

IDENTITY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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The purpose of this article is to throw some light on the question of identity in the European Union. The challenge is to understand how identity formation takes place in the contemporary world. The European integration has to be understood both as a process of socio-economic convergence among European states but also as a process of co-operation on different other levels, too. It seems that cultures, traditions and interests are more and more interconnected as societies become increasingly multicultural. This is the reason why people are concerned with the concept of identity and the recognition of their uniqueness in terms of traditions, values and ways of lives.

Identity, social identity, European Union, culture, nation

Europe is a forest of ideas, symbols and myths, and it can be seen as a mirror that reflects a multitude of concepts and meanings. And it also reflects a story worth telling not only for the political and economic change that is taking place of an unprecedented scope and type but for the interesting changes that happen to the persons involved in it. The debate about the European integration refers to a process of long-term socio-economic convergence among European societies, a careful and premeditated process of co-operation between the states involved on a variety of levels, as well as a process of constructing a European identity.

Nowadays, probably more than ever, people hear, read, and discuss questions about identity. Discussions and talks have as main subjects the meanings of home and place, migrations, displacements, and Diaspora. In a world obsessed with European Integration, the word 'identity' has become a key word for conferences, lectures, books, and articles, talking about every aspect of identity one can imagine. A great deal of interest has been developed during the last years, concerning self, subjectivity, and the theory of identity. In the network era, 'identity' has become one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debates. Sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, historians, economists, and philosophers give the impressions that have something to say about this subject. At every turn we encounter discourses about identity and its various forms. The talk is also about the emergence of new identities, the resurgence of old ones, the transformation about existing ones.

But what does 'identity' mean? Consulting the Oxford English Dictionary yields a Latin root ('identitas', from 'idem', which means 'the same') and two basic meanings. The first is a concept of absolute sameness: this is identical to that. The second is a concept of distinctiveness, which presumes consistency or continuity over time. Approaching the idea of sameness from two different angles, the notion of identity simultaneously establishes two possible relations of comparison between persons and things: on the one hand similarity, and difference on the other hand. The verb 'to identify' is a necessary accompaniment of identity: the word implies something active, which cannot be ignored. Identity is not just there but it must always be established.

The notion of 'identity' has a history. Years ago, it was seen as something that was 'given' to us. Nowadays, debates are focused on identity as a quality that arises in our interaction with others, not as an inherent quality. It is seen as something that is constructed by means of some processes; identities are seen as being constituted and validated through ongoing interactions. Because the process of identification always involves construction it reveals additional characteristics. Firstly, it is a process that is never completed, being in a continuous construction and reconstruction throughout the life-course of individuals.

During the last years, a great deal has been written about the different faces of identity, about social identity, national identity, group identity, individual identity, personal identity, cultural identity, etc. How could we characterize these faces of identity? Are there any differences between them? What do they express? On all these levels identity has something to do with a tendency toward 'sameness' or stability, with a tendency toward 'wholeness' or integration of traits, or with a strengthening of boundaries around

the unit in question. To give an example: personal identity is the wholeness of a person, in so far as this person attempts to be and to remain a well-functioning unit in his environment. Similarly, a group will not have identity unless it coheres and maintains itself as a viable system in its surroundings. Thus, the identity of a nation depends on its wholeness being recognized and its boundaries being articulated.

But first we will talk about social identity and how we could define it. The concept of 'identity' is one of the most contentious in the social sciences. Race/ethnicity, sex/gender, and sexual orientation have emerged as divisive social issues under the rubric of 'identity politics'. Without social identity there is no society, because without such framework of similarity and difference people would be unable to relate to each other in a consistent and meaningful fashion. Social identity is a characteristic or property of humans as social beings. However, the word 'identity' embraces a universe of creatures, things and substances, which is wider than the limited category of humanity. Minimally, social identity refers to the way in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. It is our understanding of who we are and of whom other people are, and, reciprocally, other people understand of themselves and of others (which includes us). Our human social life cannot be imagined without some means of knowing who others are and some sense of who we are. Identity theorists argue that the self consists of a collection of identities, each of which is based on occupying a particular role. Identities can be defined as one's answer to the question 'Who am I'. Many of the 'answers' are linked to the roles we occupy, so they are often referred to as 'role identities' or simply 'identities'. The role identities are said to influence behavior in that each role has a set of associated meanings and expectations for the self.

Not only intellectuals regard 'identity' as a theme of discussion. Popular concern about identity is, in large perhaps, a reflection of the uncertainty produced by rapid change and cultural contact: our social map no longer fit our social landscape. Politically, the rhetoric of identity allows to pursuit of sectional interests to pass as a defense of the ineffable. Commercially, the advertising industry has long understood that selling things to people often means selling them a new identity too: a 'new look' may be synonymous with a 'new me' and the path to that new identity is likely to pass through the shopping center. There has probably always been a bond between identity and consumption. But what may be new is that consumers are more sophisticated in their awareness of this and more self-consciously collusive in the face of the expanding ranges of alternatives produced by a global market.

During their everyday lives, all kinds of people, not only social scientist tried to reflect upon social identity. It is nothing new to be self-conscious about social identity, about what it means to be human, whether people are what they appear to be. These things represent, in fact, the basis of social identity. Nowadays, the social identities are prominent, and of course to some extent historically and culturally specific. Social identity is a strategic concept in broaching these questions, for a number of reasons. First, identities are necessarily attributes of embodied individuals, which are equally necessarily socially constituted. Second, if social identity is conceptualized in terms of process, a sharp distinction between structure and action may be avoided. Third, since social identity is bound up with cultural repertoires of intentionality such as morality, it is an important concept in our understanding of action and its outcomes, both intended and unintended. Fourth, in identifying internal and external moments of identification a necessary connection is made between domination and resistance and the processes of social identification. Social identities are in themselves one foundation upon which order and predictability in the social world are based.

The same situation is with the contexts and media through which contemporary discourses about identity find expression. It is nothing new to be self-conscious about identity – what it means to be human, what it means to be a person, etc. Identities are necessarily attributes of embodied individuals, which are equally necessarily socially constituted, sometimes at a high level of abstraction. A person's identity is influenced, among other things, by what he or she consumes, what he or she wears, the commodities he or she buys, what he or she reads and sees, etc. An identity is formed, partly, of what the person thinks of itself, and how it relates to the everyday life. Other powerful institutions that have to be taken into consideration when talking about an identity are popular culture, fashion, advertising, and mass media.

Broadly speaking, people talk about two types of identity: a traditional one and a modern one. According to the traditional point of view an identity is made up of some elements such as class, gender, and race which operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity. The modern view sees identity as a result of a process in which psychological and social factors are mixed. Of course, these two sets of factors

overlap; there are psychological aspects to the sociological factors, and sociological aspects to the psychological factors.

Besides, there are two sides of a person's identity: the public identity – which is the 'outside' of our concept of the self, and the private identity which is the 'inside' of our identity. The former is how others see us, and the latter is how we see ourselves. When considering someone's identity we have to take into consideration some social elements such as: class, nation, race, ethnicity, gender, religion. All these give color to an identity. An identity is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each observer in each period. Perhaps when we are thinking of identity we should think of all the events that happened to us and how these transformed us in time. Making some researches on the idea of identity, economists and psychologists come to the conclusion that individuality and individual identities are separate and distinctive from social identities. So, two selves seem to appear with the individual/personal unique self being regarded as more real, more significant and quite different from the socially learned or social self. How these two entities may be linked is an uncertain issue. In 2004, Richard Jenkins in his book entitled *Social Identity* adopted a starkly different point of view, noticing that

“The individual identity – embodied in selfhood – is not meaningful in isolation from the social world of other people. Individuals are unique and variable, but selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed.”

The individual identity and the social identity are entangled with each other, being produced by analogous processes and they are both intrinsically social. But what happens with the identities, in general, in the context of the European Union? Are they bound to suffer or not? These are only two of a wide range of questions that preoccupy not only sociologists but also other scientists. Gerard Delanty notes that

“The search for new principles of European legitimacy is inexplicable bound up with the attempt to create a space in which collective identities can be formed.”

One important question is if such a European identity can be at all formed. All the countries that are members of the European Union have their own national identities but the question is if they will “survive” in the complex story of Europe. The building of a nation, historically speaking, has been marked by struggle, by people actively fighting for their cultural recognition, particular language, history, and identity. Applied to Europe, people would try to create a unique European identity and self-possessed Europeans. But it is highly unlikely that there will be a process in Europe where a European identity replaces a Member state national one. As J. Habermas notes in his *Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State*:

“It is neither possible nor desirable to level out the national identities of member nations, not melt them down into a Nation of Europe”.

However, what is interesting to explore is whether national identities can be supplemented or transformed, even to become post-national. This consideration requires attention because the contemporary context of identity formation is entirely different from that which existed when the notion of national identity first emerged and when the national identities of the European Member States were formed.

Nowadays, cultures, traditions, societies, and interests are becoming highly interconnected and linked, as societies become increasingly multicultural. This is why people are more and more concerned with identity, the recognition of their uniqueness, in terms of cultures, ways of life and values. The countries which are member of the European Union still retain their own cultures, traditions, national identities and socializing mechanisms for their citizens. The European Union has not changed these and hopefully it will not do it in the future.

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