

REVIEW ARTICLE

Europe's Identity Problem

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Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU

Richard K. Herrmann, Thomas Risse, and Marilyn B. Brewer (Eds)
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Who are the Europeans Now?

Edward Moxon-Browne (Ed.)
Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, vi + 202 pp., £49.95, ISBN 1-84014-429-7

How can we study the EU as a social process? That is, European integration from the bottom up? The vexing lacuna in EU studies on the social origins and sources of European integration – that should be of particular interest to sociologists, social historians, anthropologists and social psychologists, as well as political scientists interested in society – remains a thinly studied question. The lack of attention stands in stark contrast with the resolutely top-down approach of diplomatic historians, legal scholars, public policy analysts and IR theorists, who dominate the field – and our understanding of European integration.

Awareness that there is a 'bottom-up' question to be asked, however, is growing. For many, the question must mean talking somehow about the 'identity' of European citizens: how nominal EU passport holders might become (and feel) truly European. Somewhere in the mid to late 1990s, the question of 'European identity' became a compelling – and lucrative – research topic. Nagged by the sense that someone ought to take seriously Jean Monnet's oft-quoted, but little substantiated, comment that European integration should have begun with culture not economy, and more directly by the threatening rhetoric about the EU's democratic deficit and emotional disconnect with its citizens, the EU institutions have ever since vigorously promoted academic work in this area. Some Eurobarometer questions seem to exist uniquely to offer easy, ready-made data for political scientists and others to churn through the identity question. The problematic of 'European identity' is born here: a normatively charged, methodologically

unclear search for a transnational 'sociological' foundation, to what might be otherwise an irredeemably idealist political construction. One thing is clear. The EU institutions may as yet have failed to convincingly construct a European population in its own image. But with its multiple arms of university funding in Europe, the US, and further afield, they have been spectacularly successful in constructing a European community of EU scholars, hooked on this kind of pre-packaged Euro-data and Euro-agenda.

It is the self-styled 'social constructivists' in IR who have taken up the baton of studying European identity most keenly. Influenced by critical theory and the ever burgeoning study of 'social identities' by scholars of race and ethnicity, a large number of younger EU scholars have embraced an idealist, hermeneutic vision of politics in the EU, sharply at odds with the dominantly materialist, methodologically individualist, drive of mainstream political science. A central part of the agenda is to take political socialisation seriously once again: to open up the black box of where preferences come from, and to emphasise the idea that institutions and identities can construct and manipulate political desires, beyond the determination of individual rationality. They also open the door to using something 'sociological' or 'psychological' to address those puzzling residual issues that arise out of the less rational, collective, emotional dimensions of politics, particularly those of an ethnic, racial or nationalist kind.

A leading example of the constructivist turn in IR was Peter Katzenstein's influential rehabilitation of the 'sociological' approach in international security studies, particularly the invocation that 'culture' – conceived in terms of 'norms' and 'identity' – can sometimes structure and determine the behaviour of states (Katzenstein 1996). Another is the monumental recent systematisation of the 'social theory of international politics' by Alexander Wendt (Wendt 1999). The problem is that these versions of the 'sociological' in political science – what Katzenstein bluntly describes as 'rummaging in the graveyard of sociological studies' – offer a wholly arcane version of what a 'sociological' approach to politics might in fact be. The ghost of Talcott Parsons rides again, and a neo-Durkheimian ontology of social facts, collective consciousness, and functionalist explanations is embraced anew. Sociology apparently is equated exclusively with abstract and dated structuralist or structurationist social theories that are of little relevance now to the empirical core of the discipline. Parsons, on the other hand, would be very comfortable with many of the ideas and culture based versions of new institutionalism, for example. The resultant debates in IR all look mighty quaint and peculiar to most practising contemporary sociologists.

Social constructivists also love to show off their philosophical learning, but the obsession with 'social identities' calls for closer examination on this score too. The fundamental philosophical question about identity is not a question of ethnicity or culture, but the puzzle of 'personal identity'. How is any kind of 'individual' identity possible, once we move to the historical or sociological mode of understanding, in which persons are in fact

exhaustively determined by the (contextually defined, therefore ever-changing) social roles and positions that they are found in. The philosopher's unfashionable answer will be a transcendental one: that it is *rationality*, perhaps of a richer, more autonomous Kantian variety than *homo aeconomicus*, which guarantees the identity (and freedom) of the modern self. Critical theory, of course, taught the postmodern generation to be unimpressed by this kind of reasoning. The constructivists, who are theoretically ambitious, instead have staked everything on an anti-individualist, anti-rational actor crusade that threatens – borrowing a phrase from the philosopher, Martin Hollis, who is often cited against the grain by these theorists – to be as much about the social *destruction* of rationality as about its social construction. The assumptions of mainstream political science may deserve a good philosophical challenge, perhaps even one that quotes continental philosophers. But the constructivist turn to 'identity' is surely a step backwards. It is high time that the social sciences go 'beyond identity' in this sense, and the dubious group based social ontologies it invokes (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000). For all its seductive appeal, this is an ordinary language term now irredeemably undercut by conceptual confusion, philosophical sloppiness, and the normative taint of too much political correctness.

The Moxon-Browne volume offers little comfort on this score. The title, blurb and some of the contributions suggest a concerted collective reflection on European identity(ies). But the concept of 'identity' is nowhere defined, and the book turns out to be the worst kind of book on European integration: a string of conference papers that are mostly either descriptive legal and policy commentaries, or normative opinion pieces about the failures of European citizenship and democracy in the EU. To claim the book has been 'edited' is to stretch descriptions. There is no introduction, no conclusion, no internal structure or ordering; some papers belong in a different book about ethnicity or nationalism; and chapters range from a brief conference intervention of 7–8 pages, to an apparently untrimmed MA thesis of 40 pages. Fatally, there is not even a bio page. The papers apparently – judging by citations – were all written no later than 1998. Ashgate is doing itself and the authors involved no favours in publishing such an unfocused, outdated and inessential volume.

The Herrmann, Risse and Brewer project is an altogether more sustained, organised and serious effort, which has seen a lengthy period of development at the European University Institute and Ohio State University. It is thoroughly interdisciplinary, with very well chosen contributors, and underpinned by a psychology-based understanding of 'identity' – thereby dodging (through neglect) the charge that this is very poor sociology. The focus on putative 'transnational identities' in the EU turns out to be a nominal unifying factor, not one based on common methodology or theoretical commitments. The editors are at pains to stress that the group is also very divided on whether the EU has been successful in encouraging

identification with its goals. Yet the various attempts to operationalise the general question of studying European identity are highly instructive.

The volume leads off with three psychology papers – by Glynis Breakwell, Emanuele Castano, and the team of Amélie Memmendej and Sven Waldzus – using experimental methodology to study the different psychological mechanisms and circumstances that might lead to changes in identity relating to a European collectivity. It is encouraging to see these sharply defined empirical studies, which have methodological interest beyond the typical EU studies' audience. A second section takes a more familiar line, of seeking out prototypical European actors – the most highly Europeanised figures working in the corridors of Brussels – to see how much these elite actors embrace the European project. Again, these are three very well developed empirical studies, by Brigit Laffan, Ruth Wodak and Eugenia Siapera, which offer detailed analysis of the difficult national and transnational roles that these actors end up having to combine.

Part three shifts notionally from 'elites' to real folk, but characteristically here the methodologies get more imperious and distant from what people actually do or are. Both the team of Jack Citrin and John Sides, and Michael Bruter, offer very competent, and technically sophisticated analyses of popular attitudes on the EU, the former from Eurobarometer data, the second from the author's own cross-national design. Citrin and Sides is state-of-the-art US political opinion research, and a comprehensive run through what Eurobarometer tells us about the growing aggregate approval towards the EU. Bruter reveals a clear distinction within the perception of European identity, when seen in a civic sense (in terms of laws and political structures), compared with when the question is posed of what it means to be a European culturally. This is a valuable finding, although we are strictly limited in Bruter's study to what a slice of university students (and a control group of 'non-students') in each country happen to be thinking and saying about Europe when asked. Attitudinal measures will never be a definitive measure of Europeanised behaviour, especially when only poorly representative.

The final contribution by Ulrike Meinhof makes clear why Eurobarometer-style data and analysis is weak. This is a quite different kind of project, an example of genuinely grounded phenomenological research, that has actually gone out and listened to people – in this case, residents of various problematic border areas in Central Europe – and looked to see if they in fact do think about Europe in everyday contexts. It turns out *not*, until they are provoked by leading questions. Meinhof quite rightly then raises the big methodological issue: that with 'European identity' scholars are fishing for something that in fact does not occur naturally. This is academic constructivism indeed. Disappointingly, Meinhof's startling challenge to the bigger research project is only briefly discussed by the editors in their comments.

An even bigger problem for the volume is this: why are we are talking about all these quite different 'dependent variables' as all measuring

'identity' anyway? Richard Herrmann and Marilyn Brewer make a very heroic attempt in their detailed and useful introduction, to clarify analytically what the question of 'European identity' might mean as an empirical object. The problem is that they are trying to clarify a very loose and baggy concept that in fact may be quite redundant when you look at the variety of ways it is operationalised. Instead they try to have it all ways. *Inter alia*, they suggest that European identity is conscious (emotional) identification with Europe; that it is awareness of Europe (knowledge about its institutions, facts, etc.); that it is electoral participation in European elections; that it is an attitudinal measure of whether Europe is a good thing; and that it is whether someone is objectively a member of a European community (big or small 'c'). They suggest that identity is conscious identification, although these two concepts are clearly not synonymous in all circumstances; but then they also suggest that identity could be a cognitive function of political behaviour – despite the fact that shifting explanation to the cognitive level (i.e., accounting for why individuals have predispositions in their heads to think in group based terms), takes us beyond identity as a group based thing.

The piece is full of similar confusions. The various operationalisations are for sure all valid ways of measuring interesting things relevant to the EU, but are they measuring the same thing? It is not at all clear they are, or that imposing a conceptual 'identity' on them as the search for 'European identity', adds anything but confusion. No, they are simply different possible ways of measuring knowledge of Europe, participation in Europe, opinions about Europe, perceptions of Europe, etc. To read 'identity' into this is an unwarranted jump. A similar thought arises with the key analytical distinction that all the editors identify between nested, cross-cutting and separate identities. But why reify the boundaries that can be supposedly drawn around such 'groups', instead of looking at breaking down these social structures into networks of unbounded individual relations, some of which are linked, others which are not?

The political science on 'identities' is here apparently well behind the theoretical times from the most up-to-date social science perspective, which has long since moved to talking about networks and cognition. Instead, these authors merely sustain loose talk of social groups and social boundaries that is born of the bewitchment of ordinary language – and outside political pressures. For the language of 'identities' is above all else the province of politicians and pundits: the folks who invoke identities precisely to build collective power, and to blur and mystify the underlying reasons why individuals engage in collective social cooperation, interpersonal relations, or personal identification. We might hope to find a more robust defence of the project in the conclusion, but here Thomas Risse settles with summarising the empirical findings of the volume and other related studies. He comes to the quite reasonable conclusion that worries about European identity have been overstated because they fail to

appreciate the empirical evidence that European identity (whatever it is) is not necessarily incompatible for many people with powerful national identifications.

Let us grant for a moment the volume's conceit that European identity is indeed measurable (somehow), and can be analysed as the dependent variable of other structural variables. How it is created and what the social mechanisms are that lead to its emergence *ought* to have been the key finding of the book, as Risse notes. What is striking is how little mainstream sociological analysis figures in the book as a tool for addressing this central explanatory question. The editors appear to equate 'sociological' approaches methodologically with discourse analysis (as practised by Ruth Wodak and Ulrike Meinhof), a woeful misrepresentation, which is a bit like suggesting that all psychologists use psychoanalytic methods. Sociologists in fact are mostly quite hostile to discourse analysis, for the good reason that they are generally seeking to find underlying social structural causes for the way people talk, perceive, think or behave. Discourse (and texts) are merely the froth on the surface of things. Any basic multivariate analysis of standard sociological variables, broken into individual-level data about gender, ethnicity, and (especially) class and occupation in the European population, would immediately break open the tired national versus transnational problematic of nearly all EU identity research. Citrin and Sides offer a couple of pages analysing the effects of education, age and income on European attitudes, based on the very limited categories offered by Eurobarometer data, but so much more could be done. In the rest of the book, the only stratification imagined to be running through this population is the extremely crude contrast between so-called 'elites' and 'ordinary' citizens; the only variation conceived is national in origin. These are, of course, the same unexamined theoretical oppositions that structure all the Eurosceptic debates about the democratic deficit. National variation on the EU is what keeps European politicians awake at night in anticipation of referenda rejections, but it is a clumsy aggregate that hides all the other ways that we might parse the European population, which is already hugely diverse *within* any given nation-state. It is obvious that finer grained, analytically specified, social class and occupational distinctions, particularly within that most important segment of the European population – the middle classes – might be hugely revealing of the structure of attitudes about Europe.

The sociological point can be pressed further, beyond the limited reach of attitudinal research. The fundamental unit of society is not an opinion or a belief; it is an action (or interaction). Of course, we can *ask* people the 'identity' question – how do you feel about the EU; does 'being European' now come in third, fourth or fifth behind your national 'identity', regional belonging, favourite football team, or preferred brand of training shoe (and other modern 'identities' that we slip in and out of)? – but the blunt truth is that this extra question is quite simply redundant once you have

good behavioural data that tells you what people actually *do* in an integrating Europe. Political scientists think of voting and 'revealed preferences', of course, but 'being European' nowadays is as much likely to be about this, as it is about shopping across borders, buying property abroad, handling a common currency, looking for work in a foreign city, taking holidays in new countries, buying cheap airline tickets, planning international rail travel, joining cross-national associations—and a thousand other actions facilitated by the European free movement accords. These ways of being European (that can all be counted, or interrogated for meaning), are notably also enjoyed by many who overtly profess themselves to be Eurosceptic or to have no European identity at all. Thought of this way, we may indeed discover 'social identities' that are genuinely transnational, if they turn out to be rooted behaviourally in new forms of cross-national action and interaction.

Such action may well be spatially as well as socially structured. Matt Gabel's work has, for example, affirmed that spatial factors (i.e., residence near a border), is linked via experience to positive attitudes on the EU (Gabel 1998). This confirms the older tale that historians such as Hartmut Kaelble have told about European integration being driven by a regional core, traceable in the regionally minded urban populations along the central spine of Western Europe, as much as the leading pro-European politicians who came from these parts. In other words, the psychological superstructure – what people think of, and retrospectively rationalise when asked, as their 'identity' – rests on behavioural foundations, that actually might prove to be very material and interests based to begin with.

The turnover of paradigms in political science moves fast, but before the fad of social constructivism blows over, it may at least have served to generate a genuine sociological and/or psychological curiosity about the providence of preferences in political behaviour. Putting the really old fashioned question of political socialisation back on the table is surely a good thing (although the conspicuously growing power of the corporate media in all democracies is a more pressing reason why this question is back). This will be an academic achievement in itself. From a politically concerned point of view, however, the misplaced theorising about European identity, and these wasted academic opportunities to do something *genuinely* sociological about European integration, weigh more heavily.

Concerns about defining European culture, or a European 'constitutional patriotism', have played royally into the conservative agenda of reifying contestable elements of the European construction that were always better relegated to the sphere of privatised diversity – the mistake of trying to define who we all think we are, rather than what we all actually do. They have also publicised and sustained the populist, idealist 'debate' over democratic legitimacy, and taken the EU away from the very real, material achievements that it has delivered to citizens: expectations of peace; economic prosperity, stability and security; the opportunities of labour,

housing and consumer markets beyond the nation-state; and the promise of a thoroughly de-nationalised individualism, anchored in rationally designed institutions, and rights based legal protections. Questions about what it means to be a European citizen, and the wholly overblown focus on democracy in the EU, are secondary to these everyday ways of being European. This ought to be a thin but sufficient form of European ‘identity’, if that is what we must call it in shorthand. In a free modern society – to return to the underlying Kantian message here – the only ‘identity’ worth sharing politically is one that each and every citizen can adjudicate as individually self-beneficial and self-compatible, and (assuming they can step out of their given social role and ‘identities’ for a moment) as ‘just’ to themselves and others. All other notions of European identity take the EU into emotional, non-rational terrain, upon which the historical nation-state will never be defeated.

References

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