. But apart from this (Gellner's) argument, we should also consider the modern nation state. Whatever exact form the modern state has assumed, defined as a nation state it is based on the principle of popular sovereignty that was first introduced by the French Revolution. It is this principle that makes it necessary (for the first time) that political elite and people speak the same language. And this is particularly true for parliamentary democracy, since citizens have to be able to

understand their government and representatives in order to determine their political position or actively participate in politics themselves.

Europe: an unidentified cultural object

That brings me to the problem of European identity. To state my position clearly at the start: European identity is an unidentified cultural object and that is how it should be.⁹ Of course, there are many who have taken a different view and have tried to define European identity in objective terms. Since 1945 libraries have been written about the ‘idea of Europe’. More recently, the problem of identity loomed large in the debate about the European Constitution. What is at stake is clear. We could paraphrase minister d’Azeglio: “We have made the European Union; now we have to make Europeans.” And it is not difficult to see that in this attempt to invent Europe the same strategies are followed that were earlier used by nationalism to create the nation state.

To invent Europe we need to transform the past into a European past. Until the 18th century the word ‘Europe’ is a strictly geographic term, without any special emotions attached. It is only from the Enlightenment onwards that the word acquires cultural value and becomes an identity marker. And from the start, ‘Europe’ means ‘history’. Europe has a history, the other continents do not. Of course, ‘history’ means ‘progress’ and ‘progress’ means ‘civilization’. We have civilization, they do not and that is why we have the legitimate right, if not the obligation, to colonize and educate them. We started in classical antiquity, which gave us our ideas about liberty, citizenship, statecraft and even democracy. Next, Christianity taught us how to behave like decent, moral beings. And rationalism empowered us to rule over nature and the rest of the world. I have left out a few details, but the story is a familiar one, so it suffices just to remind you of the general outline of this ‘grand narrative’.

What is wrong with this picture? Well, for one thing, Greeks and Romans did not define their identity in terms of ‘Europe’. The Greeks considered themselves to be the western fringe of the great Persian Empire, because that was where the

[9] This is, of course, a variation of Jacques Delors’ apt description of the European project as “an unidentified political object”.

money was. Likewise, the Roman Empire was not a European, but a Mediterranean Empire. Europe was the North: cold, unknown, full of barbarians, nothing to get there. After the 5th century *romanitas* is replaced by *christianitas* as indication of the most inclusive community with which a person could identify. Of course, Christianity divided people just as much as it united them. The division between the Western and Eastern Roman Empire was almost perfectly copied in the split between the Latin church of Rome and the Greek orthodox church of Constantinople. That fault line was even hardened by 400 years of Ottoman rule over the orthodox world and is still visible today. In the meantime, western Christianity suffered another schism, which ushered in two centuries of religious wars between Catholics and Protestants. That is one of the most important reasons why 'Europe', until then a strictly geographic concept, was gradually infused with new cultural meaning. Religious unity had proven to be an illusion. What was left was the notion of some rather ill-defined secular community.

At the same time, it was clear that this European community could only exist as a *compositio oppositorum*. This was Europe as it was designed at the Peace of Westphalia of 1648: a complex of rivalling states, held together by the so-called *balance of power*. Many wars were fought, each war fostering a sense of national identity. But wars also sharpened a sense of common destiny, because they were all fought within the arena of Europe. They forced states to work together in coalitions in order to prevent subsequent pretenders – Habsburg Spain, France, Germany – to control all of Europe. There has never been a European Empire. No single power was ever powerful enough to control this continent as a whole from one single centre. That is, in my view, one of the most important characteristics of Europe: that it has always been a polycentric and, consequently, very diverse entity. On such a continent, it is very hard to suppress unorthodox religious beliefs or radical new ideas. For until last century, those who were persecuted could often find a home elsewhere, but still in the same cultural space. It is like Edmund Burke said in 1797: “No European can be an exile in any part of Europe.”¹⁰ Of course, Burke is very idealistic and writes about his own people: the cultural elite. Nevertheless, this is one reason why we had our Golden Age.

[10] Quote from G. Delanty, *Inventing Europe. Idea, Identity, Reality* (Basingstoke/London 1995), p. 71

Let me now turn to the second component, for Europe has had its *significant others* as well. Most important in this respect has been the West-East divide between Europe and Asia. Of course, the exact location of the dividing line has always been a matter of perspective. According to catholic Poles, Asia would start in orthodox Russia. Germans had the same idea about the Poles, but were themselves decried as Huns by the French and English press during the First World War. The association between ‘Asiatic’ and ‘barbaric’ is an old one and can even be traced to some Greek authors during the Persian wars. However, the opposition between Europe and Asia owes most of its dramatic impact to the conflict between Christianity and Islam. In the 7th century Islam expanded into Northern Africa and Asia Minor and confined Christianity within its European prison. As a result, Europe became Christian and Islam came to be the opposite of Europe.

Again, this is one way to read your history the wrong way. In reality, Islam has been very much a part of European history. Many ideas and technologies on which we pride ourselves have actually come from the East, usually through the Islamic world: financial innovations of the Italian Renaissance, the compass, the printing press, the number zero and, last but not least, gun powder. Humanism owes much to Arabic translations of ancient Greek texts. And the Ottoman Empire has always been part of the European balance of power, for instance as an ally of catholic France against catholic Spain in the 17th century. This is not to say that there have not been some very real and important differences between – roughly speaking – Europe and Asia. But these differences never precluded intense contacts and mutual influence. In the end, one could even wonder why Europe is considered to be a continent in the first place instead of, like Paul Valéry suggested, as “a little promontory on the continent of Asia”.¹¹

[11] P. Valéry, *Collected Works* vol. 10 (New York 1962; ed. by J. Mathews), p. 31

Conclusion: the potential for a European identity

There is much more to say on this topic than can be addressed here. I will leave you with a few concluding remarks.

European identity does not exist. To say the same thing differently: European identity exists in the search for identity. And that is how it should be. Not to have a fixed identity implies open-mindedness, the possibility for critique of what exists, the creativity to look for alternatives.

What is helpful in this respect is Europe as a polycentric and very diverse political and cultural space. There has never been one European centre and that is just as well. Even our current process of European integration seems to move along several tracks simultaneously. Even today, we can only look at Europe through the prism of different national perspectives. In this respect Ton Nijhuis is right to contend that there are just as many processes of European integration as there are member states of the Union.¹² My concern is that it may stay that way. Cooperation is necessary. But one European nation state with one uniform European culture would be too much for my taste.

[12] T. Nijhuis, *Een nieuw Duitsland-een oud geluid?* (inaugural lecture University of Amsterdam 2000), p. 18.

Of course, the chances of that type of scenario becoming a reality are very slim. There are certain limits to political unification, given our demands for democratic government. There is no European *demos*. ‘Grand narratives’ about European identity will not help us here; neither will European TV-channels or consumption of the same rectified cucumbers. For one thing is missing: a European language. One can hardly compare the situation with the one within nation states of the 19th century. The borderlines between dialects are much more permeable than those between languages and certainly than those between the Germanic, Romance and Slavonic language groups. English as an official language remains a surrogate and would rank citizens according to their ability to learn a second language. And in the end there is the problem of identity: in the age of democracy people simply do not identify with a government that does not speak their native tongue. That, in my view, sets a limit to the degree of political cooperation and the forms it can take.

Finally, I think we should add a third component to the inventory of identity politics. Identity needs remembrance of things past. However, it also needs the ability to forget or – better yet – to see things from the right historical distance. Europe needs its *lieux de mémoire*, not just success stories, but especially

the negative experiences out of which the European project was actually born. We need to remember Verdun and Auschwitz, although in time we can learn to comprehend these horrors too from a historical – and I certainly do not mean: relativistic – point of view. But to remember each injury done by others centuries ago and act as if one still feels the pain, is a symptom of resentment. The French philosopher Ernest Renan already said it in 1882 in a famous lecture about the nation: one cannot create a nation without forgetting a lot about the conflicts between the different groups that are supposed to be part of it.¹³ In 1946 Winston Churchill came to a similar conclusion. In his view, there could be no future for Europe – i.e. the Continent – without the “blessed act of oblivion”.¹⁴ That was sound advice. Although, being a historian, I would still rather say ‘historical distance’ than simply ‘forget’.

[13] E. Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (Paris 1992).

[14] Quote from Chr. Meier, *Das Gebot zu vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns* (München 2010), p. 10.

Stumbling blocks and stepping stones towards a common sense of Europe – a troubled Danish perspective

David Munis Zepernick

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When I was asked to take part in a symposium on European identity, I was glad to be able to give my view on a topic that speaks to me both personally and as a member of the Danish Social Liberal Party. My name is David Munis Zepernick, and despite the fact that my middle name is Portuguese, my family name is German and I am often mistaken for being either Israeli, Arab or something else, I am actually Danish. I am proud of that - most of the time. But when it comes to Europe, and Denmark's and the Danes' willingness to actually contribute actively to the European project, I am not so proud. I am in fact glad that not all member states have adopted the 'Danish way', because in that case there would be no European community, let alone a union of any kind.

In this short and hopefully not too pessimistic contribution, I will try to do three things. First of all, I want to pinpoint the challenges facing us in trying to find a peaceful coexistence between national identity and a positive notion of present day Europe. In particular, I will shed light on these challenges from a Danish perspective. And finally – and I recognize that this is the difficult part – I will try to provide some ideas for stepping stones towards resolving them.

National identity and the idea of Europe

Let me start by drawing on my own experience. I feel Danish, I dream in Danish and my mother tongue is Danish. That is my national identity, and although I am a dedicated supporter of an 'ever closer union', I will probably resist any attempts by anyone to impose a conflicting or competing national identity on me. That is probably how most people feel, and consequently any attempt to promote a common European identity as something designed to replace existing national identities will be met with fierce resistance by EU-sceptics and EU-supporters alike.

Such an attempt will be an uphill struggle - and probably a dead end as well.

Identities, also national identities, are created by social interaction. National identities are not hard boiled eggs. On the other hand, an identity formed by such massive social interaction as a national identity is not easily replaced, and definitely not by something as abstract as the concept of Europe or the (for most people) almost equally abstract political institutions of the EU. Remember that the complex and highly abstract concept of national identity includes notions like territorial boundedness to a homeland, shared myths of origin and historical memories of a national community, and a common bond of a mass standardized culture. It also refers to a common territorial division of labour with mobility for all members and ownership of all resources by all members, and to a unified system of legal rights and duties for all members under common laws and institutions.

The EU is currently challenging all these aspects to varying degrees. Sometimes it's good to be challenged, whereas other times it's problematic and core values come under attack. We see this especially in welfare states such as ours, where social rights funded by members (national tax payers) are given to fellow Europeans considered non-members. The national educational grant, currently a big issue in Denmark, is a good example of such a social right many nationals believe should be reserved for members only.

Obstacles to a positive notion of Europe - a Danish perspective

Let's have a closer look at the challenges facing us. To make sure my message gets through, I will use Denmark as an example of how an already difficult task has been made even more difficult - but hopefully not impossible! I think the Danish case shows that there is a middle ground, with room for a European identity that is not locked in a zero-sum game with existing national identities. As one of the Nordic countries, Denmark is considered to be 'on top of Europe'. At least, that's how we Danes like to see it, implying some sense of national

superiority when comparing ourselves with most of continental Europe. That is part of our myth. We hate to see ourselves as the periphery of Europe, although one could convincingly argue that all the Nordic countries are periphery, geographically, politically, economically and culturally.

I am about as European as it gets. I am a declared federalist – in this context, the infamous ‘f-word’ in Denmark – but then why do I not feel completely comfortable introducing myself as a European? I could easily do so: I am a lot more pro-European than most of my countrymen. For many Danes, a number of barriers stand in the way of a positive and constructive dialogue about the notion of Europe as a potential source of legitimacy.

Firstly, there is an identity barrier. We are Danish, Nordic, and European, in order of appearance. But Danish national identity is to a significant extent defined in opposition to ‘Germanness’ – at least historically. And we share that identity-history with quite a few other European nations.

Secondly, we are facing a democracy barrier. Different member states have adopted diverging interpretations of this shared ideal: constitutional versus majoritarian democracy, the parliamentary chain of government, polity misfit, the role of judges versus that of parliament, etc.

Finally, we can speak of a credibility barrier in Europe, in part self-inflicted by national and EU elites. The EU has been deliberately portrayed as a matter of export and trade, not of politics – this was the angle of the yes-campaign in the 1972 Danish referendum on joining the EEC. The significance of the EU is often downplayed: when introducing the Single European Act in 1986, former Prime Minister Schlüter declared that “the union is stone dead”. In Denmark, there is a common idea that the EU is not a real union, and that we can always opt out. After all, that is just what we did with the four Danish exemptions (relating to Union citizenship, the Euro, Justice and Home Affairs and Defence) in the Edinburgh-protocol of 1993. Other familiar lines of argument have been that European integration is now about

enlargement, not further integration (Amsterdam Treaty referendum), and that the Danish economy would be at risk if we did not join the Euro (2001 Euroreferendum). Part of the problem is what we could call a media barrier: conflict almost always beats consensus in the struggle for headlines, and national politicians have a tendency to use the EU as a scapegoat for unpopular policy choices.

Stepping stones towards a common European future and a stronger European identity

Considering these barriers, we have to have realistic expectations and be patient. There will be no European people in the foreseeable future - probably never. We have to dedicate ourselves to the creation of a European narrative *within* existing national identities. We have to consider being Dutch in Europe or Danish in Europe like we consider ourselves independent individuals within our own families.

Conceptualize the EU as a family living in a house under construction. Family members do not always agree, and a house under construction is by definition not perfect and never will be, as no single family member can enforce his or her unique scheme. By using the positive concept of family, you imply that you are willing to obey an agreed set of rules, even though you might not have it your way all the time. As a framework for talking about the EU, the concept of ‘family deliberations’ is less conflict-prone than the frame of ‘them vs. us’ or ‘EU vs. Denmark’, which dominates the current debate, at least in my country. It’s simply a lot easier to communicate positively and make people feel comfortable with than the abstract concept of “independent European nation-states who, challenged by globalization and in pursuit of a during, peaceful and prosperous European political order, have chosen to share sovereignty in an ever closer union on a journey to an unknown destination”.

This approach is by no means a quick fix, but let’s see how we could start to build the common European narrative needed. Here are a couple of starting points or stepping stones for national politicians and others who accept the notion of a European family.

- 1) **Stop the scapegoating.** Do not – as national politicians – blame the EU for all failures while taking credit for all successes.
- 2) **Communicate** the family’s success stories as such – *family* success stories – whenever possible. Ask yourself: is there any other continent on the planet where you would rather live?
- 3) **Evaluate** the family’s failures and put forward constructive suggestions for ‘family solutions’. What if we built a military capacity for combating genocide in the neighbourhood (Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus)? What if we could combat trafficking effectively with a stronger Europol?
- 4) **Practice your party’s national EU elevator speech:** the reason why you want more Europe in Holland and more Holland in Europe in 45 seconds. The world needs Europe because...we can radiate peace and prosperity. Europe needs Europe because...we have a common destiny. The Netherlands/Denmark needs Europe because...it gains us a democratic surplus.
- 5) **Start to emphasize the European component** in national education systems, where the construction of shared myths of origin and historical memories begins.
- 6) **Create a European School of Journalism** in order give the ‘modern day storytellers’ a European perspective.

In this way we can slowly and with a concentrated effort hope to build a notion of our respective national identities in which there is room for a European family membership. If we accept the notion of family membership, it is a lot easier to discuss the specific institutional framework constructively. The struggle for hearts and minds will then not be a clash between soon-to-be 28 national identities and a European identity, but a debate within national identities, where there will be one side arguing for acceptance of a European family membership and another side rejecting such membership.

The difference is, of course, that in this second kind of struggle, the idea of Europe can actually win – if people such as yourselves believe in Europe *and* your own country and face the challenge head on.

Thank you for including me in this family event!

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