

[Jonathan White](#)

A common European identity is an illusion

**Book section
(Accepted version)**

Original citation: Zimmermann, Hubert and Dür, Andreas, (eds.) *Key Controversies in European Integration*. The European Union Series. Basingstoke, UK : Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 103-111.

© 2012 The Authors

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64994/>
Available in LSE Research Online: March 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

3-2 A Common European Identity Is an Illusion

In Hubert Zimmermann and Andreas Dür (eds.) *Key Controversies in European Integration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp.103-11.

Jonathan White (London School of Economics and Political Science)

There is a simple idea at the heart of discussions of ‘European identity’. It is that some kind of social underpinning is required for a political community to survive and prosper. The argument may be mainly empirical – that some kind of mass bond is required if a polity is to be unified, strong, and able to provide public goods, particularly in crisis moments – or it may be mainly normative – that only where such a bond exists will the polity meet the standards of legitimacy the modern world expects. Where ‘identity’ is present, coherence, common purpose and a disposition to solidarity are said to be forthcoming. Where it is absent, lack of direction and fatal divisions are expected to follow. Be it for empirical or normative reasons, ‘identity’ is posed as a polity’s necessary foundation, and its absence as a reason for scepticism. As readers will know, it is in the context of exactly such hopes and doubts regarding the prospects of the EU that the question of European identity has been consistently raised.¹

This gives us an indication of the intended *function* of a collective identity, but what of its particular *form*? What does the term denote? A misleading question perhaps, for ‘identity’ is often used with little descriptive intent, instead as a casual means to reference all those ‘soft’ dimensions of human existence left over once the ‘hard’ issues of economy and institutions have been considered. When interested actors such as the European Commission speak of ‘European identity’, generally they are not so much referring to a clear-cut entity as

¹ We shall treat ‘European identity’ as an idea born in the context of European integration; reflections on the idea of Europe are of course much older, but were hardly ever phrased as reflections on ‘European identity’.

gesturing vaguely towards the solution of a problem, to that elusive substance which can oil the system's parts. 'European identity' presents itself as a word which, if spoken enough times, can place distance between the EU and its critics, warding off charges that the EU faces a crisis of legitimacy (Shore 2000; Strath 2002). Likewise for the EU's critics, European identity and its alleged weakness is a nicely-shaped stick with which to bop Brussels on the head. The concept's ambiguity can be a plus, as it inhibits closer inspection. Alternatively, when 'European identity' is used by scholars, it is often as a means to cluster a range of narrower issues and debates, projecting them as part of a larger research programme. Those studying such diverse matters as trends in European media reporting, EU public policy, institutional discourse, practices of EU citizenship, public attitudes to the EU institutions, support for European integration in principle, attitudes to fellow citizens, or commitment to a range of value orientations, have a tendency to frame their research as the study of 'European identity', presumably so as to broaden their readership, and no doubt encouraged by their publishers, for whom the term is a reliable selling point. In other words, in deployments of the phrase 'European identity', the structure of the thing described is often secondary to the political or scholarly agenda behind it. Form follows function, one could say.

To assess European identity as real or illusory requires us to suspend these doubts about its analytical worth and sketch out a sharper meaning. What might this be?

Conceiving Identity

In general terms, those invoking 'European identity' apparently wish to make reference to the oneness and stability of a social grouping. Identity in this context implies a set of people united by common dispositions, and who exhibit continuity in what they share. Two variations on this idea can be distinguished, one more objectivist and one more subjectivist. Rather than as fully distinct, they are best approached as differing alloys of the same ideas, for most thinkers of identity combine elements found in both.

In the first view, identity is objectively real but subjectively renegotiated. That is to say, the common dispositions which individuals share are taken to be grounded in realities beyond their individual or collective choosing, and can never fully be cast off, even if they can be accentuated, de-accentuated and contested. So, for example, it might be said that ‘Europeans’ are those who share a distinctive set of Judaeo-Christian ideas which shape how they see the world, and that this holds true even if they are unaware of this fact, or if they choose to ascribe it different meanings. Despite the nod to subjective understanding, the privileged perspective is that of the observer – it is (s)he who determines the existence or absence of identity, and it is against his or her standard that the relevant individuals are assessed. In this view, people can be mistaken about their identity: they might, for instance, be ‘European’ without knowing it, or believe they were European when they could not be. That people may be misled in this way is well captured in the concept of ‘false consciousness’, which would be the standard Marxist interpretation of national identity. The challenge for all objectivist perspectives lies in how to ground the observer’s knowledge. If mistakes are possible, why trust in the observer’s omniscience? Why see their account as immune to the peculiarities of personal interpretation? And which observer – whose word should be taken as final? While an objectivist conception of European identity is sometimes advanced (e.g. Siedentop 2000), it is difficult to endorse with confidence. In any case, its rather rigid understanding of identity is likely to make it a blunt tool for responding to the underlying political question of governability.

In the second, more interpretivist perspective, identities stand or fall by people’s willingness to express them. They cannot exist in latent form, since the sympathies which comprise them have no underlying basis beyond people’s willingness to adopt and display them. Here, identity refers to reciprocal feelings of attachment, or *practices of identification* as one might call them so as to emphasise the open-endedness of the process (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p.14). Diffuse feelings of sympathy towards others are the focal-point, whether

tied in with cultural attributes or, as in civic approaches such as ‘constitutional patriotism’, the political values ascribed to the collectivity. While the spotlight is on people’s interpretations, still one generally finds a nod to objectivism in the notion that these practices of identification are supported, stabilised and given visibility by various extra-cognitive phenomena: for instance the repeated deployment of key concepts and social categories (e.g. ‘Europe’, ‘Europeans’), of narratives which build on these, and by the cultivation of symbols (e.g. flags and constitutions). Importantly – a point which the language of identification brings out more clearly than identity – these latter elements (words, narratives, symbols, etc.) are resources for identification but not constitutive of it: the research object cannot be reduced to these visible manifestations. The emphasis is on meanings – on how these resources are used and interpreted.

This conception of identity, more than the first, invites empirical investigation to establish its content. For some, this necessitates the use of opinion polls – European identity is then studied as the willingness of individuals to respond favourably to questions concerning how European they feel. For others, it points to the use of qualitative research methods such as interviews, the anthropological study of everyday-life situations, or the analysis of legal and political texts. (Differences of method may reflect not just differences of methodology but differences concerning whether identity is viewed as something consciously felt and susceptible to articulation, or something that exists at a tacit level and which can only emerge spontaneously.) Given that, in contrast to objectivist accounts, these practices of identification are not treated as a function of long-term historical truths, they are potentially quite unpredictable. Accordingly, some would argue the term ‘identity’ should be replaced with one that does not presume continuity of practice and meaning across time (‘self-understanding’ has been a suggested alternative); but where continuity is suspected, ‘identity’ would seem a valid description.

In this latter sense, then, and postponing certain further ambiguities, a common European identity would exist when people express mutual sympathies to one another as ‘Europeans’, and under-gird this with appeal to signs and discourses that refer to ‘Europe’. (Whether such sympathies would be compatible with enduring special sympathies to fellow nationals is a matter of much debate – cf. Duchesne 2011a.) This conception’s advantage is that, to a degree, it avoids reifying ‘identity’ as something stable and irrevocable. One avoids the problem of ‘latent’ identities, and allows individuals greater scope to shape and revise the identities they ascribe to (since identity is then something which depends on their assent, rather than a fate to which they are consigned). This conception is not without its own problems – chiefly, the epistemological one of how to establish when these practices of identification are present, given they may be viewed as little more than traces in the individual brain; but also the conceptual one that the further one moves in the direction of open-ended practice the less appropriate a static term such as identity becomes. There will also be plenty of boundary problems, given the emphasis on reciprocal recognition: what does one make of those individuals who claim allegiance to a grouping yet whose membership is questioned by others? Involuntary membership is the same problem in reverse. Still, it is broadly this conception of a common European identity which presents itself as the kind worth examining for its real or illusory character.

A question remains: how many people would need to engage in these reciprocal practices of identification before they would amount to something one could feasibly call ‘European identity’? What would their necessary scope be? Given the identity question tends to be posed in the light of concerns about a polity’s governability, the assumption is generally that a common European identity would need to encompass all EU citizens, or at least a sizeable majority of them. In other words, it is expected to extend widely across the

inhabitants of a politically-defined territory.² (Note here the ambiguity of the word ‘common’, which denotes both something shared and something banal, something of the ‘common people’.) Yet in principle it need not be an inclusive, mass phenomenon: one might equally conceive it as the reserve of an elite, a form of distinction perhaps, functioning like French aristocratic culture in the early modern period as a basis for reciprocal recognition amongst Europe’s elites. Access to European identity would be exclusive to those of the most exquisite refinement and good taste. That the matter is seldom cast in this way is testament to the origins of the identity debate in political concerns at least partly shaped by modern ideas of universal citizenship and political equality.

European identity: a foolish myth?

The most defensible conception of a common European identity has something to do then with stable and reciprocal practices of identification between all or most inhabitants of a given territorial space. Alternative conceptions are either dogmatic, incoherent, or best captured with a different vocabulary. As we switch to the empirical question of whether such practices of identification currently exist on a European scale, we are confronted with largely negative findings. Despite clear efforts by the EU institutions to cultivate them, they remain rather thin on the ground.

The absence, or at least marginality, of something one might call European identity seems apparent however one investigates it empirically. For those who seek its traces in Eurobarometer opinion polls, popular willingness to declare attachment to ‘Europe’ and ‘Europeans’ generally emerges as weak (Kohli 2000, Duchesne 2008). There are notable differences across countries and social groups (Fligstein 2008), but this merely reaffirms the

² It is ironic that the contours of collective identity are often expected to follow political boundaries (here those of the EU), despite the fact identity is invoked precisely to compensate for the alleged inability of institutions to generate allegiances independent of prior attachments.

absence of mass regularity of the kind ‘identity’ would suggest. While there are certainly those willing to declare that they ‘feel European’, how far this translates into meaningful practices of identification away from the polling context is unclear. For those using interview techniques, the finding tends to be that ‘Europe’ rarely provokes an emotional response, instead being a point of indifference or resignation (Duchesne et al., 2010b, White 2011). Only those with extensive factual knowledge feel themselves qualified to discuss Europe in depth: it is a topic one *learns* (in schools, or in the financial press) rather than an object of spontaneous affection (Gaxie et al. 2010; cf. chapters by Throssell and Bozec in Duchesne 2010a). For scholars taking an ethnographic approach, for instance studying the self-understanding of mobile elites as they move across Europe in search of jobs, romance or adventure, the finding tends to be not that they have subsumed themselves within a European collective, but rather that they have taken modest steps towards ‘de-nationalisation’, i.e. towards freeing themselves of existing territorial ties (Favell 2007). Researchers of border communities meanwhile report that the removal of physical barriers to movement has often been accompanied either by forms of symbolic ‘rebordering’ (i.e. new forms of separation, e.g. between the Poles and Germans of Ślubice / Frankfurt-an-der-Oder), or the development of discourses of local exceptionalism (e.g. consciousness as a ‘border region’ that transcends the usual categories of allegiance) (Asher 2005, Meinhof 2004). Clearly, the uncertainty regarding which research methods are best suited to studying collective identity leaves scope for those dissatisfied with a negative finding to argue that it is the method rather than the object which is faulty; still, there does seem to be a broad convergence of results across these varied approaches. In short, while changes in the self-understanding of Europeans seem to be happening, they are not generally happening under the European sign, and do not entail patterns of reciprocal identification co-extensive with a pan-European space.

Of course, it may be premature to conclude where such changes are leading. Perhaps these practices of identification will emerge. In the meantime, one option is to revise our

conception of European identity in a more realist direction. Diffuse feelings of sympathy towards others as Europeans are, it might be argued, admittedly hard to discern, and in the most literal sense European identity is illusory. Yet perhaps the idea is meaningful nonetheless. Even if individuals themselves show few signs of such an identity, and can discern no such thing when plumbing the depths of their consciousness, if they can be persuaded *others* feel such a thing, at least at critical moments, then it might exist in virtual form. As a feeling people project onto others rather than themselves, a concept they assume must have meaning even if it means little to them, ‘European identity’s’ effect might be to encourage people to act *as though* they shared in such a thing, even when they did not. Identity might then be seen as a fiction in the strict sense, but a useful fiction.³ Such a position represents a third, *inter-subjective* conception of European identity. Although it is little discussed in debates on European identity, such a conception has equivalents in the theory of public opinion (e.g. Noelle-Neuman 1984). It implies an interesting and feasible research question: how far people think others subscribe to a European identity (or how far they are willing to be persuaded by such a claim). Possibly the results would mirror those found by conventional approaches, but possibly not: certainly these second-order beliefs may be more susceptible to manipulation than the brute feelings of individuals. European identity would probably not be the first collective identity to exist primarily as a dubious but widely-held conviction.⁴

³ Alternatively the reality / illusion dichotomy might be abandoned, on the grounds that it is a permanently open question what people can be persuaded to think on this matter, much depending on mobilisation in specific instances.

⁴ The famous ‘permissive consensus’ may be seen as founded exactly on the widespread belief that ‘most people’ favoured European integration and therefore ‘I’ will go along with it, with resistance building precisely when the beliefs of others were put in question by certain landmark referenda results.

Whether this back-door variant has purchase or not, sooner or later a normative issue arises: is a common European identity such a benevolent notion that it is worth rehabilitating even in this rather mythical fashion? Arguably at least some versions of the idea constitute not only an illusion but a dangerous illusion. First, if, as we have argued, any meaningful application of the term ‘identity’ requires the supposition of a stable pattern of reciprocal practices of identification encompassing all or nearly all members of a given realm, it points to a rather consensual image of social relations. One sees this in particular in those conceptions of European identity which focus on shared cultural traditions inherited from the past. Such images have little to say about the diversities and adversarialisms one associates with a pluralist political community: antagonisms are likely to be denied within the community and turned outward on the world beyond it. Identity-talk is generally a means to convince people that they are alike and that their relations are harmonious, often with the purpose of making them easier to govern. As a model of citizenship it has clear tendencies to conformism, complacency and acquiescence. Of course, defenders of the concept will say this is a misconception: that they have in mind something far more polysemic, with individuals free to disagree on what European identity means and how they will enact it. Yet the further one emphasises fluidity and disagreement, the less reason one has to speak of identity at all. As Brubaker and Cooper put it (2000, p.11), ‘it is not clear why weak conceptions of “identity” are conceptions of *identity*. The everyday sense of “identity” strongly suggests at least some self-sameness over time, some persistence, something that remains identical, the same, while other things are changing. What is the point in using the term “identity” if this core meaning is expressly repudiated?’

Second, by setting the bar so high on the kind of social integration needed for a viable polity, the concept can also acquire conservative connotations, acting as a resource for those who wish to argue a population is *ungovernable* and that certain political initiatives must therefore never be attempted. Here again, there is a performative dimension to appeals to

European identity. The notion that Europeans lack a common identity can be used to delegitimise transfers of wealth from affluent parts of the EU to poor, or the strengthening of the European Parliament vis-à-vis other EU institutions. Fair enough, one might say, if reciprocal practices of identification are indeed the precondition for such initiatives. Yet such a sweeping claim can be no more than a hypothesis, and an extremely difficult one to test at that. One should be sceptical of those bearing decisive evidence in its favour. When it is observed that ‘Europeans’ are reluctant to see the supranationalisation of taxation powers because they ‘lack a sense of European identity’, the listener might ask themselves whether it is not rather that there are powerful individuals who wish to prevent such an outcome, and who, rather than debate the merits of such an initiative, wish to give people a reason why it is impossible.

Beyond European Identity

To criticise notions of European identity is not to underestimate the importance of the political question we began with. There are those who would rubbish the idea of European identity on the grounds that the EU institutions need nothing but the coercive force of the law to govern, and nothing but a trail of constitutional transfers of power to guarantee their legitimacy. But these are bad grounds on which to reject the notion. Social integration of one kind or another seems both empirically and normatively necessary if the EU is to persist in an acceptable form – just not the kind ‘European identity’ implies.

There are various ways of conceiving transnational political community without appeal to European identity. One is to emphasise the variety of perspectives people take on Europe as opposed to the singular view conjured by the term ‘identity’. This type of ‘narrative diversity’ has been proposed as an already existing reality for Europe’s intellectual elites (Lacroix and Nicolaidis, 2010), even if questions remain regarding how far it permeates European societies as a whole. Another possibility is to avoid altogether the search for a

diffuse set of sympathies towards ‘Europeans’ in general, looking instead to non-territorial forms of subjecthood which draw together some but not all. Political categories such as Left and Right, and ideological labels such as conservatism, liberalism and socialism, are of potential relevance here (White, forthcoming). So too are social categories which evoke equivalence of experience according to occupation or socio-economic status (e.g. ‘public sector workers’, ‘farmers’, ‘journalists’), and the practices of cross-national comparison which may generate receptiveness to them (White 2011). Issue-specific concerns and relations of adversarialism seem as plausible a basis for cross-national allegiances as the widely inclusive ties of European identity, and are arguably more consistent with political pluralism. Rather than an entity reified and made the target of identification, ‘Europe’ and its political arenas are best seen as a terrain on which events, actions and diverse experiences unfold – the stage rather than the heroic actor.

“European identity” as a phrase is likely to be with us for some time, as various actors have reason to use it. Even empty phrases can be real in their consequences if enough people take them seriously, but it is not clear that we are at that point, or even heading in that direction. As something more substantial, the notion is yet more remote. European identity is an illusion, and some would say a foolish one. But it has been invented to respond to a genuine problem, one that will persist as long as efforts to govern Europe as one.

Bibliography

- Asher, Andrew (2005), ‘A Paradise on the Oder? Ethnicity, Europeanization, and the EU referendum in a Polish-German Border City’, *City & Society* 17:127-152.
- Brubaker, Rogers and Cooper, Frederick (2000), 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29 (1).
- Duchesne, Sophie (2008), 'Waiting for a European Identity ... Reflections on the Process of Identification with Europe', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 9 (4).

- Duchesne, Sophie (2010a), 'L'identité européenne, entre science politique et science fiction,' *Politique Européenne* 30.
- Duchesne, Sophie et al. (2010b), 'Europe between Integration and Globalisation: Social differences and national frames in the analysis of focus groups conducted in France, Francophone Belgium and the UK', *Politique Européenne*, 30 (Spring), pp.67-106.
- Eriksen, Erik Oddvar, and John Erik Fossum eds. (2011): *Rethinking Democracy and the European Union*. Routledge.
- Eurobarometer (2010) *European Citizenship – Cross-Border Mobility*. Aggregate Report August 2010. Survey co-ordinated by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM).
- Favell, Adrian (2007), *Eurostars and Eurocities: Free Moving Urban Professionals in an Integrating Europe* (London: Blackwell).
- Fierke, Karin & Antje Wiener (2009): *Constructing Institutional Interest: EU and NATO Enlargement*. In Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier eds. 2009: 99-119.
- Fligstein, Neil (2008), *Euroclash: the EU, European identity, and the future of Europe* (Oxford: OUP).
- Gaxie, Daniel, Nicolas Hubé, Marine de Lassalle and Jay Rowell (2010), *L'Europe des Européens – Enquête comparative sur les perceptions de l'Europe* (Paris: Economica).
- Góra, Magdalena, and Zdzislaw Mach eds. (2010): *Collective Identity and Democracy. The Impact of EU Enlargement*. Oslo, ARENA Report No. 4/10. RECON Report No. 12.
- Kohli, Martin (2000), 'The Battlegrounds of European Identity', *European Societies*, 2 (2).
- Lacroix, Justine and Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2010), *European Stories: Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts* (Oxford: OUP).
- Liebert, Ulrike (2001): *Constructing Monetary Union: Euro-Scepticism, and the Emerging European Public Space*. Bo Strath & Lars Magnusson, eds., *From the Werner Plan to*

- European Monetary Union: Towards a Political Economy for Europe; Brussels et al. Peter Lang, 2001.
- Liebert, Ulrike and Hans-Jörg Trenz eds. (2010): *The New Politics of European Civil Society*. Routledge.
- Liebert, Ulrike ed. (2007): *Europe in Contention. Debating the Constitutional Treaty*. Special Issue of *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*. Vol. 8, No. 3.
- Lindberg, Leon, and Stuart Scheingold (1970): *Europe's Would-be Polity*; Upper Saddle River, N.J., Prentice Hall.
- Meinhof, Ulrike Hanna (2004), 'Europe Viewed from Below: Agents, Victims, and the Threat of the Other', in Richard K. Herrmann, Thomas Risse, and Marilyn B. Brewer (eds.), *Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield).
- Noelle-Neumann, Elizabeth (1984), *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion - Our Social Skin* (Chicago: UCP).
- Risse, Thomas: *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres*. Cornell University Press 2010.
- Schiek, Dagmar, Ulrike Liebert, Hildegard Schneider eds. (2011): *European Economic and Social Constitutionalism after the Treaty of Lisbon*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schimmelfennig, Frank & Ulrike Sedelmeier eds. (2009): *The Politics of European Union Enlargement*. Routledge.
- Shore, Cris (2000), *Building Europe: the Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge).
- Siedentop, Larry (2000), *Democracy in Europe* (London: Allen Lane).
- Stråth, Bo (2002), 'A European Identity: To the Historical Limits of a Concept', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5 (4).

Strath, Bo eds. (2010): *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other*. P.I.E. Peter Lang (4th ed.; 1st 2000).

Verdun, Amy & Thomas Christiansen (2000): 'Policy-making, institution-building and European Monetary Union: Dilemmas of Legitimizing European Integration', in Colin Crouch (ed.), *After the Euro: Shaping Institutions for Governance in the Wake of European Monetary Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 162-78.

White, Jonathan (2011), *Political Allegiance after European Integration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

White, Jonathan (2012), 'Community, Transnationalism and the Left-Right Metaphor', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 15 (2), pp.197-219.