

# Book Review: European Identity and Culture: Narratives of Transnational Belonging

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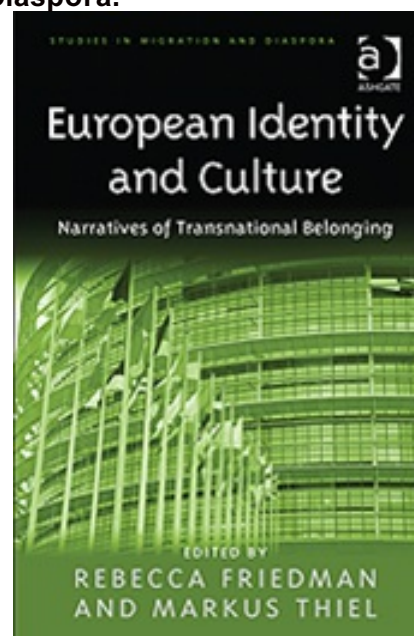
*European Identity and Culture* explores cultural aspects of transnational identity formation. At its core, it tries to shed light on why there is both resistance and a search for common belonging in Europe. **Amy Ludlow** finds that in reframing our conceptual understanding of identity and its formation, this book sheds light upon how we might respond to the longstanding crisis of legitimacy in Europe.



**European Identity and Culture: Narratives of Transnational Belonging.** Rebecca Friedman and Markus Thiel (eds.). Ashgate: Studies in Migration and Diaspora. September 2012.

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In the words of the European Commission's President, Europe is facing "not just a financial crisis but also a crisis of confidence in our future, credibility and of respect for our values". This crisis has a long history, which predates, although has been exacerbated by, the Eurozone crisis. It has proved difficult to cultivate a shared vision for the European project and a sense of European belonging. The final report of the Future on Europe Group reports that in "many parts of Europe, nationalism and populism are on the rise, while the feeling of solidarity and sense of belonging in Europe are dwindling". Many do not understand the EU and feel that it meddles in matters with which it ought to not concern itself. Europe is seen as a threat to national culture and identity.



This is therefore a very timely volume. It brings together academics from a variety of humanity and social science backgrounds to challenge our understanding of identity and its formation. Throughout, an emphasis is placed upon the cultural aspects of identity formation. The book's main conceptual contribution lies in its advancement of the "processural" character of transnational identity formation. Unlike much of the literature before it, which "is still wedded to a predominantly statist as well as static paradigm" (p.2), this volume's authors present a more dynamic conception of transnational identity, one which is in flux and changing over time. In doing so, the authors set out to "elucidate some of the more subtle, shifting dynamics that evade quantitative static analyses" of identity formation (p.3). They have certainly achieved their aim.



The first part of the book explores the bi-directional relationship between EU integration policies and national public spheres in Europe. Sophie Duchesne's contribution in chapter three is particularly illuminating. Duchesne's thesis is that we ought to analyse attitudes towards European integration as a component of national identification, rather than as an autonomous object. She draws upon qualitative studies (particularly her 2005-2010 project "Citizens talking about Europe") to question the conclusion of many quantitative studies that national identities diminish support for European integration.

Duchesne et al's study demonstrates that different groups hold different opinions regarding European integration, according to both their nationality and social belonging. Thus, since European identification is "part and parcel of national identification changes" (p.60), European identity can be properly understood

only by a detailed comprehension of national identity formation and the ways in which it might be changing. Furthermore, as Duchesene notes, “In the discussion about the so-called ‘EU democratic deficit’, the assumption is that people do not feel represented enough at the European level and that this generates Euroscepticism among European citizens who, in addition, feel they do not benefit enough or uppermost from EU policies” (p.68). The findings from her study do not support that hypothesis. Eurosceptics were found among those who benefited most from European integration. Moreover, people felt attached to their nation, even if they did not feel well represented at a national level.

These findings ought to be read by anyone thinking about how a truly transnational European public sphere might be developed. Although they require validation by further data, they suggest that talking about “European identity” in an abstract, autonomous sense is rather meaningless. To make any sense, the term must be rooted in a national context. The solution to the European identity problem may therefore lie within, rather than without, Member States. Furthermore, these findings suggest that the solution to the European democratic deficit is more complex than increasing representation or improving perceptions of policy outputs. The problems may in fact lie in European political culture and the character of European policy. As Duchesene argues, “National policies may have developed a sense of community and solidarity among themselves that people need and value independently of any rational evaluation of the way they benefit from them” (p.68). This seems to be lacking at a European level.

The second part of this book explores the repercussions of the tension between national and transnational identities, in everyday citizen experiences. In some instances identity formations have reignited the search for a common belonging, whereas in other cases, identities have emerged in competition and resistance to the EU project. These chapters draw upon diverse and innovative daily life examples, including leisure practices and culinary choices. There is a thoughtful chapter by Raymond Taras about counter-narratives to what he calls, “Islamophobia”. This makes a refreshing change to some of the less well-considered terrorism literature (although see a recent review of [Europe’s Angry Muslims](#) for an example of a more informed text)

However, for me, chapter six on “The Europeanization of Terroir” was a particularly interesting read. In a shift away from the political, this chapter embodies a broader definition of Europeanization which encompasses the full range of cultural, social and economic effects of Europe upon the everyday lives of its citizens (p.120). Marion Demossier explores how the consumption of traditional foodstuffs, and the values it encapsulates, exposes a tension between tradition / heritage (the national) and modernisation / adaptation to a modern market (the transnational). Despite this tension, she demonstrates that *terroir* encourages a growing European identity. Diversity (in tastes) is embraced because individuals are “comfortably rooted in their own particular identity, time and place” (p.127). This conclusion is strongly reminiscent of the motto “unity in diversity” which was adopted by the EU in 2000. The *terroir* example thus doubts the simplistic antithetical relationship between the national and transnational, and once again, creatively illustrates the complexity of European identity and the need for on-going interdisciplinary debate.

While there are no simple answers to Europe’s identity crisis, I would thoroughly recommend this book to those brave enough to take up the challenge of thinking about the problem. It provides thought provoking narratives of transnational belonging which are accessible to historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and lawyers alike.

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**Amy Ludlow** is a College Teaching Associate and Director of Studies in Law at [Trinity Hall, Cambridge](#). She is currently finalising her Ph.D. (Trinity College, Cambridge): “Does Public Procurement Deliver? A Prison Privatisation Case Study”. Amy read law at Trinity College, Cambridge (first class) from 2005-2008. She then completed a Masters, specialising in EU law at Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium (summa cum laude), before returning to Cambridge to begin her Ph.D. research. [Read more reviews by Amy](#).

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