

CHAPTER 1

THE IDENTITY OF EUROPE AND THE
IMAGE OF EUROPE: CONCEPTS,
THEORY, METHODS

1.1 IDENTITY AND IMAGE

The history of Europe has been the subject of historiographical syntheses and textbooks for many generations now: school and university syllabi have offered papers in 'European history' ranging from the Middle Ages to the present. There is a sound body of work on what is sometimes called 'the idea of Europe': various schemes over the centuries for European unification or federation, including the current EU project. But only relatively recently have historians begun to examine critically what people have thought about the question of what exactly that 'Europe' consists of. One of the earliest seminal texts, and indeed a major inspiration for this book, remains Denys Hay's 1957 study *Europe: the emergence of an idea*; its careful, erudite exploration of the meaning of the word 'Europe' in the sources of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is still one model of how to conduct the history of ideas. However, it was the explosion of interest in the history of national identity in the 1980s and 1990s, borrowing ideas from psychology and anthropology, and the subsequent application of the key concepts in the study of collective identity to the history of Europe, which really set historians asking the question, 'What is Europe?'

Denys Hay's book was also prophetic and inspirational in its use of visual material, alongside an impressively learned examination of the primary written sources. In recent decades, increasing numbers of historians have attempted to employ a whole range of pictorial or visual material, in conjunction with the more conventional archive and printed sources. They have, for example, used political prints and cartoons to try to understand more about political culture in the past;¹

¹ See e.g. Porter, 'Seeing the past'.

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they have borrowed from new theoretical developments in art history, and more recently from cultural anthropology, taking on some of the concepts developed in the study of visual culture. Over the last half-century, history has acted like a magpie among the arts and social sciences, investigating and borrowing selectively from the conceptual apparatus and intellectual toolboxes of its sister disciplines, from econometrics to sociology, and from political science to cultural studies. Some of the experiments have produced peculiar hybrids with a short life-span, but it can hardly be denied that this restless search for interdisciplinary, innovative conceptual and methodological approaches to history has generated some of the most stunning work in the profession over recent generations.

This book takes two of those ideas and combines them: the notion of identity applied to the concept and history of Europe, and the use of visual material, alongside the other evidence available. The subject here, then, is the development over nearly three millennia of the ‘image of Europe’, meaning the way in which people visualized their continent, and the interaction of that changing image with the development of what people thought Europe actually was, in terms of geography, culture, politics, ideas and race, or in a word, its identity. That intersection between ‘image’ and ‘identity’ lies at the heart of this book about Europe.²

This introductory chapter is intended to outline and explain the key concepts, theory and methodology involved in the investigation. We shall first explore the field of the identity of Europe, and then progress to how visual images can be used to shed light upon the matter. Finally, the way in which this book will use these theoretical and methodological insights will be elaborated and laid out.

1.2 EUROPEAN IDENTITY

IDENTITY

Identity issues are nowadays the province of nearly all disciplines in the social sciences and arts, and indeed there are as many definitions of the concept as there are disciplines which study it.³ The senior disciplines in this study of identity are

² In recent years a numbers of publications have dealt with aspects of this subject – the visualization of Europe – though none with the emphasis placed here on methodology and identity. See e.g. Den Boer et al., *The history of the idea of Europe*; Den Boer, *Europa: de geschiedenis*; Gommers, *Europe – what’s in a name?*; Bussière et al., eds., *Europa*; Von Plessen, ed., *Idee Europa*; and an essay by Wolfgang Schmale in Öhner et al., eds., *Europa-Bilder*, 13–34.

³ Frijhoff, ‘Identiteit en identiteitsbesef’, 621–2. This section draws on my earlier formulation, in Wintle, ‘The question of European identity’.

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anthropology and psychology, but the universal interest in such questions dates really from the 1960s, when identity began to mean more than just 'sameness', and to signify a 'positively valued socio-psychological construct', consisting of 'allegiance to people, group, and often place and past'.⁴ Collective identities can provide existential meaning for people, and can therefore give additional stability during periods of upheaval. They can generate a degree of continuity between individuals and their social environment, and can confer social recognition and approval.⁵ Much of the subtlety built into the concept by anthropologists and psychologists tends to be ignored, discarded or misunderstood in other disciplines, and we shall attempt to avoid those pitfalls here, where the approach taken is primarily that of the cultural historian.

It has further been pointed out that identities are only widely discussed when there is something perceived to be wrong with them.⁶ Indeed, it can be argued that there is no such thing as a complete, finite and perfect collective identity, and that to strive for such completion is dangerous, and even potentially quasi-fascist: we must endeavour by democratic means to restrain 'the volcano of identity passions'.⁷ Identities can be destructive and negative in their effects, then, and even if they are 'positively valued', their faults and defects can pose serious political and social problems which need to be addressed.⁸

There has taken place in the academy a wide-ranging debate about whether collective identities are fixed, or subject to change; whether they are immutable, fixed by genetic inheritance and the physical characteristics of the birthplace, or whether such identities can be put together as a kind of multi-level patchwork, which can and does alter over time. There is almost complete unanimity amongst the experts on this point, and it is not necessary to rehearse the arguments here: collective identities are constructed according to the social and physical environment in which people are placed, and are subject to change over time and from place to place.⁹ Furthermore, 'identity construction is a political process . . . "We" utterances must be treated as partial statements of claims rather than as descriptions of a reality.'¹⁰ It is always necessary to ask who is promoting which particular collective identity and why, and who is resisting it.¹¹ This is not to deny entirely the influence of climate, physical environment, bloodline, genes and the rest, but to accept that these 'givens' are only some of the elements in the complex

⁴ Macdonald, ed., *Inside European identities*, 6–7.

⁵ Von Benda-Beckmann and Verkuyten, eds., *Nationalism, ethnicity*, 24–5.

⁶ García, ed., *European identity*, 81–2. ⁷ Foucher et al., *The next Europe*, 56–7 and 60–1.

⁸ Bloom, *Personal identity*. ⁹ Spiering, 'National identity and European unity', 115–18.

¹⁰ Grillo, ed., 'Nation' and 'state' in Europe, 10–13. ¹¹ Michael, *Constructing identities*, 2–9.

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make-up of a collective identity, and that their importance is more often determined by the degree to which they are given recognition within a 'constructed' identity than by the self-evident power of their 'essentialist' nature. Collective identities, then, are largely to do with nurture, not nature, and are defined in the main by culture rather than genes ('culture' meaning here all that which is not 'given').¹² To be sure, popular myths about in-born, shared characteristics and essentialities (*Blut und Boden*, for example) can take on their own momentum and can generate enormous political forces once their credibility is established – as happened in Nazi Germany and in many other ultra-nationalist situations. But in spite of popular conviction on occasions, collective identities are not immutable over place and time.

Moreover, identities are multiple in nature, or even 'kaleidoscopic'. A person may have a single identity, but it will be made up of many levels of loyalty and identification.¹³ An individual's or a group's identity can consist of and be affected by allegiance to such things as his, her, or their gender, family, class, region, religion, age-group, kin-group, nation, and so on: all these things are important, and seldom does one dominate to the exclusion of others.¹⁴ Identities, especially of groups, are best represented therefore as matrices, the composition of which is not fixed. Our identities change, because they are based on perceptions, which themselves change over space and time.

If it is possible and indeed normal to identify with more than one thing at a time, like class and gender, or religion and age-group, then identities are capable of containing elements which clearly are potentially inimical, and which may on occasion explode into open conflict. Therefore the various elements in an identity matrix may well be contradictory.¹⁵ Thus people can (and do) hold loyalty to different institutions which may at times clash, or at least in theory be partially exclusive of each other: an example of such mixed loyalties within a single collective identity would be feelings of allegiance to both nation and region.

If collective identities are based on perceptions, such perceptions are not only of ourselves, but of what we think 'we' are not. All kinds of collectivities, including peoples, states, nations and indeed continents, identify themselves partly by defining their own characteristics, but also by defining those which they think they do not share. This Othering process, or the construction of identity

¹² Wintle, ed., *Culture and identity in Europe*, 22–3.

¹³ García, ed., *European identity*, 83–4; Von Benda-Beckmann and Verkuyten, eds., *Nationalism, ethnicity*, 15–18.

¹⁴ Foucher et al., *The next Europe*, 57–8; Grillo, ed., 'Nation' and 'state' in Europe, 10.

¹⁵ Von Benda-Beckmann and Verkuyten, eds., *Nationalism, ethnicity*, 12.

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by defining alterity, is to do with noticing difference whether real or imagined, between 'us' and 'them'. Some differences seem obvious and physical, to do with skin or hair colour; most of the perceived differences are behavioural. Indeed, it is often the case that it is easier to identify characteristics in an 'opposite' group than it is in one's own: the quintessence of Englishness may be hard or impossible to pin down, but the French or Germans (or come to that, the Venezuelans) do not resemble it any way whatsoever. This notion of Othering has been applied at a European level as well, most famously in the work of Edward Said, especially in his *Orientalism* of 1978;¹⁶ that European Othering will be examined here, particularly in Chapter 6. But that fascination with difference, Otherness and the exotic in building and modifying collective identities is widely acknowledged. It is a kind of identity formation based on the perception of stereotypes, or even scapegoats; often malignant prejudices are involved, and indeed it is one of the purposes of the present volume to expose any such continuing misconstructions underpinning a European identity.¹⁷

Many of these aspects of identity construction are admirably illustrated in the study of *national* identity, one of the most important concepts in historical studies in the last generation. We used to speak of national characteristics, and indeed national characters. National character studies were popular as least as far back as the eighteenth century, and although they were originally based on 'manners', or behaviour and social conditioning, in the course of the nineteenth century there was an increasing emphasis on biology and race.¹⁸ Sir Ernest Barker's lectures in 1925–6 on 'National character and the factors in its formation' were typical of the time, and leaned heavily on essentialist notions of race and environment.¹⁹ In the 1960s such discourses of national character came to be perceived as politically incorrect (although the term was not yet invented), but in the 1980s they were back with a vengeance under a new name: national identities.²⁰ Since then they have dominated mainstream history (and many other disciplines) to a quite extraordinary extent. The main differences between the broadly similar old 'character' and new 'identity' discourses are the two points just made here: identities (unlike characters) are constructed rather than set in stone, and identity formation (again unlike character) is heavily dependent on the perception of alterity.

Nations are politicized *ethnies*, and are defined in juxtaposition to other groups; they are therefore about exclusion and opposition just as much as any inherent

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*. ¹⁷ Macdonald, ed., *Inside European identities*, 221–2.

¹⁸ Langford, *Englishness identified*, 7–9. ¹⁹ See Cubitt, ed., *Imagining nations*, 16.

²⁰ Harbsmeier, 'Character, identity, and the construction of Europe', 5–7.

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characteristics of the nation in question.²¹ National identity and nationalism are certainly the most important legitimating political forces in the West today, and probably in the world as a whole.²² There is a constant frame of reference to the nation, all around us ('My fellow Americans . . .'), which is all the more potent because we no longer even notice its ubiquity.²³ These collective, politicized identities, then, are powerful forces; to what extent have they operated at a European level?

AN IDENTITY FOR EUROPE?

Is there such a thing as a European identity? It is now generally accepted (even conceded) that there is, even if the notion is highly distasteful to some. For in the same way that it is perfectly possible to feel loyalty simultaneously to one's religion and one's gender, it must be possible, technically, to have feelings of identification both with one's own country and with Europe.²⁴ This European identity certainly exists from the outside, in the eyes of the Japanese for example, or even the Americans, in a way that does not work for other continents, except very monolithic (and empty) ones like Australia and Antarctica. Asians do not champion their continent in the same way as Europeans have done, certainly since the Renaissance; and if Africans do so it tends to be in defence.²⁵ This 'Euro-awareness' exists now, and has done for many centuries; its characteristics may be hard to define, and it is heavily reliant upon a relational juxtaposition with the other continents, but it is a presence recognizable from the outside, and increasingly from the inside as well.

One problem in getting certain people to admit that there is such a thing as a European identity is that many see it as fundamentally opposed to, and designed to undermine, their national allegiance. This book is not a plea for adherence to a European identity; indeed it is highly critical in some places. However, it is important to realise at the outset that feelings of Europeanness are not at all incompatible (necessarily) with national loyalties. It may very often be the case

²¹ Herb and Kaplan, eds., *Nested identities*, 15–16; Leerssen, *National thought in Europe*.

²² Smith, *National identity*, 143. ²³ Billig, *Banal nationalism*.

²⁴ Bance, 'The idea of Europe', 12–13; Pagden, ed., *The idea of Europe*, 2–3, 21. Countless statistical analyses of the survey data have long concluded that a European identity (in the EU) does indeed exist, though it is seldom unproblematic: e.g. Duchesne and Frogner, 'Is there a European identity?'; Bruter, 'On what citizens mean by feeling "European"'; and Bruter, *Citizens of Europe?*

²⁵ Pagden, ed., *The idea of Europe*, 51–4.

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that one level or type of loyalty within an identity is stronger than another, without entirely eclipsing the weaker one; that is, one's primary loyalty can be to one's nation, while a meaningful identity still attaches to supranational institutions like a global religion, or to Europe. Anthony Smith has articulated this form of 'Europeanness' as a kind of overarching identity, which can embrace national identities without confronting them, in the same way, for instance, as national identity need not conflict with loyalty to extended family or kin-group.²⁶ Although the European Union and its predecessors will be discussed in Chapter 8 of this book, most of it is concerned with a much broader notion of Europe, which was current before 1957, and indeed is still current: the EU and Europe are not the same thing at all, and if only in that sense, national loyalties are not predestined to clash with Europeanism. To reiterate, this book is in no way intended to be an apologia for the European Union.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY: SHARED EXPERIENCES

Focussing on this definition of identity as applied to Europe – a generally positive, non-combative and non-exclusive background feeling of membership and of sharing of some values – historically it can be argued that Europe has had an identity or identities in the past, to which many Europeans have felt a degree of allegiance at various times. This might be called the 'shared heritage' argument, and it has been taken up by many historians: for example James Joll, the renowned British Europeanist of the 1970s, zeroed in on the Roman Empire, Christianity, the Enlightenment, and industrialization as key influences on the European experience, shared at least in part by enough of Europe to act as a defining heritage for the continent.²⁷ For the high Middle Ages, in the 1990s Robert Bartlett made a strong case for what he termed the 'Europeanization of Europe' between 950 and 1350.²⁸ Of course it remains a question of definition: if this kind of 'European identity' is treated as a prototype, blueprint or pre-history of the European Union today, then the notion rapidly becomes a nonsense. The idea that European culture forms a long unbroken line from the ancient Greeks to the Erasmus programme is both highly inaccurate and highly offensive: there is no seamless web of continuity in European culture, and to assume

²⁶ Smith, *National identity*, 174–5; Von Benda-Beckmann and Verkuyten, eds., *Nationalism, ethnicity*, Chapter 4.

²⁷ Joll, *Europe*; discussed and summarized in Wintle, ed., *Culture and identity in Europe*, 12–16.

²⁸ Bartlett, *The making of Europe*. For more detail, see Chapter 4 below.

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there is involves a teleological self-satisfaction which marginalizes the input of other cultures. When this ‘sanitized past’²⁹ is utilized to provide a cultural pedigree for the EU’s integration policies, it is suspect, and certainly unhistorical. However, that is not what Bartlett and others are trying to do: they are simply demonstrating that at various times in the past there have been periods in which many Europeans in many areas of Europe have shared certain experiences and influences and have felt the reality of that shared experience; nothing more.

During the Renaissance, for example, a renewed European awareness grew up, especially in juxtaposition with the ‘discoveries’ of the New World: these new feelings of identity with the European continent, *vis-à-vis* the African, Asian, and especially the American continents, were particularly strongly portrayed in visual material, for instance in cartography, and in drawings, prints, paintings and sculpture, as will be amply demonstrated in Chapter 5. The iconography of the continents was assembled in such a way that for most who saw these images (and they were very widely circulated), Europe became a positively valued construct, embodying superiority over the other continents in power, war, learning, the arts, culture, style, religion, and everything else.³⁰ In the words of Anthony Pagden, ‘The shrinking of the frontiers [of Europe] in this way gradually forced upon the European consciousness a greater sense of the boundaries that lay between them and the rest of the world.’³¹

This, then was an early form of European ‘identity’, and it underwent a considerable enhancement at the time of the Renaissance. In the Enlightenment, too, there was an overt European self-awareness, at least amongst an intellectual elite: it was an international assumption, once again supremacist, that the European family of nations dominated and would continue to dominate the world, by virtue of their relatively high level of civilization. These attitudes may be distasteful to many nowadays, but they certainly indicate a strong sense of a cultural commonality among many Europeans in the eighteenth century. Edmund Burke remarked that ‘no European can be a complete exile in any part of Europe’,³² and Voltaire could see Europe as a ‘great Republic’, sharing political ideas, religion and law.³³ Intellectual Europe had a clear self-image by the time of the Enlightenment, and a strong sense of its shared cultural heritage.³⁴

²⁹ Balzaretti, ‘The creation of Europe’, 181–2. ³⁰ Wintle, ‘Renaissance maps’.

³¹ Pagden, ed., *The idea of Europe*, 51. ³² Cited in Hay, *Europe: the emergence of an idea*, 123.

³³ Cited in Hazard, *European thought in the eighteenth century*, 463.

³⁴ Wintle, ed., *Culture and identity in Europe*, 13–14.

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So in the past there has been a European identity, in the sense of what Europe meant to (some) Europeans as a concept, and indeed as the present book progresses through its approximately chronological chapters we shall review that identity in more detail, through its changes over the centuries.³⁵ And does this generalized feeling of supranational Europeanness still exist today? As long as it does not presume to form the legitimation for a superstate, then on balance the answer must be in the affirmative. Most of Europe has a common, 'Indo-European' linguistic heritage. In religion, Christianity's role in Europe today has radically diminished, but its part in Europe's past has been a defining one, and even now the influence of Christian Democrat parties in Europe should not be underestimated. Certainly in high culture – fine art and music – there is a richly varied but recognizably European tradition.³⁶ In more general cultural terms, there is evidence of a shared heritage which gives meaning to the concept of Europe, although it should not be elevated to mythic status. And it could be argued quite convincingly that parts of European political culture are or at least should be a definitive feature of European identity: Jürgen Habermas has proclaimed that 'the political culture must serve as the common denominator' in the future Europe, rather than other characteristics.³⁷

There is nothing very finite about this kind of Europeanness, which is constantly changing over time, as culture changes, and which is experienced in varying degrees in different parts of Europe. It is partial and, on the whole, non-exclusive (there are some exceptions). Sometimes the United Kingdom has been very much a part of this Europe, and sometimes it has been less so. Hungary has experienced a debate which has ebbed and flowed for 300 years about whether it is or wants to be part of Europe.³⁸ Russia has sometimes been definitely in, and at others definitely out; for the last 500 years a debate has continued about its position.³⁹ Many in Central and Eastern Europe saw 1989 as the occasion for the region's 'return to Europe', in the words of Vaclav Havel.⁴⁰ The borders

³⁵ Thus a distinction is drawn here between 'European identity' and 'the idea of Europe' in the sense of a scheme for the political organization of the continent, although there is obviously some common ground between the two concepts.

³⁶ Tusa, *Art matters*, 13. ³⁷ Habermas, 'Citizenship and national identity', 7–8.

³⁸ Gal, 'Bartók's funeral'.

³⁹ Lewis and Wigen, *The myth of continents*, 26–7; Butlin and Dodgshon, eds., *An historical geography of Europe*, 149–50; and Heffernan, *The meaning of Europe*, 13–29.

⁴⁰ Kumar, 'The 1989 revolutions and the idea of Europe', 449–59.

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of Europe, especially in the East, are anything but stable, and they move all the time.⁴¹

It is essential to grasp that this kind of European identity is emphatically not the same as the collective identity from which a state – especially a nation state – derives its political legitimacy.⁴² A general feeling of ‘Europeanness’ and loyalty to Europe, in a cultural sense, does not need to conflict with national identities.⁴³ The other kind of ‘European identity’, beyond the one we have been discussing up to this point, concerns a European version of the kind of national identity which is the driving force behind the nation state, and which legitimizes the political power of national governments. This is to transpose the nation-state model to the European level, and to seek justification for European government, state apparatus, army and police in Europeans’ feelings of loyalty and allegiance. It has to do with the kind of national identity which generates patriotism, duty to country, and jingoism, up to and including dying for one’s country; in short, national identity. There will be a full consideration of the self-image of the European Union in Chapter 8, and the pretensions of the Habsburgs and others to Euro-hegemony will be examined as well (in Chapter 5). But this book is not about attempts to generate support for a European super-state. Rather it is a study of when and what it has meant – if anything – to feel European, and how that feeling has been visualized. Seldom if ever has that ‘identity’ demanded the kind of allegiance to Europe upon which modern nation states insist.

However, because much of the theory and study of collective identity formation has been formulated at the level of the nation state, the question needs to be asked whether it is possible to have that kind of collective identity at European level, and if so, whether it already exists.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See the section in Chapter 2 on the borders of Europe.

⁴² On this distinction, see Habermas, ‘Citizenship and national identity’; and at a European level, on the distinction between ‘civic’ and ‘cultural’ collective identity, Bruter, ‘On what citizens mean by feeling “European”’.

⁴³ Andréani, *Europe’s uncertain identity*, 13; Mikkeli, *Europe as an idea and an identity*, 228–9; Herb and Kaplan, eds., *Nested identities*, 61; Beetham and Lord, *Legitimacy and the EU*, 33–50. Schild, ‘National v. European identities?’ suggests that recent successes by nationalist-populist parties have made the tension between national and European identity more problematic.

⁴⁴ Alongside the Euro (EU)-enthusiasts, there are of course a number of trenchant sceptics about whether European identity can exist in any meaningful, positive, or acceptable form: e.g. Wilterdink, ‘An examination of European and national identity’; Shore, ‘Inventing the “People’s Europe”’; Hedetoft, ‘National identities and European integration’; Nederveen Pieterse, ‘Fictions of Europe’.