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Narratives of Redemption: Memory and Identity in Europe

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Abstract

After centuries of being torn apart by conflicts that remain deeply embedded in the European collective memory, Europe's most recent history is being written as a narrative of redemption. In order to establish itself as a political, economic and social entity, Europe has been emphasizing its common cultural roots and historical features of unity. For this purpose, narratives of identity have been produced in the context of European and national institutions that seek to replace fractures by pluralisation and forgetfulness by redemption. However, the codification of European culture and identity has turned out to be an extremely difficult task: the conceptual devices for theorizing Europe as a social unity and cultural identity are insufficient and unsuitable. In addition, the conceptualization of identity tends to be primarily related to notions such as belonging, memory and continuity rather than to the idea of an in-progress project taking place in the present and in the future. Recent theoretical approaches reveal how European identity narratives require hybrid multilayered configurations in order to accommodate national, ethnic and cultural features, as well as post-national political and economic unification. This paper attempts to explore some processes of identity construction in an European context and to discuss how elements that embody the ambiguity that runs through European culture - unity and diversity, commemoration and forgetfulness - are registered in the social memory.

Keywords

memory; identity; Europe

1. EUROPE AS A PROBLEM

Europe has a long history and a troubled memory. For more than twenty five centuries, what we now call Europe has been the arena of bloody conflicts caused by ethnic, religious and political divides. On the other hand, Europe is also the cradle of most of the features of modern civilization, in particular democracy, human rights, science, industrialism, capitalism, the welfare state, and modern arts. Europe's memory can thus be described as paradoxical and ambiguous. With this historical reality in mind, should Europe merely be seen as an aggregate of nations or is there any common identity? Moreover, how can European identity be conceptualized?

Since the end of the Second World War, the economic and political unification of Europe has been a successful mechanism of conciliation. In order to establish itself as a

political, economic and social entity, Europe has had to emphasize its common cultural roots and historical features of unity. Consequently, Europe has become part of people's lives in the majority of European countries. A new level of identity, apart from national identity, and a new level of belonging is being shaped.

However, the codification of European culture and identity is, in fact, a demanding task. Social sciences have advanced theoretical devices to consider nations and communities, as well as cultural differences and minorities. Yet, most of the concepts seem to some extent inappropriate and unsuitable for theorizing Europe as a social and cultural unity. In addition, the conceptualization of identity tends to be primarily related to notions such as continuity, collective memory, and common roots. Nevertheless, Europe's memory and culture is evidently characterised by fragmentation and diversity. More recent theoretical approaches have attempted to elucidate how European identity narratives require hybrid configurations in order to encompass the specificities of a whole continent with a complex history.

Our main purpose is to draw attention to the inherent ambivalence in the idea of Europe, to discuss the connection between memory and identity, and to highlight the importance of the *imagination of the future* in designing Europe as a project.

2. EUROPEAN IDENTITY: A LAYERED PERSPECTIVE

Despite all the attention that has been given to it in the past few decades, European identity is a tremendously vague, slippery, elusive concept. Europeans have experienced considerable difficulty when trying to answer the question "who are we". Thus, when historians, sociologists, or anthropologists talk about European identity, they are working on a concept with a doubtful relation to reality. Assuming that self-definition, identification, and membership are the fundamentals of identity, how can Europe be conceptualized in terms of its potential to aggregate citizens of several dozen countries? When it comes to European identity, no substantive, consensual definition can be provided. The "classical civilization" (Greek philosophy, rationalism and art, Roman law, Latin), Christianity, and the legacy of Enlightenment (human dignity and rights, citizenship, the rule of law) are often mentioned as the core markers of Europe's essence. However, these same features have also triggered vast divisions and conflicts, which tend to be forgotten in order to preserve the idea of reconciliation and unity. According to David Dunkerley *et al.* (2002, p.115),

if the construction of a European identity is selective with regard to what is included as part of 'European spirit', it is similarly partial in terms of what is ignored. For example, if 'democracy' is at the core of a European identity, how are we to explain the forms of government across Europe that, even during the course of twentieth century, have been anything but democratic?

If definition is a problem, identification with Europe and membership of Europe are notions which are also pervaded with uncertainty and ambivalence. The identification of European people with Europe is a recent and loose liaison. National belonging is beyond dispute for a significant number of Europeans, as shown by *Eurobarometer* surveys: in 2010, 46% of those interviewed profess their attachment only to their nation, seeing themselves only as nationals of a country (41% saw themselves as nationals and Europeans; in 2004,

before the economic and political crisis that has affected Europe since 2008, the figures were exactly the opposite). Despite all the efforts of European Union institutions to foster popular identification, the majority of Europeans do not believe there is a common identity in the continent. What is more, euro-sceptics consider European integration as a threat to national identities (Dunkerley *et al.* 2002, p.115).

Regarding membership of Europe, the picture is once again not clear. Who is and who is not European depends entirely on the definition of the features of legitimate Europeaness. No definite answers are given when someone asks about the limits of Europe (Jenkins, 2008, p.156-165) – and this seems to be a historical ambiguity. Ranging from the (Western and Eastern) Roman Empire to Charlemagne or Napoleonic empire, from Cold War blocs, dividing East and West, to European unification as accomplished by the European Union and the Schengen Area, Europe's frontiers are slippery and overlapping, with limits being redesigned by contextual events over time. Thus, to be and to feel European seems more a matter of political dominion than a matter of territory, culture, or ethnic ties.

Do these arguments mean there is no such thing as European identity? Is there any gap between the concept and the reality? While debating some problems of historical methodology, Reinhart Koselleck provides some very helpful hints on the conceptualization of European identity. For the author, the historian operates on two different yet interconnected levels:

he either investigates circumstances that have at one time been articulated in language; or he reconstructs circumstances which were not previously articulated in language but which, with the assistance of hypothesis and methods, he is able to extract from the relics. (...) We are therefore dealing, on the one hand, with concepts embodied in the sources and, on the other, with scientific cognitive categories (Koselleck, 2004, p. 255-256).

In addition to Koselleck's theoretical proposition, it is also useful to consider Roger Brubaker's (1996) idea of nation as a "practical category". These proposals help to avoid the temptations of essentialism when dealing with collective identities. Even if European identity is scarcely acknowledged as an "articulated circumstance" or a "space of experience" (Koselleck, 2004, p.255-275), it should be analyzed as a conceptual category that emerges from a rigorous, systematic review of facts. In order to contribute to an operative conceptualization of European identity, we will begin by unravelling the multiple meanings attached to it.

European identity, as well as European memory, is made up of ambiguous layers. One of the most simple, yet frequent, inconsistencies is that of Europe and the European Union. After six decades of integration under the flag of the EU (formerly the European Economic Community), most of the conventional territory of the continent is on the "blue map". Due to successive enlargements, Europe has become synonymous with the European Union in everyday discourse. The problem with this proximity is the fact that the two are essentially related to different dimensions, specifically, cultural and political. Here lies a second layer: Europe as polity and Europe as a cultural entity. The first is obviously connected to political unification achieved through the European Union, while the second mostly refers to the common historical inheritance mentioned above. Now, when it comes to identity issues,

this duality can be truly puzzling. For the last four decades the EU has sought to promote a common feeling of belonging among the peoples of Member-States. This has been mainly accomplished through the creation of EU imagery and the codification and officialization of symbols and cultural features.

The construction of a unified imaginary is an explicit policy in the European Union, which seeks to stress social and political unity, along with common cultural and historical roots. For this purpose, the European Union's institutions managed to introduce "official" symbols, such as the flag, the anthem, and the celebration of Europe Day. Beside EU symbols, other forms of enhancing a common identity have been appearing in recent decades. Presently, Europe pervades the daily life of Europeans with signs and celebrations. Some examples are driving licences, car plates, passports, the European Court of Human Rights, European Capitals of Culture, European commemorative years, European sports championships, and, of course, European citizenship and currency. Some of these things are the responsibility of the EU, while others emerge from civil society or other European organizations, for instance the Council of Europe. The main effect of these initiatives seems to be the Europeanization of public space. Consequently, Europe has become a part of people's lives in the majority of European countries, for the most part in an unconscious, "banal" way, to paraphrase Michael Billig (1995).

A third layer shaping European identity arises from the question: who is European? The condition of European has long been questioned due to indefinite geographical limits, in addition to historical episodes that moved those lines backwards and forwards, self-definition of peoples (namely on the fringes of the continent, such as Iberia, Scandinavia, or Great Britain), and immigration flows from the 1950's onwards. Moreover, the symbolic map of Europe can also be looked at through the prism of concentric circles of legitimacy: those who seem to have the indisputable right to be European, those who are on the fringes, those who might expect to be accepted one day, and those living in Europe who will never be allowed to be Europeans. According to Klaus Eder and Wilfried Spohn (2005), it is vital to question who is and feels European, who are core, peripheral, potential, or non-Europeans. This disjunction is directly related to the determination of who is European via civilization (historical and cultural ties), who is European via integration (political contract of EU) and who is the *privileged* and *authentic*, meeting the two conditions.

Another division that leads to misinterpretations regarding the idea of European identity emerges from different visions of what Europe is or should be. A fourth layer is to be found in the dichotomy of an open, plural Europe and a *fortress Europe*. As different cultural, religious, or ethnic communities have settled in this continent, due to decolonization and immigration, a battle for the definition of a legitimate vision of Europe has begun. On the one side stand those who believe that Europe should be preserved from alien influences, closed to non-Christian immigrants, and enclosed in its exclusionary, constantly surveilled boundaries, both physically and symbolically. On the other side are to be found those standing for multicultural societies in Europe, who emphasize difference as a human value, as well as its great contribution to modern Europe. In sum, nationalist, intolerant Europe contrasts with a cosmopolitan vision of Europe deep-rooted in Enlightenment values (Risse, 2010, p.2).

Finally, one must be aware of a deep, fundamental layer, which comprehends the ambivalence of Europe's past. Or, rather, the two pasts of the continent: the good past and the dark past. As for the former, Europe surely has a significant, valuable collection of positive *performances*, which are worth keeping (and celebrating) in the common memory. A considerable part of this collection also and primarily constitutes the historical heritage of nations. Some of these historical milestones have been mentioned above. On a short list, we would include science, democracy, pluralism, freedom of thought and speech, citizenship and rights, the rule of law, human dignity, and the welfare state. A longer and more intangible list could comprise landscapes, art movements, heroes, literature, cultural diversity, equality, environmentalism, international cooperation. Despite the brightness of the good side of Europe, it is obviously not enough to conceal the dark side of its past. Another endless list can be easily drawn up; its infamous topics would go from religious persecution to bloody wars, from the slave trade to genocide, from nationalism to colonialism. Europe's memory is, to a certain extent, a dreadful burden. Facts like the Holocaust or the World Wars must haunt us indefinitely.

Faced with this fragmentation, is there any reasonable expectation of borders being removed and of the wounds of memory being healed? Despite its layered design, is it unrealistic to talk about a European identity? How accurate is Monica Sassatelli (2002, p. 436) when she argues that "ambiguous content seems to reinforce the possibilities of identification with [Europe]"? Although direct or plain answers are not viable, it is reasonable to posit two basic ideas: 1. European identity is not conceivable in the same terms as national models of identity, so it ought to be depicted as a multi-layered cartography of overlapping maps; 2. Europe appears to correspond to an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991), but surely not in the exact circumstances of nations – rather as *imagined Europe*, a common identity and memory to be *designed for the future*.

3. REDEMPTION AND CELEBRATION: EUROPE AS A PROJECT

In accordance with its troubled past, Europe has to deal with a troubled memory – a fragmented, multiple, clashing, and ambiguous memory. In opposition to commonplace knowledge, memory is not a monolithic or rigid element in the life of individuals, groups, or communities. On the contrary, memory, most specifically, collective memories are often problematic, controversial, and debatable. I would say that memory constitutes a vital anchor for identity processes, though it is a plastic, fluid anchor. In reality, memory is not about factual events or objective remembering. Instead, it is commonly a *longue durée* process of selection, (re)interpretation and (re)construction, which comprises both remembering and forgetting. Deliberately or not, the construction of memory is always an attempt to stress a particular point of view, and subsequently to avoid conflicting or dissenting positions. In other words, it is related to the legitimacy of memory narratives – the determination of how things were or happened.

Because of their enormous potential for legitimization, collective memories have been a privileged arena for contestation as well as for the struggle for specific meanings.

Memories have always had a strong effect on persuading and mobilizing people into collective adventures, such as battles, wars, alliances, diasporas, genocides, or humanitarian help. How people define themselves, what people believe in, and what people do with their cultural and political power largely depends on their response to past experiences. Emphasizing the close relation of the two concepts, John Gillis (1994, p.3-4) says that

the notion of identity depends on the idea of memory, and vice versa. The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity. (...) identity and memories are highly selective, inscriptive rather than descriptive, serving particular interests and ideological positions.

Both memory and identity can be conceptualized as *symbolic filiations or imagination of the past*, in the sense that individuals, groups and communities operate a selection of past events in order to justify present choices. Who we are and who we want to be are questions often answered through a process of “*rétroprojection*” or “*filiation inversée*” (Pouillon, 1975, p.159-160), in which we choose the *founding moments* of an imagined past. Consequently, the materialization of collective memory is not possible without the negotiation of conflicting meanings and without the legitimization of memory narratives.

Being a debatable, elusive issue, memory has been grasped as a political resource throughout history. The politicization of memory aims to control the meanings, to limit and contain what past events are supposed to mean, to identify the heroes to be followed and the villains to be rejected or forgotten. Both at institutional level and community level, groups strive to appropriate memory in order to influence and shape it according to particular interests and purposes in the present. The politics of memory is also required for the pacification of painful, grievous, and uncomfortable memories of war, ethnic cleansing, collaborationism, massacres, totalitarianism, or colonialism. Reconciliation and forgiveness often demand that official versions of history and memory are uncovered and revised. It is frequently done by means of literature, cinema, counterfactual historiography, but also by the destruction of “*lieux de mémoire*”, to make use of Pierre Nora’s (1997) concept, for instance, memorials, statues and other forms of memorabilia, or, instead, their musealization as a sign of collective suffering. Therefore, the memorialisation and politicization of memory also endorse the victims’ “*right to memory*”, insofar as they convey some particular appropriation and reframing of narratives of the past (Lebow, 2008, p.25-27).

As far as Europe is concerned, its paradoxical, ambiguous memory and identity leaves us with a feeling of helplessness and perplexity when trying to find some answers. The common memory of twentieth century Europe was mostly marked by war and genocide: two world wars, the Holocaust, the soviet gulags, colonial conflicts, separatist conflicts (Northern Ireland, the Basque Country) and ethnic cleansing (namely in former Yugoslavia), to mention only the most traumatic. These are memories of collective pain, and the collective suffering they represent still exceeds and transcends the last six decades of peace and unification. In a symbolic way, European peoples are still mourning the victims and regretting what happened, partly because in the first years after the war the trauma was so overwhelming and the risk of conflicts arising from war criminal trials was imminent (Judt, 2011, p.83-85).

Centuries of being torn asunder by conflicts remain deep within the European collective memory, as several authors have remarked (Olick, 2007; Frunchak, 2010; Hirsch, 2009; Kattago, 2009; Misztal, 2010; Rolston, 2010). Bloodshed and destruction represent a heavy burden that haunts Europe's dream of unity, though since the end of World War II, the economic and political unification of Europe has been a successful mechanism of conciliation. Indeed, Europe's most recent history has been depicted as a narrative of redemption. This occurs primarily in two ways: repentance for the evil past and praise for present achievements and future plans.

Repentance mainly occurs as the "politics of regret", in the words of Jeffrey Olick. The author (2007, p.139) states that "politics today seems to have become the continuation of war by other means. (...) Contemporary politics continues past wars as discursive battles over their legacies". The "politics of regret" operate in a very narrow terrain: in between reparation for victims and de-humanization of perpetrators, learning the lessons from the past and risking the perpetuation of hatred in the present society. Jeffrey Olick (2007, p.140) asks the right question: "how, then, are we to think about this delicate balance between remembering and forgetting?" In the case of Europe, this issue is specially addressed because of its momentous burden – the Holocaust. And because of centuries-long anti-Semitism across Europe, the Holocaust is not just a German crime, but European barbarism. Less noticed but more destructive regarding the number of victims, the burden of the crimes of socialist regimes also represents a significant part of (Eastern) Europe's collective trauma.

Penitence for Europe's twentieth century has been taking several forms: reconciliation with enemies (Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand holding hands in Verdun, honouring the dead of World Wars I and II, in 1984), official and individual apologies to the victims (Willy Brandt kneeling at the monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in 1970), monetary reparations to the victims (West Germany paid billions of euros to the state of Israel), commemorations, testimonies. Nevertheless, the inherent commitment to a peaceful future and to preventing genocide from happening again is perhaps a naive pledge. Regrettably, the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, inaugurated in 2005, needs to be balanced with the genocide in former Yugoslavia, desecration of Jewish cemeteries across Europe, xenophobic acts towards immigrants...

As for praise, we mean the aggrandizement of the accomplishments of Europe (mostly the EU) that pervades the official discourse of politicians and other communitarian authorities. Since European culture and identity are matters of EU strategy, the self-congratulatory tone is quite common with respect to Europe's successes. Some examples worth mentioning of these moments of enthusiasm are the introduction of the euro, the common currency, the signature of Treaties, the implementation of European citizenship, or, on a more regular basis, the opening of sessions of EU institutions and bodies, such as the Parliament, the Commission, the Council, or the Courts. The celebratory tone also applies to some crucial *topos* of the European Union: the motto *unity in diversity*, the idea of Europe as a community of values, or a reservoir of ethical responsibility. The celebration of six decades of peace, economic prosperity, and social cohesion is also in tune with the image projected for Europe.

Considering how complex it is to describe the substance of European identity and its multi-layered form, it is likely that the best definition available is the idea of *Europe as a*

project. According to several authors (Castells, 1998; Delanty, 2002a; Eder, 2009; Sassatelli, 2009; Strath, 2002), though with different perspectives, Europe's identity can only be a project for a future society. In the words of Monica Sassatelli (2002, p. 436), "the Europe referred to by the EU can be envisaged as an 'imagined community' in the making", and this symbolic construction fuels social cohesion and political legitimization. Above all, Europe seems to be an organism in evolution, learning how to cope with differences and asymmetries and how to make the whole set function as a unity of interdependent units. There are advantages to portraying Europe as a project, one of them being the malleability that allows the building of a future in an original, imaginative, experimental way. Indeed, this seems to be the only path which suits contemporary European societies, given their dialogic, liquid, plural, hybrid, and ambivalent features (Bauman, 2004). Furthermore, it is also congruent with contemporary forms of identification and belonging, which give way to multiple, composite, in-transit identities. As discussed before, European identity narratives require hybrid, multilayered configurations in order to encompass the specificities of a whole continent with a troubled history. Klaus Eder (2009, p.442) claims that "a European narrative is a dynamic combination of different stories that will produce a dynamic form of collective identity". Accordingly, European identity cannot be monolithic or hegemonic. A multilayered identity would thus be appropriate to encompass national, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, as well as post-national political and economic unification.

Ultimately, European identity can only be envisaged as a plural, polysemic narrative. Eder (2009, p.441-442) suggests that we may see it as a "meta-story" that brings together critical stories of "constructing and reconstructing a European identity". The Common Market, the achievement of peace, citizenship of the Union, the European culture that derives both from immemorial heritage of the most diverse peoples that once settled in its territory, and the hybridization which arises from cultural diversity dynamics are some examples of what Eder (2009, p.438-439) calls the supranational, postnational and transnational stories. However, these stories are not necessarily compatible and consistent, so that European identity is, above all, derived from the combination of choices made at every moment. According to this author (2009, p. 437),

which collective identity is mobilized depends on the story that is chosen to identify the boundaries of a network of social relations that bind 'Europeans' (...) to each other. The three basic stories, the story of a common market and a Social Europe embedded in the story of a European citizenship, the story of a unique European culture, and the story of a hybrid Europe are incompatible. They will not coincide in terms of constructing a clear boundary; rather, they construct different boundaries. They tell about different 'Europes' (in the plural). Thus, European identity emerges as something with different boundaries, depending upon which story we tell.

Additional insight is given by Gerard Delanty (2002b), for whom European identity should be crafted from a cosmopolitan heritage and pluralisation, together with multiple processes of Europeanization that are already occurring, namely the construction of a European public sphere (see also Risse, 2010). As Europe pervades the national frameworks of action and the common imagery of citizens, a new stage of reflexivity and pragmatism emerges, not only at an institutional level but amongst the social and political fabric of the

European community. To put it differently, a new level of identity and belonging is being shaped, beyond national membership. The point is that European identity is not only the bureaucratic, legal, and institutional apparatus of the EU. On the contrary, “a full understanding of Europe’s ambivalence, refracted through its multiple, nested identities, lies at the intersection of competing European political projects and social processes” (Checkel, 2009, p. 2).

4. “FUTURE MEMORY” AND “HORIZON OF EXPECTATION”: THE EUROPE TO BE

If we consider Europe as an in-progress project, what is the role of memory narratives in the construction of a unified, transnational community? Forgetting or remembering – which one should come first? Can we do without either of them? Clearly, forgetting the past is not an option, specially the dark past. In face of the painful memories of war, genocide and dictatorship, Europeans may forgive, yet they are not willing nor allowed to forget. The only solution, thus, appears to be to rescue the past, to redeem the past through the triumph of the present. Peace, democracy, freedom, human rights, political unification, economic prosperity, the welfare state, these are the achievements that legitimize present-day discourses of unity and identity. We assert that it is possible to honour and exorcize the past and, at the same time, to use this catharsis as a trampoline to the future.

Richard Lebow (2008, p. 39) gives us some interesting hints on the use of memory when he suggests that we have the possibility of imagining the future the same way we imagine and mythify the past:

we have no memories of the future, but we do have imagined memories of the future. We routinely build scenarios with good or bad outcomes based on the lessons we think we have learned from the past and use them to work our way through life and policy choices. (...) Future ‘memories’ of this kind are just as important for building and sustaining identities as memories of the past – and many of the latter are, of course, also imaginary.

Future memories refer to crossroads, to leading choices and, in a more explicit way, to alternative paths available to a community. How do Europeans picture Europe in the next twenty or fifty years? What position do they desire for their continent in the world? How do they figure out their own commitment towards local, national and European spheres? Which Europe would Europeans bestow on their children: a plural, egalitarian, federal society or a Europe of nations, fearing foreigners and globalization?

Imagining the future, then, is what we do in the present. When the future is perceived as an inheritance of our current steps, today’s choices constitute the foundation for future memories. Therefore memory exists mostly in present time. It is present action that shapes the future, but the former is actually elicited through an in progress image of the future. To a certain extent, Reinhart Koselleck’s category of “horizon of expectation” matches these notions, as it embodies the complex present-future intertwining. In Koselleck’s (2004, p. 259) words,

expectation also takes place in the today; it is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it.

Europe's horizon seems cloudy and misty. We are witnessing all sorts of crises and the future appears to be a *foreign country*. Still, Europe's union and identity is likely to continue to be part of the expectations and hopes of Europeans.

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