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'On what Citizens Mean by Feeling "European":

Perceptions of News, Symbols, and Borderless-ness

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Abstract

What is 'Europe' for citizens? What do people mean when they say that they feel, or not, European? A growing amount of literature has been produced by political scientists and journalists alike to try and assess the absence or existence of a European identity, but it is very unclear what people tell us when answering our questions on their political identities. Multiple theories of political identities exist, imposing fairly rigid and untested (and, essentially, quantitatively untestable) assumptions on what they mean. No deductive technique, however, would allow us to let citizens explain to us the deeper signification of citizens' answers to our questions on who they are and how they perceive their attachment to varying political communities.

Therefore, this paper presents an analysis of a series of focus group discussions run in France, the UK, and the Netherlands with over ninety participants on what citizens believe to be 'Europe' and 'Europeans'. They tell us how they believe the media inform them on Europe, and how they perceive the main symbols of the European Union. They explain what matters to them in terms of their direct experience of European integration, and finally, what a 'European identity' means to them and whether they think of themselves and of their peoples as European or not.

We discover that citizens are relatively cynical with regards to the perceived bias of the media on the European question, derive impressionistic but somewhat surprising findings on the meaning they attribute to Europe through its symbols, with references to peace, cosmopolitanism and other 'anti-identity' values, and that ultimately, their predominant perception of European-ness relies, precisely, on the disappearance of internal EU borders. Finally, we can identify two main 'ways' for citizens to define a European identity, a predominantly 'civic' one, and the other, a predominantly 'cultural' one.

Keywords: European Identity, European Union, Focus Groups, Media, Symbols, Public Opinion.

Away from Borders: Europe and Borders?

Recent work on borders and identity published in this journal (Armbruster, Rollo, Meinhof, 2003; Meinhof, 2003) has shown that in a situation of unstructured interviews with members of border communities, Europe does not fare very well as an identity reference. If we consider that border communities are the most likely to 'experience' Europe in their everyday lives, this is certainly a paradox. European integration has transformed the very nature of the borders between member-states, and also those between the European Union and its neighbours, modifying the 'other' to which we could expect citizens to oppose their own identity.

The paradox, however, would become even greater if it appeared that for European citizens as a whole, European identity is largely defined around internal borders and their modification or (perceived) disappearance. Recent quantitative evidence in Bruter (2003 and 2004) shows that European identity has reached non-negligible levels across countries, and that it can be dub-divided into two distinct civic and cultural components. In order to better understand how, at the same time, European citizens at large might feel European, while in an interview context, border communities do not seem to spontaneously perceive the importance of Europe in their daily lives, I present, in this article, some qualitative evidence about what Europe 'means' to a series of respondents in focus groups. While this evidence was collected at the same time and in the same project as that used in Bruter (2003), and points out to the same results, it undoubtedly gives us another perspective on the reality of European identity. The article published in _Comparative Political Studies_ shows that the civic and cultural components

of a citizen's identity can be measured separately and how they interact, while the qualitative evidence tells us more about the contents of these identities (what does it *mean* to be a European citizen, or a European) and the symbolic ways in which they are lived and phrased by a number of citizens from three European Union democracies.

Using comparative semi-structured focus group as a source of empirical data, we ask citizens what they understand by Europe and a European identity (therefore 'suggesting' the European theme, unlike Armbruster, Rollo, and Meinhof), and how they perceive the symbols of Europe, information on Europe, and the impact of European integration on their daily life. As will be shown, the connection between Europe and borders seems much more real to those European citizens who live away from borders in the border communities themselves according to the studies just cited.

'Who I am is who I am'…

With European integration becoming an increasingly political process, questions regarding the political legitimacy of the European project have become more and more salient in the mass media as well as the political science literature. At a time when Western powers claim louder than ever that peoples should have the right to decide their own fate and live in their own state in the Balkans, the Near East, or Africa, is it 'fair' to create a European 'citizenship', and a fully institutionalised European political system if citizens do not 'feel' European yet?

In traditional social contract theory, (for example, Rousseau, 1762), it seems that without identity, there can be no true, durable, legitimacy attached to a political entity, no conscious acceptance of the power of the State and of its monopolistic right to use legitimate coercion (Weber, 1946). Every time a new political community has been created, therefore, the legitimacy of the contract that links it to its citizens and gives it its fundamental institutional acceptability requires the creation of a new political identity.

In many respects, however, the position of those who claim that the European Union has failed to generate a sense of European identity among its citizens seems theoretically and empirically rather weak. Many political scientists have simply derived assumptions on the lack of a European identity from the limited progress of the degree to which European citizens have supported European integration over time (for example, Inglehart, 1997, Gabel, 1994). Sometimes, scholars, and more often journalists, have even suggested that the latter is only another expression of the former.

Conceptually, of course, such an equivalence assumption is not defendable (Bruter, 2003). But another significant problem faced by the study of a European identity, even on the basis of the few questions occasionally asked by mass surveys (such as Eurobarometer) is the almost philosophical impossibility to make sense *ex abstracto* of what citizens 'mean' whenever they tell us that they do or do not feel European. Indeed, as Peter Burgess explains[1], in a way, 'identity remains prisoner of language'. In other words, from a metaphysical point of view, I can only define the foundations of my identity according to what I mean by this identity itself, or, again, what makes me 'me' can only be understood with regards to the way I define myself. There can be, in that respect, no comparison between the self-defined identities of any two individuals as, by

nature, any two individuals will use different determinants, models, perceptions to define their own selves.

This, of course, raises significant questions for political scientists willing to study political identities at the individual level. Does it mean that we should abandon any hope to compare individuals' assessments of their European identity and can only use 'top-down' and aggregate-level perspectives to study European identity? This would mean focusing on who 'should' be considered European, what unites Europeans in terms of geography, politics, culture, and the perceived 'natural' limits of 'Europe'. Studying European identity from a top-down, 'objective', perspective has meant to understand what unifies Europe and Europeans in terms of cultural heritage, values, etc. and how to characterise Europe and an hypothesised European common heritage. This has been undertaken by political scientists such as Ester, Halman, and de Moor (1993), social historians such as Wintle et al. (1996) and other researchers such as Van Deth and Scarbrough (1995), Inglehart (1990, 1997), Dalton (1996), and Duchesne and Frognier (1995) in empirical terms. A more theoretical approach to the questions of what is Europe, who are Europeans, what is European citizenship, and what are the grounds of a European identity has also been taken by Howe (1995), Meehan (1993), Guild (1996), and Waever (1995) while the institutional identity of the European Union and its social meaning, in terms of images of identity and community, have been mostly studied by sociologists and anthropologists such as Shore (1993), Shore and Black (1992), and Abeles, Bellier and McDonald (1993).

In contrast to this perspective, a behavioural 'bottom-up' perspective tries to answer questions such as: Who 'feels' European (using an individual level perspective)?

Why do some citizens identify with Europe while other do not? And, of course, what do people 'mean' when they say that they feel (or not) European? From the point of view of the political scientist, these questions involve serious theoretical, conceptual and empirical problems. Indeed, the basic question addressed here is how to define, conceptually, a European identity? Bruter (2003) has argued that we should differentiate between two aspects of political identities, a 'cultural' one and a 'civic' one.

In this paper, the concept of identity will first be defined. The notions of European identity and Europeanness, as perceived by citizens will then be approached, using qualitative empirical evidence based on a series of nine focus groups run in the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands with over 90 participants. The focus groups were used in conjunction with a wider research project based on a comparative experiment, where the effects of news and symbols of European integration on citizens' global, civic, and cultural European identity were assessed using two surveys.

The focus group design will first be described, together with the research questions being addressed, the concepts of civic and cultural identities will be briefly introduces, and the results will then be analysed in terms of news perceptions, symbols of Europe, experience of European integration and perceptions of a European identity.

Design of the Focus Groups

The focus group were organised in the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands. Nine groups were formed, each comprising between eight and eleven participants aged 18 to 56, together with a native-speaking organiser. The discussions were semi-

structured, tape-recorded and translated. They lasted between 40 and 60 minutes in each case. For a variety of reasons, in spite of what many prefer, we chose to mix men and women, but kept age-group fairly homogeneous (with a sample skewed towards the younger generation)[2].

The organisers were all briefed together and given a specific agenda of themes to be explored with the group. Part of the agenda was common to all nine groups, while three themes were only on the agenda of three to four groups, including at least one group in each location. As part of the overall experiment, before the focus group discussions each participant was asked to fill in a questionnaire on European identity and then exposed to a set of articles describing either good or bad news on European integration, and photographs representing either symbols of European integration or placebos. This resulted in four distinct newspaper extracts (good news and symbols=1, good news and placebo=2, bad news and symbols=3, and bad news and placebos=4), represented in roughly equal proportions in each focus group. While not all groups talked about all of them, altogether, the agenda of the focus group was to help us provide a qualitative answer to four questions in order to be able to make more sense of the quantitative data we were gathering in parallel:

- How do people perceive the way they are informed on Europe by various news media?

- How do citizens know and perceive the various main symbols of European integration and what they mean for them?

- What is citizens' direct experience of Europe, and how does it influence their levels of European identity?

- What do people think of the 'idea' of a European identity? In other words, what is it for them, does it exist at all, do they believe it is very generalised and wide-spread, what does it involve, how does it connect with other political identities, and what does it means for European citizens?

Using a structuralist approach, we may infer that people's European identity derives from their perceptions of Europe, themselves influenced by the images they form of Europe. The focus group analysis mostly helps us to understand better what these perceptions are, how images of Europe are formed and interpreted, and how people connect them with their European identity per se.

In all cases, the insights are drawn from all relevant focus groups across countries, that is, between three and nine focus groups, depending on the category of questions targeted. The first names and the number and location of the focus group will be used with all quotations.

Defining 'Civic' and 'Cultural' Components of Political Identities[3]

Before it became an area of interest for historians, sociologists, discourse analysts, or political scientists, the notion of 'identity' was extensively studied by philosophers and

psychologists. In psychology, the concept of identity is what bridges the gap between the self and the outside world, the idea that while individuals are unique and independent, their perceptions of themselves can only be constructed in relation, sympathy, or opposition to elements of the outside world (Mummendey, 1997) as confirmed in this volume (for example, Galasinsla, Galasinski, 2003, Meinhof, 2003).

Identity is therefore understood as a network of feelings of belonging to and exclusion from human subgroups: belonging to a gender group, a given age group, a family, religion, race, community, nation, etc. The unique superposition of groups a human being feels attached to constitutes its individual and unique 'identity' together with the definition of what constitutes the out-group (Mummendey, 1997, Wodak, 1999). The definition of an identity in psychological terms is obviously a mixture of real connections or differences and prejudices, the latter being necessary to enrich the world with one's own knowledge and certitudes, whether 'objectively' true or false.

Because of this presence of clear subjective elements in the definition of one's identity and the out-groups identity is defined against, for psychologists, we can only first understand identities at the individual level, using the traditional framework of methodological individualism. This implies that to understand the development of a mass European identity specifically, we must analyse how the identity structure of individuals varies, how an individual identity is either formed in the stages of early socialisation, or bent later in an individual's life to incorporate further elements of reference.

If we do not take into account that identity is first and foremost an individual characteristic, the array of research questions linked to identity formation becomes much narrower and its explanations much clearer. Studied from a societal perspective, as done

by many sociologists such as Bourdieu (1991) and Leca (1992), identities become fixed, rigid, categories that only evolve through generational replacement and environmental evolution. From an individual perspective, however, changes in mass identities in general and mass political identities in particular present all the ambiguities and complexity of veritable 'realignments' (Fanklin, Mackie et al, 1992) with the wide variety of theoretical and analytical explanations that can be attached to them. We are, therefore, faced with slow, complex and ambiguous situations in which citizens will define their European identity in relation with other political and non-political identities, and need to capture the 'place' that European identity has found in people's hearts and minds, and their definition of it. If political identities can be defined as the elements of an individual's identity that relate to a formalised political community, understanding political identities implies a need to understand what those formalised communities might predominantly represent in the imaginary of an individual.

Our analysis relies on a conceptual distinction between two main components of political identities, a 'civic' one and a 'cultural' one (Bruter, forthcoming). The 'cultural' component represents, by and large, the sense of belonging of an individual citizen towards a particular group. This can be defined by a certain culture, social similarities, ethics or even ethnicity. The 'civic' component, on the other hand, has to do with the identification of citizens with a political structure, the State, which can be summarised as the set of institutions, rights, and rules that preside over the political life of a community.

In the case of many countries, distinguishing empirically between the 'cultural' and 'civic' components of most political identities is both difficult and only moderately interesting from a political science point of view because the dominant 'State' and

'Nation' of reference are super-imposed. Even in cases of countries where regionalist and separatist tendencies are strong (see the studies of Lipset and Rokkan, 1967, or Seiler, 1998 on that question), differentiating between cultural and civic identities might only be easy for peripheral, minority groups. For example, in Britain, many Scots would think of themselves as having a dual Scottish / British identity. For most Englishmen, however, Englishness and Britishness will be considered as implicitly or explicitly similar. 'Europe', however, presents a completely different pattern. Indeed, while conceiving Europe as a cultural identity would imply a reference to Europe as a continent or civilisation that presumably stretches from the Atlantic to the Ural, conceiving Europe as a 'civic' identity would imply a reference to the European Union which covers less than half of it. In these particular circumstances, the political entity referred to in the hypothesis of a European civic identity does not match the cultural entity as yet. This makes tests for the differences between the two types of identities and their relative strengths – even for the 'centre' - much easier to perform than in any other existing case, and more interesting when it comes to the study of the political significance of further enlargements of the European Union on local as well as Western European public opinions.

One of the goals of the focus group is, therefore, to try and understand whether citizens refer primarily to the 'civic' or the 'cultural' component of European identity when they claim to their European-ness or lack of. This distinction is implicit in our analysis throughout the results of the discussion. The findings are presented around the four main types of relevant questions addressed in the groups discussion on perceptions

of media information, symbolism, European experience, and identity. We present the results according to these categories in the following four sections.

Talking about the Media and Europe: Perceptions of the way the media inform us on European integration

The first insight of the focus group allows us to capture respondents' perceptions of the way the media inform them on Europe and European integration. Indeed, the media are the most obvious source of 'images' of Europe. Voluntarily or involuntarily, they affect people's perceptions of what Europe stands for, and it is, for this reason, extremely important for anyone interested in understanding what Europe means to citizens to capture how people perceive the images of Europe conveyed to them by the media. Four of the nine focus groups discussed this question in all three locations.

To introduce the more general topic of how people think the media present and represent Europe, the group organisers started to ask, very briefly, how the respondents perceived the 'sense' of the news presented to them in the newspaper extracts they had just read. With regards to these specific articles, there was no hesitation to call the supposed good news 'positive' and the supposed bad news 'negative'. From there, the participants were asked more general questions about the way the media inform them in general.

Comparative differences were significant. Globally speaking, the respondents judged news on Europe roughly neutral in the Netherlands, neutral to fairly negative in France, and very negative in Britain. About the last case, Paul (UK, group 1) said that:

'No, no… they always say Europe is shit and all that […] That's what you always read, especially in rubbish like the Sun and so on!'

He then attributed this negative bias to the Australian ownership of the largest British media group. He accused the Maxwell group of having an interest in promoting opposition to the European project:

'They don't even pay taxes in England at all and then they say they represent the people! They don't want Europe to be too strong.[…] Also, you know, they don't want Europe because of their own interest too […] especially tax harmonisation and all that: it's not good for the rich and it's even worse for the very very rich like them, so they try to claim it's bad for the poor to be supported by their readers!'

Even in the case of France and the Netherlands, however, many participants noticed that the European Union and its various institutions were often blamed for what goes wrong with what Ann (Netherlands, group 1) called the 'legislation on bananas', environmental details and other tiny questions sometimes addressed by the European Union.

In all cases, the respondents were asked if differences existed, according to them, in terms of orientation of the information on Europe by news organ. In France, the participants claimed that TV tended to be more negative towards Europe than most newspapers. This remark might not have arisen outside of a somewhat 'sophisticated' population. In Britain, major differences were found by the respondents across

newspapers, which corresponded to the 'common knowledge' on the question (that is, particularly Eurosceptic tabloids and Daily Telegraph, moderate Times, and relatively pro-European Guardian, Independent and Financial Times). No such difference was spontaneously expressed in France or the Netherlands, although the question was not asked directly anywhere.

When asked what were the types of good and bad information most often associated with European integration in the media, the respondents seemed to answer both questions quite easily. Among the negative images conveyed by the media, the participants mentioned heavy bureaucracy (Anne-Julie, France, group 2), focus on tiny questions, internal dissension between member-states, obscure negotiations, unsatisfactory compromises, etc (all, several occurrences). Among the good news, they mentioned in all three countries economic development and prosperity, internal co-operation, cultural initiatives, policy diffusion (Sarah, UK, group 1, albeit not called that way), etc.

Analysing briefly these comments of the participants to the focus group, it seems that the media are perceived to present European integration as a mostly technical project but underline its diplomatic failures. This is confirmed by the policy areas in which participants perceived that the European Union was presented positively or negatively by the media. Areas of negative presentation included competition policy, agricultural policy (only for the French groups) and common foreign policy (particularly emphasised by the British groups). Areas of positive presentation include - still according to the participants - cultural and educational co-operation (particularly emphasised by the Dutch sample), industrial policy, regional development (particularly emphasised by the French sample),

and scientific co-operation. The Dutch sample also mentioned environmental policy positively and the French and British samples talked about social legislation.

Therefore, overall, to varying degrees, the focus group perceive that the news given to them by the media on Europe tend to be predominantly negative, particularly in terms of 'political' contents (as opposed to economic). They also thought that this information matters, that people follow it and that, as claimed by Christophe (France, group 2):

'[one] cannot think of Europe without thinking of slightly stupid, heavy mechanisms, bogus laws on the size of apples and salmon and so on!'

Participants were asked if they often verified the information they are exposed to, using, for example, an alternative source. A few answered that yes, but most answered that they do not. This suggests that the bias mentioned in terms of sense of information is likely to matter with regards to the perceptions of Europe by European citizens.

Talking about symbols of Europe: Knowledge and perceptions of the official symbols of European integration

The second theme of discussion for some groups had to do with the symbols of European integration rather than the news and the way the media inform citizens on Europe. As in the previous case, the topic was introduced in relation to the symbols mentioned in the questionnaires or the photographs of symbols of European integration in some of the

newspaper extracts. The symbols included in the photographic stimuli included, among other things, the European flag, Euro bank notes, and the European passport. In addition to those, the questionnaires mentioned the European anthem (Beethoven's 9th Symphony Ode to Joy), the European 'national festival'(Schuman Day on 9 May), and the elections to the European Parliament.

The participants were asked whether they knew of these symbols before the day of the experiment. No respondent claimed not to know the European flag. The common passport and the synchronised universal suffrage elections to the European Parliament were also known by a clear majority of the members of the focus group. Unlike the case of Britain, in both France and the Netherlands, a majority of the respondents also knew the European anthem and had seen photos of Euro bank notes prior to the experiment[1]. However, in all three cases, very few participants already knew of the Schuman Day. This result was slightly different in France where a non-negligible minority knew of the event, which has benefited from relatively high media coverage and efforts of popularisation by public authorities in the past few years.

Interestingly enough, however, many of the focus group participants expressed doubts as to whether the general public knew much about these symbols, even the ones they almost all knew (passport, etc). Of course, there would be no sense in taking this information in the first degree (that is, as an 'expert' indication of the actual knowledge of symbols by the general public). However, this comment tells us something about perceptions of media diffusion of symbols of European integration, perceptions about the

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[1] The experiment and focus group discussions took place in 2001, before the launch of the Euro as a 'physical' currency.

salience of these symbols in daily discussions, and probably an unconscious perception that European integration is still, after all, an 'elite' phenomenon.

When the participants knew some of the symbols, they could express surprisingly clearly what images and connotations they associated with them. Emily (UK, group 2) talked about the European flag. She explained that she perceived it as:

'A more peaceful […] and positive flag than the Union Jack. Even the colours are softer! […] You can't think of people going to war with that.'

She said that she preferred it to the latter for that reason and that it does not convey any violence or hatred unlike the British flag. About the European anthem, Matthew (UK, group 2) also explained that he had found it was a good choice, devoid of any narrow political message, unlike the God Save the Queen. Most respondents ignored the 'official' symbolism of most of the symbols of the European Union, but among the values and connotations proposed, peace, harmony, co-operation, etc. are the elements mentioned most often. The emphasis on co-operation is of particular importance. Indeed, few of the symbols chosen for European institutions and the European Union were designed to represent co-operation between individual States (Bruter, 1998). However, erroneous co-operative interpretations have been quite numerous, in particular in reference to the flag, when the European Communities only had twelve member States (Bruter, 1998). The focus group discussions showed us that, in fact, these erroneous interpretations have also appeared quite intuitive to many citizens who go on perceiving the State as the main level of political power even in the context of European integration.

The European level is then, at most, characterised as an 'anti-national' level by our respondents.

Following this acknowledgement, focus group participants were asked whether they perceived any opposition between symbols of Europe and symbols of their individual State. Interestingly enough, this is one of the themes on which participants were most radically split. In the British sample, group 2 seemed to agree that the 'non-national' symbols of the European Union contrasted with the 'nationalist' symbols of the United Kingdom. Matthew (UK, group 2) explained that, in his opinion:

'Europe […] doesn't go against the UK or anything […] They don't want to destroy it, but when you look at Britain and all our stuff, the anthem and the flag and so on […] they exclude Europe and everything else because if you think of your country struggling to survive […] and against enemies and all the rest, you can't imagine Europe.'

This is an interesting perception on the 'direction' of a potential exclusion between Europe and the nation state in terms of symbolic discourse. In Paul's perception, Europe is not, therefore, a threat to the nation state (if the nation state accepts Europe, Europe will not exclude the nation state) but threatened by it, and, as a result, a momentarily interrupted - but important - complement to the UK.

The discussion on symbols of European integration gives us a certain number of very important elements of information on the way citizens perceive these top-down 'images' of Europe and the European Union. Firstly, we learn that there is a rather good knowledge on the whole of the main symbols of the European Union. Secondly, we can see that these symbols suggest the formation of subjective images and connotations by citizens who associate them to values of peace, harmony, co-operation, and other

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elements that represented the first philosophical 'line' of the European project in the first half of the century (Bruter, 2000). These interpretations and connotations seem 'anti-national' in essence, close to the polar opposite of borders as a political reference. Thirdly, we understand that in spite of their knowledge and interpretation of these symbols, the participants to the focus group expressed doubts about the same being true of the general public. We interpret this comment as an indication of the fragility of the relationship of the participants with symbols of European integration. Slightly forcing the interpretation of participants' comments, the evolution of the focus group discussion on that topic almost gives the impression that they were slightly ashamed of associating positive subjective images with symbols of European integration, particularly in Britain and France.

Talking about their experience of Europe: Acquaintance and perceptions of the impact of Europe in citizens' daily life

The next element of the focus group discussion had to do with the perception by citizens of the importance of Europe in their daily life and their own 'personal' experience of European integration as citizens.

The questionnaires given to the participants to the experiment included a series of questions on their daily experience of the European Union. These items aimed at taking a snapshot of citizens' dealing with European integration in everyday life through travelling in the rest of the EU, living in another EU country, having trans-European

families, or speaking more foreign languages. In the focus group discussion, the respondents were, therefore, asked, before anything else, whether they thought that living in or travelling to another European country would make people feel more European, and the same about European origins and speaking foreign languages. The respondents were encouraged to relate the discussion to their own individual experiences and those of people they know.

Jonathan (France, group 1), did so in reference to his brother:

'My brother lived in Europe and in the USA […]. It was so different because it was so complicated, administratively to study in the US, and so easy in England!'

At the same time, Christophe (France, group 2) expressed somewhat similar comments on Europe being 'citizens' home' with regards to the Schengen area:

'I often went through Amsterdam Airport lately […] from the US […] Every time I arrived and showed my passport, the customs people didn't really check my passport and greeted me in French! I felt quite moved!!'

All these comments showed that European integration is 'felt' by the respondents (and their families) in the context of travel and life abroad within – as opposed to without – the European Union. From these elements, we may guess that living in another country outside of the European Union might reinforce the sense of European identity of

respondents almost as much as life in another European country (as part of one's 'European experience' per se).

The groups were then asked whether they expected that the categories of people who are particularly exposed to the European reality through travelling and working abroad should feel increasingly more European. The groups were also asked more directly, if some members had lived abroad and whether it had made them feel more European. Anne-Sophie (Netherlands, group 3) explained that:

'When I was in Mainz as an Erasmus student, I felt very European […]. We didn't mix up very much with the Germans themselves, because many of them lived with their families […] but we really created a group with the other Europeans: I think… I think the Belgians, the Italians, the Spanish, the Swedes, us… even the Britons: everyone felt very 'European', more than when we were at home!'

Later, Anne-Sophie formalised her comment further and suggested that Europeanness can only develop strongly in the context of contact with fellow Europeans, and even more easily when their similarities are enlightened by contrast with differences with extra-Europeans (in her case, in Mainz, she particularly mentioned Americans and Asians). This may explain, again, the perceived impact of living in a non-European country as well as – or in reinforcement of – the European experience of a respondent.

As far as travelling abroad is concerned, the comments of the groups were a little bit more contradictory. Claire (France, group 3) and Emily (UK, group 1) both had positive comments about the impact of their European travel experience on their European identity. The former analysed her experience of a seven-week-long 'Interail' trip through most of Europe (both in and out of the European Union):

'I never thought I could feel so close to Romanians and so on […]. You know, we stopped in Slovakia and the people, there, were really poor and so on, and brought up in communism […] but I really felt closer to people there than when I was in Japan or in the USA. […] Also, you know, the food and the languages and so on… sometimes, you think you are back to France when you are in Poland or you feel you are in Italy when you are in Romania or you… you think that Finland and Czechoslovakia (sic.) are not unlike because the food and the people and the way to go out are really the same. I didn't feel that when I travelled anywhere else.'

Emily made similar comments, pointing out to the similar preoccupations, interests, and tastes of people throughout Europe. Her comparison extended even further geographically, since she mentioned countries like Belarus and Latvia.

However, Ann (Netherlands, group 1) regretted that when she goes to Tuscany, where her parents have a holiday house, they are still treated like 'foreigners'. She also explained that when they go to Belgium, she sometimes think that people dislike their Dutch neighbours even more than they would dislike people who come from very far away:

'They basically tell us we are all perverse, they hate our football teams and even our way of speaking! […] If we play Brazil, they'll definitely support Brazil!'

The discussions were then oriented to the impact of speaking foreign languages in contemporary Europe. Here again, the groups were split between those who think that speaking foreign languages makes one feel more 'international' and more integrated in the European Union, and those who think that it does not make any difference. Various participants recalled their experiences abroad and in their relationship with fellow

Europeans, mentioning either the relative difficulty… or the relative easiness of communicating with people from other European countries.

About foreign European origins, the few participants who had some mostly mentioned their links with family in other European countries, and their effects in terms of travel, languages, etc. It is very difficult to expect citizens to 'know' if this has had any impact on their own sense of European identity, as it would assume a capacity to take some distance from the fully internalised conception of how people perceive themselves. If we analyse with some distance what was said in the focus group discussions, however, these participants all seem to have developed a fairly strong sense of Europeanness, and several referred to implicit or explicit trans-European 'minority' networks. A good example was that of Anna (Netherlands, group 2), who was born in Opole in Poland and moved to Rotterdam with her family when she was 1. She was 27 at the time of the interview:

'My Dad's brother moved to a fairly poor suburb of Toulouse in France, where there are lots of problems with immigrants […] but my family settled down really easily. […] When I go to see them, or family friends who live in Milan and in Münster, I always feel at home!… We have our own Europe […] and sometimes it seems to have strengthened much faster than for most people in the EU […] I would have no problem marrying someone who wanted to live in France or Germany or even Italy if it weren't for the language!… […] I love it here, I have many friends, and I have my brother and sisters, but otherwise, I think I could easily feel at home anywhere in Europe!…'

Judging by our participants' comments, European experience obviously matters. However, respondents did not always perceive directly that European experience is important as such. They either focused on technical consequences of their European experience (easier administrative installation in a foreign – but EU member – country, end of border formalities within Schengen, etc.) or took their European experience to be

the revealing factor – as opposed to the consequence – of the impact of European integration for citizens. The stress on symbolic treatment as EU citizens (e.g. the attitude of the customs official towards a French citizen as Schipol) might also tell us more about symbols of Europe than the part of the discussion that was conceived as dealing with 'symbols' by citizens.

Here, the very notion of border – absence of, and remaining ones – is reintroduced at the forefront of the discussion: European-ness means first and foremost that some physical and symbolic borders have disappeared for citizens (Schengen borders, differences of treatment in other EU countries, etc.) while borders with the rest of the world might have strengthened (fellow European vs non-European students in the Erasmus experience case, comparison of Romania with the US or Japan, etc).

This leads to a more general and more direct discussion of the very notion of 'European identity', what it means to citizens, and how salient they take it to be.

Talking about 'European identity': Identity within Language, Identity and Borders, Identity and Citizenship

From talking of the participants' experience of Europe, the discussion was oriented by the organisers towards the last major challenge of the focus group discussion: that is, to understand what participants thought of the very idea of a European identity, of its reality, and of how wide-spread it is. Ultimately, we intended to capture how significant

European identity is in the life of European citizens in general and of the focus group participants in particular and, mostly, to understand what it can mean to citizens.

These questions were approached at the very end of the groups' discussions and all groups were faced with them. They started when the groups' leaders came back to the debriefing elements and reminded the participants that the experiment was, in fact, dedicated to the study of the level of European identity of citizens. The participants were asked, this time, if they thought that the questionnaires' items on European identity did, indeed, measure their level of European identity and what they would understand by these terms.

Some parts of this discussion was the actively led by the groups' leaders who were asked, unlike earlier aspects of the discussion, for example, to explicitly ask respondents whether they thought that a European identity and being 'for' Europe were the same thing. No respondent took this line. All perceived quite spontaneously the difference between support for a project and the emergence of a new identity. It was more difficult, however, for the participants, to propose a positive definition of what a European identity is. On the whole, the definitions they gave went into two different directions, each approved by a roughly similar proportion of the participants with no clear comparative pattern. Some of the respondents defined a European identity around a set of values like cosmopolitanism, co-operation, cross-national and cross-cultural mixing. For example Adam (UK, group 3):

'I feel European because there is no sense in struggling against other countries and… and it just seems stupid, all this money put in armies and military material and everything.'

On the other hand, another portion of the participants defined a European identity using a terminology similar to what they would have used to define their own national identity. Peter (Netherlands, group 2) explained that:

'[Feeling European means] to feel close to other Europeans. It's… that's when you think you could live in another European country and feel "Ok, that's like home". […] It's not necessary that… it is all the same in Europe but still, when there are some small signs and small stuff… that… that all make you think that's all part of the same big society while somewhere else doesn't.'

These two radically opposite definitions correspond to two trends in understanding the underlying 'philosophy' of European integration, between globalisation and cultural construction. Surprisingly enough, whether Europe is an anti-national or a meta-national construct divided the focus group' participants as much as it divides political scientists.

The respondents' direct answer to the question of whether they feel European was predominantly positive, but the focus group discussion allowed us to get a clearer sense of the depth of the answers given by the participants. Few respondents clearly expressed that they had absolutely no sense of European identity. Among the spontaneous non-identifiers, most explained – using different types of discourse – that, in fact, their sense of the differences between Europeans was stronger than their sense of their similarities. Ben (UK, group 1) explained that he did not feel he had much in common with fellow Europeans or even, for that matter, with Southern Englishmen! In the Dutch focus group, a couple of respondents expressed similar perceptions on a European identity. Ann (Netherlands, group 1) explained that:

'How can we feel European when there is not even enough in common for all of us to feel equally Dutch?…'

On the other hand, the respondents who expressed a relatively high level of European identity expressed it primarily with regards to a sense of narrowness associated with their national identities and national circles, and a sense of similarities of lives and concerns with fellow Europeans.

They also underlined the 'civic' aspect of European integration and the logic of feeling European when it constitutes a homogeneous political area from the point of view of policy-making, politics and movement. This was expressed, for example, by Christophe (France, group 2):

'When you know all… Europe decides so much of our life: you have to feel European […] because we really live in the same "country"!'

This confirms that the perception of the salience of Europe as an area of civic unity is a major determinant of the level of European identity of citizens, and that both civic and cultural logics remain significant when it comes to determining the level of general European identity of citizens.

To specify their message, however, we asked participants whether their identity had more to do with 'Europe' in general or with the European Union in particular. In most cases, and with a few very vocal exceptions, a majority of the participants claimed that, at the moment, they did not feel that they had much in common with the populations of Central and Eastern Europe as yet. Most respondents, however, had no direct

knowledge of Central and Eastern Europe while many of them had visited at least two other countries of the European Union at some point in their lives.

The images associated to Europe by respondents varied according to their main perspective (cultural or civic) of European identity. The traditional values of peace, harmony, co-operation, etc. were stronger among cultural identifiers while civic identifiers were keener on elements like prosperity, free movement, democracy, environmental policy, and, more generally, a set of 'pioneer'-related wordings.

But again, when asked what Europe 'means' to them in less abstract terms, the predominant and almost unanimous answer in France and the Netherlands had to do with the modification of physical borders. Jean (France, group 2) expressed it in very plain terms:

I spent forty years of my life queuing for hours in the car when we were going to see my family from Nice to San Remo, and that was at least once a month. We would check if we all had our identity cards, and wait patiently and slightly fearfully to see if the customs people would check our Ids, ask us to park on the side and search our car, or just quickly nod to tell us to go. Now that Europe has become real (sic.), the border control point is empty, there is no need to take your identity card or to worry about buying too much alcohol […] but even now, I can't drive there without shivering, remembering the times when things were so different, and thinking that Europe has really gone a long way and changed us (sic.)

Discussion and Conclusions

On the whole, the focus group discussions helped us to refine significantly the intermediary steps of the process of formation of a European identity and to understand better what citizens may mean by it. Besides other goals, the focus group were mostly dedicated to a better understanding of the images of Europe and the European Union

formed by participants. Another puzzle targeted was the way they are influenced by news on Europe, symbols of the European Union, and their experience of Europe.

We found that in their perceptions of Europe and self-assessment of their European identity, some participants (a majority) appeared predominantly 'civic' while other, but only a minority, were predominantly 'cultural'. The images of Europe held by 'cultural' identifiers had to do with peace, harmony, fading of historical divisions, co-operation between similar people and cultures. The images of Europe held by 'civic' identifiers had to do with borderlessness, circulation of citizens, common civic area, new policy making, and prosperity. Undoubtedly, all these subjective images, predominantly positive, are those that will be used by citizens to anchor their sense of belonging to this new political community. They will determine the character predominantly civic or cultural of their European identity.

Participants were also conscious of some level of communication received from official authorities, through symbolic campaigns and the development of official symbols of European integration formalised by the elite, and from the media, through good and bad news about Europe. They intuitively perceive (and maybe even exaggerated) the impact of these elements of top-down communication and assessed their orientation: predominantly negative for the media, with significant cross-national differences, conveying ideal images of harmony, peace and co-operation that echo their own prejudices, in terms of symbols. Interestingly enough, there was an almost general feeling for the participants that while 'they' could be distant and cynical enough to differentiate between disinformation/manipulation and 'the truth', fellow citizens were expected to be too gullible to resist the pressure of positive or negative communicators.

The participants also had the intuition that experiencing Europe would make citizens feel more and more European, and, therefore, that what can be called the 'institutional inertia' of European integration (Bruter, forthcoming) would develop naturally. Indeed, they thought citizens would become more European while being increasingly exposed to the impact of Europe in their daily life through increased travelling, living abroad, and political salience of the European Union in terms of policy-making and politics. This remains true as a mass-perception even though Arbruster, Rollo, and Meinhof (2003) show us that those who are expected to experience Europe most saliently in their daily lives by living on and around borders do not 'read' symbols of European integration in the way one could expect. In that way, they linked, the individual-level 'European experience' hypothesis to the aggregate level 'institutional inertia' hypothesis using their own personal experience and their perception of the rest of the European citizenry.

Finally, talking about European identity directly, the participants to the focus group in all three countries confirmed its relevance, as a research question, and its intuitive reality for – generally elitist – segments of citizens from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France. Finally, the focus group discussions confirmed that the two 'civic' and 'cultural' dimensions of a European identity can be differentiated, and that different respondents may have one slightly predominant dimension, the cultural dimension appearing as slightly predominant, overall, in the British (non representative) sample and the civic dimension slightly predominant in the two (still not representative) continental samples. In both cases, however, the strengths and weaknesses of respondents' expressed forms of European identity largely had to do with their

perceptions of transforming borders within and around the European Union. There was no clear gender or age-related differences in these perceptions of remaining and fading borders, but clearly, the United Kingdom which is still outside of the Schengen area lacked one clear symbol of border deletion, which was perceived, overall, by our Dutch and French participants as *the* best expression and foundation of their modern European identity.

Of course, some of the clear weaknesses of the focus group remain. The technique is somewhat impressionistic, and the unique and unpredictable turn of the discussion in each group as well as the non-representative character of the samples raise questions with regards to the external validity and the generalisability of the findings that have just been identified. Nevertheless, no other technique could help political scientists to understand any better what citizens actually mean when they refer to their political identity in general and to their relative European identity in particular from a 'bottom up' perspective. Hopefully, these results will have helped us to face Peter Burgess's paradox of an 'identity prisoner of language' with some new tools. Apart form learning about the way people perceive the way they are informed on Europe, the symbols of the European Union, and their daily experience of European integration, we now know that some level of systemisation can be assumed when comparing individuals' perceptions of European identity and its relationship with physical and symbolic borders. In particular, we have seen that two main components of this identity are referred to by citizens in their answers: a cultural and a civic one, with very different implications for the future of the European project. This impressionistic and limited design will have hopefully helped us to get a better sense of the way to interpret some of the most promising and fundamental

questions citizens can be asked when trying to capture and understand their political

perceptions, beliefs, and identities.

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ENDNOTES:

1: See Peter Burgess comments at the ID-NET meeting in Florence, 9-11 June 2000, on identity 'prisoner of language', that is, of individual definitions and perceptions of what identity means.

2: The skewed age groups are due to a sample largely recruited among students and around universities. All age groups, except the elderly, were represented however. The main reason why we chose not to separate men and women was that the argument provided by part of the literature in favour of this segregation is, in my experience and that of many other political scientists and psychologists, unproven. All the focus group organisers involved in this project were asked whether they had noticed any over-participation of the men as opposed to the women, and none answered for any of the groups. The organisers were also encouraged, more specifically, to try and make sure that all participants would feel comfortable participating in the discussions.

3: This section is inspired by a conference given at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy, 9-11 June 2000.