

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 13, Issue 3 (2017)

Commentary

Identity in Today's Europe: a New Geopolitical Strategy

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Citation

Nardini, A. and Dempsey, M J. (2017). 'Identity in Today's Europe: a New Geopolitical Strategy', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 13(3): 1337-1347.

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

The European Union (EU) is currently facing an uncertain future as member states debate the importance of political and economic cooperation. Although the organisation was founded on liberal principles, national discourses based on realist strategies have become more prevalent, spurred by debates on borders and identity issues. In essence, Europe cannot be liberal in principle while pursuing realist policies. Focusing on the concept of identity, this paper argues for a theoretical redirection of the EU, calling for a new geopolitical concept of identity based on its liberal tradition.

Keywords

European Union; identity; liberalism; realism

IDENTITY IN TODAY'S EUROPE: A NEW GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY

In the aftermath of the world's deadliest war, Winston Churchill called for a 'United States of Europe' as a means of securing peace (Churchill 1946). Nevertheless, Churchill's idea of united European states, sewn together through economic and political integration, is tearing at the seams. In the last few years alone, the European Union (EU) has witnessed the UK voting for Brexit, as well as threats of Catalonia and Scotland seceding from Spain and the UK respectively. Although the far right lost elections in the Netherlands and France, for the first time since the EU's birth, altogether it seems that there is more support to leave the union rather than to fight to preserve it (Taggart 1998).

The European experiment calls for a definition of European identity that is new, insofar as it must respond in innovative ways to current challenges, which had not been anticipated by the founders: heavy internal and external migration and the willingness of members to secede. This has caused further divisiveness among member states, as Germany and other EU countries have come to reject Italy's proposal to open more European ports to rescue operations carrying migrants (Barigazzi 2017). As the number of refugees entering its borders continues to increase, the European liberal political structure falters under the resurgence of divisive national identities. Without a commitment to founding aspects of the European project, the EU is doomed to fail.

LIBERAL ORIGINS AND REALIST DEVELOPMENTS

The European project was born in an attempt to avoid repeating one of the darkest periods in world history. Throughout the twentieth century, the continent was held hostage by Nazi fascism and Soviet communism. Therefore, the primary objective of the founders was to promote peace and prosperity across a shared economic design. Europe's liberalism was framed according to Kant's view of the free market as an essential agent of peace, where European peoples were encouraged to maintain amicable

relations for mutually advantageous reasons (Kleingeld 2006). The definition of liberalism in this commentary matches that of Michael Doyle: a government or state based on free individual consent, defending law and property, where the free market has pacific implications and values and republican institutions shape policies (Doyle 1997: 19). Applying this definition, with Churchill's support for a common defence and Jean Monnet's championing of a strong economy, Europe's founding idea was to create a community of people guided by institutions, which would propel the continent towards peace through reciprocally advantageous economic interactions.

At the Treaty of Paris in 1951, where the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) originated, project designers declared that what 'an organized and vital Europe can bring to civilization is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations'. They underlined that 'Europe can be built only by concrete actions which create a real solidarity and by the establishment of common bases for economic development' (Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community 1951). These ideas were strengthened in 1993 with the establishment of the Copenhagen Criteria, which formulated stipulations for accession. The criteria stated that any country wishing to join the EU would not only have to function effectively in the market economy but also guarantee democracy and human rights (Eur-Lex 1993). Later, in the 2008 formulation of the Treaty of Lisbon's Article 2, the EU committed to 'the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including minority groups' rights' (Treaty of Lisbon 2007). The focus on human rights was additionally stressed in other international agreements signed by member states, not constitutive of the European project but equally reinforcing its liberal commitment: the UN Charter, the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950, the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, Declaration of the Rights of the Child of 1959, and the UN Convention against Torture 1984. European leaders hence resorted to liberal convictions that treaties and agreements would serve as foundations for a peaceful Europe, just as Kant had envisaged (Doyle 1983).

It must not be forgotten, however, that the European experiment has been maintained by means of American intervention (Kagan 2003). After World War II, the US acted as a guarantor for the European project through both the establishment of the Marshall Plan and the presence of military troops on the continent. This meant that the US, on the one hand, continued to act as an agent for security on European soil, maintaining a substantial number of troops to ensure defence through NATO's operational capacity. On the other hand, European leaders not only consented to a great deal of intervention from the US in their countries for a continuous period, but also accepted, to a wide degree, the idea that America had a moral and strategic responsibility in guiding the world (Mearsheimer 2010: 388). Over the years, this has not only affected transatlantic relations, making the European project reliant on the US, but has likewise influenced European leaders, who more or less consciously expect America to provide solutions for issues troubling their union.¹

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the USSR and of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, European leaders (with American backing) pushed for further enlargement of the EU to the East, hoping to extend its democratising and pacifying aims. However, since the end of the Cold War and the decline of American commitments on European soil, the EU has moved towards a greater degree of insecurity, leading to the triumph of what this paper defines as political realism.² According to Doyle, realists observe reality rather than offering value-laden prescriptions. They assume that state interests should and in most cases do dominate class interests, and that they should and can be distinguished from individual rights. As international society is best described as a condition of international anarchy, reciprocal insecurity makes all interactions temporary (Doyle 1997: 43).

Hence, Europe's state of Kantian peace, made possible by external (i.e. American) intervention, has evolved from what could be characterised as a soft power to a much more realist one, attempting to safeguard its position in the international economic order (Garcia 2013). Additionally, three major events have influenced transatlantic relations, pushing member states to take such a realist turn: first, the American reaction to 9/11, judged by many Europeans to be excessively intransigent and militarised (Hitchcock 2003: 193-199); second, the Obama administration's pivot to the Pacific, which Hillary Clinton hoped to continue had she reached the White House (Clinton 2011); third, the future of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), especially after Donald Trump's withdrawal of the US from the deal (Holland and Rascoe 2017; Eriksson, Maurice and Zalan 2016). While the first event juxtaposed the EU and the US ideologically, the last two issues cast further doubt on the economic and financial relationship between the two sides of the Atlantic, which already stood in a delicate balance (Tocci and Alcaro 2012). As the US scales down from its commitments in Europe, the Kantian paradox starts to re-emerge.

Economic self-interest couples with dissatisfaction with the nation-state system, as well as balance of power concerns. The implications are troubling (Rosato 2012). In the example of the Middle East, Europe's decision to pull away from actively supporting democracy and human rights in the area has negatively affected the state of international affairs, resulting in a weakening of the EU's global presence (Asseburg 2013). The economic crisis has additionally led to the strengthening of protectionism and decoupling of trade deals, though these policies contradict the EU's established foreign policy goals and will most likely damage member states in the long run (Kausch 2010).

PROJECTIONS FOR NEW GEOPOLITICS: DEFINING EUROPE

While Europeans increasingly travel abroad to the US, Canada and Australia in search of better employment prospects, as they have been doing since the end of World War II, Europe finds itself at the receiving end of one of the largest migration fluxes in history. Although the EU seems to view its own emigration favourably, immigration into the Union is perceived negatively, with identity issues highlighting a return to nationalisms. Difficulties in dealing with border issues are, all in all, a manifestation of a more serious internal problem: identity. Politicians have worked for decades to institutionalise a common European identity, emphasising historical, cultural and political commonalities as a means of making citizens of the EU feel a transnational belonging (Friedman and Thiel 2012: 2). Member states are currently called upon to merge different concepts of what it means to be European in the Brexit era and what it takes to become so. Although the EU, at least on paper, centres on human rights and pursues multiculturalism, the continent is at a juncture in which non-Europeans are also testing the idea of European identity.

The issue of 'what we are' has remained unresolved since the attempts to implement the European Constitution Treaty of 2004 (Moravcsik 2006: 219-241). Member states never seem to have gone beyond the Copenhagen Criteria, whose failings have been noted elsewhere (Veebe 2011). While founders of the European project attempted to unite its members with common principles, defining European identity continues to challenge EU politicians (Scruton 2015). Insisting on a transnational European political organisation based on laws, rights and duties is edifying in the abstract, but it lacks a certain concreteness necessary for people to rally behind. The quest for European identity must treat national identities as inclusive, not divisive, which can be used as a cornerstone to forge a comprehensive, liberal project. Using Italy as a case example, Roberto Spingardi argues that 'one of the

keys to defining a European identity is to reinforce our separate national identities and understand how the positive aspects can benefit Europe as a whole' (Spingardi 2017: 65).

The idea is to become guardians of values that we in turn pass on to our children and especially to those who work with us, by example, fully informing them, sharing values and commitments in order to help restore confidence in the future. This is the way we can help to build – even “through contagion” – a Europe that should also be based on the respect for our unique cultural values and history (Spingardi 2017: 67)

Nevertheless, in the current climate of widespread uncertainty about how to deal with the tension between what Europe is and what it is not, fear has returned. In this sense, Europe fights not only against the political temptation of returning to national sovereignty in response to a more technocratic Europe, it also needs to fend off populism, originating from a lack of substance within Europe. Considering the current political fragility of the Union, it is not surprising that recurring arguments advanced by transnational, populist, anti-European movements have entered political discourse, focusing on national identity, immigration, sovereignty, workers' rights, and political-economic needs (Poli 2014: 13). This was epitomised by consistently high support for Marine Le Pen in the recent French elections of 2017. Approval for her protectionist economic policies, anti-immigration, and anti-EU stances reached historical levels (7.7 million votes in the first round), taking her Front National to the run-off where, albeit losing to Emmanuel Macron, she gained a remarkable 10 million votes (Marchi 2017).

It is not lightly that Augstein, in analysing the phenomenon of the new populist and xenophobic right, claims that fascism cannot be relegated to the past: 'In a frightening reappearance of the past, “ethnic” categories are implemented to manage social and cultural differences. Europe is going through a popular revolution. It is taking possession of the continent, changing it profoundly, as liberalism once did' (Augstein 2015). The EU is abandoning its liberal roots in favour – this time – of a search for new, divisive identities.

The limits of nationalism, conceived not only at the state level, but at the European too, where identity takes on the traits of mere legal affiliation, are obvious. As noted by Hobsbawm and Kertzer, the temptation of turning to national xenophobia shading into racism is neither new, nor merely European. Rather, it presents a universal challenge to all human beings, as they ask themselves what exactly needs defending against 'the other', identified with the immigrant stranger. 'What is being defended,' write Hobsbawm and Kertzer,

is not simply the position of individuals in group A against challenge by outsiders. The strength of this xenophobia is the fear of the unknown, of the darkness into which we may fall when the landmarks which seem to provide an objective, a permanent, a positive delimitation of our belonging together, disappear (Hobsbawm and Kertzer 1992: 6-8).

Undoubtedly, there were not enough treaties, constitutions, charters and declarations replicated and re-invented in a period of over twenty years to create a positive sense of identity and continental unity, consolidating the 'reference points' and the sense of belonging to this organisation called Europe, which was meant to surpass national borders (Balibar 2009). As described by Hobsbawm and Kertzer, the fear of difference persists and will continue during this fragile moment.

It is important to discuss how membership issues cannot be addressed by appealing to a purely identitarian definition (Vejvodová 2014). Jeremy Rifkin identified the difficulty inherent in 'giving depth' to the European project, which is another way to phrase the identity issue. In the wake of 9/11, Rifkin presciently wondered whether Europe's commitment to cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence would be substantial enough to withstand similar terrorist attacks in the future. He also envisioned a global and widespread economic crisis, 'a deep and prolonged downturn' in the world economy, effectively predicting what would happen in 2008 (Rifkin 2004: 384). Projecting such a scenario, Rifkin questioned whether Europeans would remain committed to the principles of inclusivity and sustainable development, faithful to an open, process-orientated form of multilevel governance, even if they were witnessing social upheaval and riots in the streets (Rifkin 2004: 383-384). Faced with the challenge posed by Rifkin, the answer seems to be negative. Europeans do not actually seem to believe in the values of inclusiveness and development in times of crisis – both within EU borders, and beyond; Europeans do not seem keen to embrace an open, multiple system of government, which they perceive as a threat to their future well-being, prosperity and cultural values. European responses to global geopolitics have resulted in a return to the national discourse of populist and anti-European groups, in the name of the 'realist' necessity to protect Europeans against 'the other'.

Despite its internal differences, or perhaps precisely because of them, Europe must find a European identity by looking inwards. Selective commitment will not do: a European continent that wants to be an authoritative global player must reinvent itself through the commitment of all its members. The EU cannot depend on Germany to manage currency and on France to call the security line and create foreign policies, turning to stronger nations (and their strongest assets) to preserve its identity. Although the ECSC originally articulated the need to lie down together the 'German lion and the French lamb', the EU must address this situation on more than just the basis of two countries. Of course, if today France and Germany find themselves alone to address the most important decisions, then more should be said about the absence of the other member of the triad that in the past contributed to global geopolitics – Britain – which since World War II has been less and less willing to take decisive action in the European arena (with the exception of the second Iraq War). This withdrawal has carried a heavy political and strategic price among European allies (Oliver 2015), culminating in the Brexit referendum of June 23, 2016. The economic and political consequences of the decision made by the United Kingdom are far from clear but it is evident that they will affect the European project deeply.

However, resolving the identity issue internally does not mean moving away from an international dimension. The original guarantor for European cooperation, the US, must be committed to the value of the European project. Besides a revamping of transatlantic relations, it is also vital to recognise that the interests of France, Germany and many other European members, especially after the Ukrainian and Syrian crises and their subsequent repercussions in Europe, call for cooperation with Moscow too. As Robert Kaplan observes, there is no clear division of our continent today, such as witnessed during the Cold War; however, Cold War dynamics are now reversed. Western Europe increasingly looks to Russia as a bulwark in the face of new threats of international terrorism and to counter the migration flows (DeBardeleben 2011). At the same time, Eastern Europe puts growing pressure on the US, as NATO does not seem to represent an effective protection against international challenges, not limited to Russian expansion of control (Kaplan 2016). For this reason, the debate on which countries ought to be responsible for European identity reflects the confusion regarding security, as the EU is called to move away from being an exclusively 'American' creation but ought to look at multiple entities – internal and external, domestic and transnational – for securing its existence and prosperity.

In respect of this consideration, a realist strategy for forging a new European identity could set the EU as one of the vertices of a hypothetical triangle, with the other two extremes being the US and Russia: the balance is stable and the triangle holds only if each of its last points is able to cultivate the bond that assures the other two, although each vertex has the potential ability to sustain itself (Nardini 2015: 53-71). As Europe has entered more or less formal arrangements with Moscow, particularly with regard to the energy issue, America can no longer be the only *raison d'être* for Europe. The EU as a whole requires handholds and balances to other situations with a certain degree of influence in the world (Giusti and Penkova 2014: 24).

Realism, however, falls short. European identity cannot be mapped in a purely rational cost and benefit analysis. Divisiveness must be put aside, as bureaucrats are called to design a new paradigm in which 'individuals and nations within Europe will subordinate parochial interests to achieve a common good based on the beliefs, values, and norms embodied by the identity' (Bellow 2010). Jurgen Habermas suggests that it is necessary to understand the real political challenge: the European community of nations should become a cosmopolitan community of states and citizens of the world (Habermas 2012: xi). In this sense, the future of Europeanism can be mapped: in the positive, metahistorical, forward-looking and constantly redefining sense of European cosmopolitanism (Khan 2015: 123-140; Risse 2010: 38-40). Cosmopolitanism may alternatively or additionally be understood not only as the need to overcome the concept of nation, but also to make Europe able to provide the security and intercultural education of its citizens through a common formal project that is truly faithful to the roots of the 'European experiment' (Ignatieff 1994: 9).

In terms of security, cosmopolitanism ought to move away from a perspective stressing greater self-organisation, co-ordination and negotiation as purely procedural concepts (Zolo 1997: xv). The debate on terrorism, but also the juxtaposition of assimilation and cultural integration within the broader notion of identity, would not assume a differential mode with respect to European and non-European citizens but must be brought back to neutral terms. Issues regarding security ought to be addressed in an egalitarian fashion, faithful to the liberal tradition that calls for common rules unifying the various national conceptions for the safety of world citizens. The presumption of innocence, common to every citizen on European soil (through regular or irregular entry - thus dismissing the debate on criminalising illegal immigration *per se*), should be coupled with a neutral application of criminal justice, free from any geographical identification, ethnic or religious, focusing solely on the principle of no harm. Such a model could be enriched with a deeper environmental vision, to meet the growing desertification, depletion of water resources, climate upheaval and rapid changes in the energy production, including the debate on fracking. It is important to go well beyond the commitments made in this area in Copenhagen and in Paris, which, however laudable, are still not binding and are related to the promise of compensation that never reached developing countries (Black 2015).

As Gerard Delanty notes, the proliferation of 'Europeanised personal identities has not produced a European collective identity as such' (Delanty 2016). European identity can nevertheless be successfully forged through education and historical awareness. Neil Fligstein argues that those with opportunity to interact with people from other member states, due to educational and/or professional opportunity, are more likely to identify with Europe (Fligstein 2008: 124). The people who have not had these opportunities usually refer more to their own state (*ibid*). Therefore, based on Spadolini's words, Europe should develop a social and educational model, which works on security and interculturalism, based on existing and declared values. In order to have a more stable and united future, member states must leave the theoretical realm to create a liberal, cosmopolitan project (Spadolini 1985: v-xvii). Such a project may not necessarily arise from the bottom-up, but ought to promote transnational, 'nested'

identities that could curb national resurgences, shaping them through both local and international policies, public grants and education (Shore 2000: 51). As liberalism is intrinsically woven back into the European project, a successfully inclusive European identity can look at something already in existence and not be an artificial creation.

CONCLUSION

The Europe conceived by Adenauer, De Gasperi and Schuman was undoubtedly rooted in a value-laden project for the individual, not harnessed by a utilitarian, interest-based, or realist perspective. While the future of the EU is debated across the continent, the European project can only survive if it reaffirms its liberal origins, moving away from constructing identity in opposition to 'the other', instead looking at sources of transnational belonging that can unite rather than divide.

Key concepts for a comprehensive proposal for European identity are commitment by all members, inclusive international relations, security within an egalitarian framework, a commitment not only towards republican institutions and a free market but towards the environment, education and human rights. Above all, Europe was created as an ideal, a goal for which to strive (Davies 1996: 10). Today, member states must restate that ideal: besides specific discussions on practical policies (which are beyond the scope of this paper), the theoretical framework cannot betray its founding liberal principles. Only through a return to its liberal roots can the EU live up to its self-declared objectives, solidify its internal unity, and answer the challenges that borders and identity issues present today.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Not all Europeans, however, have been accepting of America's role in the continent. A prominent example would be De Gaulle's European strategy (Ludlow 2010).

² The rise of neoliberal doctrines, such as Thatcherism, could also be seen as a factor accelerating the European transition to realism. Laissez-faire economics and market deregulation have undoubtedly affected EU economic policies, as well as the concept of identity and belonging to the European project.

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