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The politicization of European identities

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The ship of European identity has entered uncharted waters. Its sails are flapping in a stiff breeze. Beyond the harbor, whitecaps are signaling stormy weather ahead. The crew is fully assembled, but some members are grumbling – loudly. While food and drink are plentiful, maps and binoculars are missing. Officers are vying for rank and position as no captain is in sight. Sensing a lack of direction and brooding bad weather, some passengers are resting in the fading sun on easy chairs thinking of past accomplishments; others are huddling in an openly defiant mood close to the lifeboats, anticipating bad times ahead. With the journey’s destination unknown, the trip ahead seems excruciatingly difficult to some, positively dangerous to others. Anxiety and uncertainty, not hope and self-confidence, define the moment.

Many European elites, deeply committed to the European Union (EU) as a political project, might reject the vignette we sketch above. They see the EU as institutional machinery for the solution of problems that in the past had shattered peace, destroyed prosperity, and otherwise proven to be intractable for national governments. For them, it is a project rooted in the European Enlightenment, and an emphatic way of saying “never again” to the disastrous wars of the twentieth century. While the Union has not yet succeeded in crafting a common European sense of “who we are,” time is on its side.

A smaller counter-elite might be more comfortable with our identity tale. Exploiting growing mass concerns and fears, it has in recent years begun to define an alternative agenda for European identity politics – one inspired by multiple currents, including nineteenth-century romanticism. The image of Europe as a shining city perched on the hill of

We thank all of the project participants, and, especially, Michael Barnett, Holly Case, Adrian Favell, Thomas Risse and Ulf Sverdrup for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this essay. The remaining shortcomings are due to our thick-headedness rather than their acts of intellectual generosity.

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perpetual peace, social welfare, and inalienable human rights is replaced with the cry of “Europe for Europeans.”

Various forces and claims are thus fragmenting the possibility of one European identity even as European economic integration has proceeded faster and farther than anyone expected. Why? Politics, we argue, is the answer.

European economic and political integration has proceeded in a technocratic fashion. At least initially, this was an understandable strategy, given the need to solve the German problem and to cope with the geopolitics of the Cold War. Exploiting a decades-long permissive consensus, elites designed and completed the single market, the euro, the Schengen passport-free zone, and, most recently, crafted an extraordinarily successful policy of enlargement. National political and economic elites as well as other winners from this project have closed ranks behind it. At the same time, these attempts to de-politicize politics, to create Europe by stealth, have produced a political backlash that has increased over time. In this contentious and expanding political narrative, Europeans need to take back their nation-states and resist the unnatural imposition of rule from Brussels.

We explore the politics of European identity by adopting a multi-disciplinary perspective. While the work of political scientists and the survey techniques upon which they rely are important, in this book we largely turn elsewhere – to anthropology, sociology, and history. This approach allows us to capture the experiences of the winners and losers, optimists and pessimists, movers and stayers in a Europe where spatial and cultural borders are becoming ever more permeable. A full understanding of Europe’s ambivalence, refracted through its multiple, nested identities, lies at the intersection of competing European political projects and social processes.

Politics – specifically, various forms of politicization – are redefining, remaking, and expanding these intersections. Politicization makes issues part of politics, and it involves a number of different actors and processes. Bureaucrats crafting a Europe centered on Brussels, and intellectuals theorizing and normatively justifying a new kind of (cosmopolitan) European allegiance, play key roles. Yet, their projects intersect with xenophobic nationalists, anti-globalization Euro-skeptics, and a (Western) European public that for decades has been indifferent to the evolution of a European polity. Beyond elites and their projects, identities are also being crafted and politicized by

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ongoing social processes related to the lived experiences of Europeans. These may include watching Europe's top-ranked soccer clubs (many with precious few national players); following the annual Eurovision Song Contest; meeting in Europe-wide social and business networks; mobilizing at the grass-roots level across national borders to celebrate or protest Europe; and shopping in supermarket chains increasingly organized on a continental scale.

We are self-conscious in the use of project and process here. Sometimes European identity is a political construction project undertaken by various national or supranational elites. Talking about the construction of identity suggests an engineering view of politics – one that emphasizes purposeful actors and their political choices. At other times, though, we are dealing with processes along different scales of social mediation and exchange, including deliberation and communication, social networks, commodity circulation, and political bargaining. These may occur along European, national, subnational–regional, as well as transnational–global lines. From this vantage point, the evolution of European identities is the result of open-ended processes that give space to actors pursuing their specific political projects, without assuming either that they will come to full fruition, or that they will end in total failure.

Despite our focus on Europe, we recognize that its identity dynamics are not unique – an appreciation driven home when we locate the continent in a number of different contexts. These include the historical context of contemporary Europe; the spatial context of other world regions in which borders are fluctuating and contested; the cultural context of other civilizational polities seeking to define their coherence against relevant others; the rapid currents of globalization and internationalization that make all state borders porous; and the context of a world order defined by an American imperium that combines the military traits of traditional European empires with commercial characteristics of the novel American emporium.

To deny Europe's uniqueness, however, does not mean to deny its distinctiveness. And that distinctiveness has two very different parts. Europe's past leads through luminous and dark periods; it encompasses the good and the bad; it inspires hope and despair. European ambivalence today reflects this legacy. And with Europe once again united, the store of collective memories has broadened enormously and will make the emergence of a collective European identity even more problematic than it had been before enlargement.

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In sum, ours is not a state-of-the-art volume on European identities, but a statement on how we should go about studying them. We are interested in political and social rather than psychological notions of self-understanding. Identities refer to shared representations of a collective self as reflected in public debate, political symbols, collective memories, and elite competition for power. They consist also of collective beliefs about the definition of the group and its membership that are shared by most group members. We understand identities to be revealed by social practices as well as by political attitudes, shaped by social and geographical structures and national contexts.

Different analysts and different academic disciplines disagree on where to locate and how to measure identity. Is it to be found in European institutions, with their ability to foster and construct a sense of what it means to be European? Or should we search for it in a variety of everyday social practices such as co-ownership, joint political action, and shared consumption practices? Wherever we look for European identity, its form varies significantly across different social, geographic, and national domains. To capture this diversity, we have encouraged pluralism and a crossing of disciplinary boundaries in this book, with the intent to open new lines of inquiry and raise novel questions. Research on European identity – and especially that centered on the EU – could benefit from a fresh look. Our hope is to make a modest start in that direction.

In the remainder of this opening chapter, we develop our arguments in three parts. A first section surveys major theoretical approaches to European integration, assessing what we have learned about identity in Europe. In the second section, we explore the importance of politicization for understanding the contemporary construction of European identities and advocate a multidisciplinary approach to the topic. The last section previews the main lines of argument in the various chapters that follow.

Theorizing European identity

Over the last five decades, Europe has changed dramatically. A continent divided by national hatred, ravaged by war, and bereft of a firm psychological basis has evolved into an increasingly peaceful, prosperous, and confident polity in which various nation-states are experimenting with a novel kind of international relations. This dramatic change is reflected in the world of scholarship, which has moved from the discussion of European integration theory in the 1950s and 1960s to analyses

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of multilevel governance and Europeanization since the early 1990s. Below, we briefly survey these literatures, highlighting what they do – or do not – say about the politics of European identity construction.

European integration theory in the 1960s

A generation ago, one of the most important debates in international relations focussed on the future of Europe, including the evolution of European identity. It built on the foundations laid in the interwar years by David Mitrany and his technocratic vision of functional integration, and on a vibrant nationalism literature developed by Hans Kohn, Carleton Hayes, and others. The central protagonists were Ernst W. Haas and Karl W. Deutsch, who articulated two very different theories of European integration.

Haas's (1958, 1961) neo-functional theory focussed on the elite- and group-centered politics of a newly emerging European polity, specifically the various functional imperatives that were propelling the European integration process forward. In contrast to Mitrany, Haas deliberately inquired into the political pressures acting on politicians. Political elites in various nation-states, he hypothesized, would learn new interests and adopt new policies as they were pushed by the functional dynamics of integration. The political costs of staying outside or behind in the process of European integration were extraordinarily high. Like bicycle-riders, elites were condemned to pedal lest they fall off the bike altogether. Identity played a minor role in Haas's theory. What drove the process of integration were functional pressures and the redefinition of actor interests. Moreover, while Haas allowed for changes in interests, his rationalist ontology ruled out, or at least made very unlikely, any deeper changes of identity.

Haas's theory inspired a cohort of energetic and brilliant younger scholars to refine and operationalize his seminal work. Two synthetic statements summarized the progress of a decade of research. Lindberg and Scheingold (1970a, pp. 24–63) argued that Europe's would-be polity was compatible with the reconsolidation of the nation-state after the horrors of World War II; in terms of public support, it was operating within a permissive public consensus – one built upon instrumental rather than emotional ties. Joseph Nye (1987 [1971], pp. 94–5) placed the European experience with regional integration into a broader comparative perspective, developing a sophisticated version of a dynamic regional

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integration process model. The gap between the increasing complexity of the theoretical models (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970b; Puchala 1972) and General de Gaulle's stubborn refusal to let himself be integrated into integration theory led to a sharp decline in scholarly interest in European integration even before Haas's (1975) premature post-mortem on the obsolescence of regional integration theory.

In contrast, Deutsch and his collaborators developed an approach to regional integration that focussed on the flow of information and goods and services as proxies for the level and growth of a European community (Deutsch *et al.* 1957; Deutsch, 1953, 1967; Cobb and Elder 1970; Fisher 1969; Caporaso 1971). Informed by a cybernetic theory of politics and a belief in the absolute limits of all channels processing communications and transactions, Deutsch insisted on statistical measures that normalized absolute increases in European communications and transactions against the growth of comparable national figures. In the voluminous statistical studies that he and his students published, the growth of European interdependencies of various kinds was found to be lagging behind that of national interdependencies.

On the question of European identity, Deutsch was arguably both more explicit and more pessimistic than Haas. Indeed, he remained deeply skeptical about a possible shift of mass loyalties from the national to the supranational level. Deutsch and his collaborators recorded some gains in attitudinal integration of selected mass publics and elites in Europe in the mid-1960s (Deutsch *et al.* 1967). But even at the level of elites which, then as now, tend to be more internationalist than publics, a major empirical study at the end of the 1960s found the emergence of no more than a pragmatic transnationally oriented consensus that tolerated the persistence of national diversity (Lerner and Gordon 1969, pp. 241–61).

While the argumentative lines between the neo-functionalist and communication theories of European integration were clearly drawn, neither view offered a well-developed perspective on politics or politicization. Neo-functionalism relied on pluralist theory, an ahistorical and anti-institutional view of politics that made it difficult to incorporate issues of identity. Although Deutsch's theory of identity was powerful in terms of both conceptualization and operationalization, his theory of politics relied for the most part on political metaphor, couched in the language of cybernetics and Skinnerian behavioral psychology. Moreover, neither Haas nor Deutsch developed a more fine-grained understanding of the politicization of identities.

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In sum, the distinction between elite and mass politics was central to two different visions of European integration in the 1960s. Since then, Europe has made strides that to some extent support the expectations of neo-functionalism, even though European politics is evolving into something quite different from a federal or confederate union. At the same time, although these advances in European integration have proven wrong the skepticism of Deutsch's cybernetic theory of integration, his insistence on the staying power of nationalism is supported by its continued vitality and the occasional vigor of national opposition to the European project. European identities are evolving at a complex intersection of elite and mass politics.

Europe as an emerging multilevel polity

Since the early 1990s and in response to a relaunched European project, a vibrant theoretical literature on questions of European integration and identity has emerged. Here, we highlight several theoretical contributions that might shed light on identity dynamics in Europe, including research on multilevel governance, historical institutionalism, ideational-constructivist frameworks, and arguments about deliberation.

Work on multilevel governance explores the complex institutional structure of the evolving European polity (Marks, Hooghe, and Blank 1996; Kohler-Koch 2003). It has helped us to conceptualize and document empirically how policymaking has spread across supranational, intergovernmental, transnational, and regional levels in post-Maastricht Europe (Leibfried and Pierson 1995). However, because of its rationalist foundations – stressing transaction costs, informational asymmetries, and principal–agent relations – this scholarship can tell us little about how European dynamics may be changing identities on the continent.

Research by historical institutionalists has brought a time dimension to studies of Europe and the EU. While historical institutionalism has always sat somewhat uneasily between rationalist and sociological understandings of institutions (Hall and Taylor 1996), the theorizing of prominent Europeanists moves it decisively closer to the former. Consider the work of Paul Pierson. Within the context of the EU, his discussion of unanticipated consequences, adaptive learning, institutional barriers to reform, and sunk and exit costs is entirely consistent with – and, in fact, premised on – a rationalist perspective. EU institutions are all about constraints and incentives (Pierson 1994, 1996). While Pierson is to be commended

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for providing solid microfoundations to a largely descriptive historical-institutionalist EU literature, the costs are quite significant. His rationalist take essentially destroys the bridge that links the analysis of institutions to sociological insights – a bridge that might make it possible to gauge how European institutions, over time, affect identity.

One might think that ideational and social constructivist work would be ideally placed to help us understand identity dynamics in Europe (Adler 2002). Yet, this is not necessarily so. For some, ideas are simply an important variable in helping to explain causal dynamics in the EU's development (McNamara 1998; Parsons 2003), but not identity per se. Other scholars do examine identity, but focus too much on the EU and its institutions (Risse 2004; Checkel 2007b), thus missing other, perhaps more important arenas of identity construction. Even more problematic, this scholarship too often underspecifies or brackets out altogether political dynamics, an implausible analytic move in today's Europe (Checkel 2007a).

Consistent with a central theme in this volume, multidisciplinary work by a smaller group of constructivists has come closest to capturing the true face of identity in contemporary Europe. Ted Hopf (2002), for example, integrates linguistic theory with political science in a way that drives home what many others miss: that identity in Europe starts at home. Bridging anthropology and political science, Iver Neumann (1996, 1999) helps us see that identities do not simply nest in the positive-sum way seen by all too many EU scholars (Laffan 2004). Identity construction often begets a process of “othering” rather than “nesting.” Identities can be sharply conflictual rather than snugly complementary.

Finally and most recently, some scholars have developed deliberative arguments that address Europe's identity politics. More normative than empirical in orientation (Eriksen 2006; Pensky 2008), these arguments draw heavily upon the social theory of Jürgen Habermas, specifically his argument about constitutional patriotism, to sketch a European identity that is both post-national and non-malignant. Yet, they miss conceptual problems in Habermas's argumentation (Castiglione, this volume). Too often, these arguments fail to connect their social theory to politics, where contestation, conflict, and power play central roles (Hyde-Price 2006) and where a de facto constitution has long existed in the form of the frequently amended Treaty of Rome (Moravcsik 2006).

Closely related to this deliberative school of thought, another group of Europeanists seeks to find the EU's identity in its status as a civilian or normative power (Manners 2002). The close relation between these two

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lines of arguments blurs the distinction between normative ideal and empirical reality. If one actually tests for a correspondence between what the EU says and what it does, normative power as a basis for European identity comes up short (Erickson 2007).

While making important starts in theorizing European identity, these various literatures consistently underplay the importance of politics and processes of politicization. In some cases, the reason for this omission is an exclusive focus on institutions; in others, it is the theorist's penchant for neglecting the complexities of domestic politics; in still others, it is the adoption of a benign view of politics that, while normatively appealing, is simply out of touch with European and world politics.

Europeanization

Last but certainly not least, there is work on Europeanization, which in many senses provides the state of the art on how Europe might be reshaping deeply held senses of community – national, local, regional, and otherwise. The concept describes a set of interrelated processes that go well beyond the traditional focus of scholars interested in how state bargaining and elite identification affect the evolution of the EU (Olsen 2002, 2007; Graziano and Vink 2006). It shifts our attention to an examination of the effects Europe has on the contemporary state – its policies, institutions, links to society, and patterns of individual–collective identification (Caporaso, Cowles, and Risse 2001; Knill 2001; Börzel 2002; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005).

Europeanization portrays a complex dynamic through which Europe and the nation-state interact. It is not a story that can be told relying on binary distinctions. The EU does not dominate over its members by steadily wearing down the barriers of the nation-state. And nation-states do not succeed in fending off attacks on their untrammelled sovereignty. Rather, both the EU and the nation-state play crucial roles.

Work on Europeanization has generated important new empirical findings on European identity.¹ Perhaps most intriguing is the argument about its positive-sum nature. That is, one can be French – say – and, at the same time, European; identities, European or national, do not wax

¹ We stress empirical because, until the mid-1990s, work on European identity tended to stress the normative – the kind of identity Europe ought to have (Delanty 1995, pp. 2–3).

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or wane at each other's expense. Instead, they are often nested in complex and variegated patterns for different individuals and groups, and are triggered in specific situations leading to different kinds of politics (Herrmann *et al.* 2004, pp. 248–53; see also Risse and Maier 2003; Soysal 2002; Caporaso and Kim 2007).

Yet, several analytic biases limit the ability of this scholarship to fully capture identity dynamics in contemporary Europe. Substantively, it focusses too much on EU institutions. Methodologically, it is hindered by excessive reliance on survey instruments such as the Eurobarometer polls. To be sure, cross-national surveys and refinements to them are useful for helping to understand basic distinctions in the political orientations of mass publics in Europe and toward the EU (Moravcsik 2006; Bruter 2005). But polls risk imposing a conceptual unity on extremely diverse sets of political processes that mean different things in different contexts. Indeed, survey questions may create the attitudes they report, since people wish to provide answers to questions that are posed (Zaller 1992; see also Meinhof 2004, pp. 218–19; Favell 2005, p. 1112; and Hopf 2006).²

In addition, Europeanization is nearly always portrayed as a top-down process, with the causal arrows pointing from EU institutions and policies to the nation-state. This focus on the EU level leads to an emphasis on elites and institutions. On the specific question of a possible Europeanization of identities, there thus exists a strong tendency to privilege EU institutions or political-bureaucratic elites (Hooghe 2005).

Finally, many important political elements are left unexamined. With its strong institutional focus (Fligstein, Sandholtz, and Sweet 2001), Europeanization research misses the politics and conflict that often accompany transformational dynamics. In a recent conversation, a specialist on the Middle East decried the way in which Europeanists study identity. “For you folks, identity is something nice; it’s all about institutions, deliberation and elites. Where I study identity, people die for it!” Although it is true that European identity politics are today typically not a matter of life or death, they do incite strong political reactions. And as those living in London and Madrid have learned

² Survey research in particular insists on agreed-upon working definitions of the concept of identity as well as unambiguous and explicit operational indicators, in full awareness that the concept “takes on different meanings to different people in different contexts, under different historical, social, economic and political conditions” (Anderson 2006, p. 1).