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978-1-107-01561-6 - Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory, and Identity

Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand

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Introduction

Europe has not always been there. Both the name and the object are relatively recent in history. Although the origins of the name can be traced back to 700 BC, the appellation “Europe” came into its contemporary usage only after 1700 CE (Burke 1980). Its existence as a specifically *political* object is even more recent. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, with the first steps toward European integration, have the contours of a political community with this name emerged.

Furthermore, during the past sixty years of European construction, the borders of this entity have varied so much (from the first six founding members to the current twenty-seven members) that the geographical meaning of such a political object has fundamentally changed. Perhaps the most significant change lies in the fact that, whereas the old European Community was merely a Western European project, the current European Union (EU) has both an Eastern and a Western soul. One could also argue that the “old continent” is an ensemble of two halves, north and south. This poses a further challenge to attempts to answer any simple question, such as “What is Europe?”

Battles over the meaning of Europe begin with its very name. Some have tried to bestow a self-referential specificity to the name “Europe” by arguing, for instance, that its etymology literally means “large, broad-faced” – from the Greek “eurys” (wide) and “op(s)” (eye) (Jonker 2009a: 44). Others have argued that the name carries a relational dimension: In this case, “Europe” comes from a Semitic language, not Greek, and means the “land where the sun sets” or “western lands” (Jonker 2009a: 46–9). Whereas the first definition

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makes Europe a self-contained project, the second yields a Europe that has defied since its inception any simplistic East-West dichotomy.

Even today, despite the existence of a polity called “the European Union,” with its relatively established boundaries, the *meaning* of Europe remains very much contested. Is Europe only the EU? Or is it more a general name for a continent? Is it a geographical, a political, or a primarily cultural entity? What are its boundaries? Where do they come from? Does it make sense to look for *any* understanding of Europe based on a putative or principled center? Or is Europe nothing but a name given to a bundle of relationships among other territories and peoples?

The aim of *Imagining Europe* is to address these questions by exploring the formative process of a European identity, one situated between myth and memory. A vast amount of literature looks at the meaning of Europe from a variety of perspectives. Very little work, however, has endeavored to explore the interplay of myths and memory in the representations of Europe.

On the one hand, political scientists have conducted an array of research on the EU. All these studies focus on what the EU is: a regulatory state (Majone 1996), a civilian power (Orbie 2008), an empire (Zielonka 2006), or, possibly, a potential place for transnational democracy that we should work to improve (Schmitter 2000, 2004, 2006). As a consequence of their emphasis on the EU, all these works approach Europe as a *given* political entity, with very little attention to the problem of the *meaning* of Europe more generally, but also more fundamentally.

On the other hand, philosophical works on the meaning of Europe, such as Morgan’s (2000) idea of a European “superstate,” mainly focus on what Europe should be, neglecting the way in which the meaning of Europe has evolved in different historical and geographical contexts. Even literature on European constitutional patriotism, with its focus on constitution making as a possible source of patriotic identification, does not primarily focus on the way in which Europe has been imagined since its inception.¹

Finally, the sociological and historical works, which take a broader approach by looking at the historical and social evolution of the idea of

¹ For his inclusion of European memory, Jan-Werner Müller (2007a, b and 2010) is a notable exception. But to a certain extent, this theme is secondary to his main focus on the evolution of the concept of constitutional patriotism as such. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of his ideas.

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Europe (see Pagden 2002; Delanty 1995; de Boer et al. 1995; Delanty and Rumford 2005), do not centrally address the problematic interplay of myth and memory in the construction of a European identity.

Furthermore, of the few works that have focused on the interplay of Europe's myths and memories, most have argued that, given the agonistic and divided character of European history, the only possible symbolic reservoir available for European citizens to draw from for their identity are myths such as that of the Greek heroine "Europa" (Passerini 2003) or mythical figures from history, such as Mozart and Napoleon (Henry 2001). The problem is that these proposals presuppose the existence of a thick, common cultural identity, which is far from the case in a multinational polity such as the EU.

Few works have specifically focused on the political myths of Europe; these include, for example, the foundation myth of Europe as a vehicle of peace or prosperity (Della Sala 2010), the mythology of the EU in world politics (Manners 2010), or the economic mythology of the EU (Jones 2010). Such works essentially follow the model of nation-states and thus remain trapped in a perspective of "methodological nationalism" (Beck 2003).² These works, all collected in the special issue on "Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union" of the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, the leading journal on European studies, have the merit of bringing an often-neglected issue to the top of the agenda, but still present some significant shortcomings.

In particular, all these works remain too closely linked to the model of national myths to adequately investigate the role of myth in a supra-national polity such as the EU.³ Furthermore, they tend to work with a theoretical framework that conflates myth with other kinds of narratives or, at times, with any false belief as such. Now, it may be historically true that, in many nation-states, founding narratives have easily turned into political myths (think of the Nazi's myth of the Aryan race), but this is not always the case, particularly within supra-national contexts, where there is nothing comparable to the school and propaganda systems available to modern nation-states.

² An exception is Stråth (2005), who provides important methodological insights on the interplay of myth, memory, and history in the construction of a European Community. Even though Stråth refers to Bottici's understanding of political myth in his work, our approach remains different because we more strongly emphasize the difference between myth and collective memory.

³ Della Sala's introductory article to the special issue explicitly states that there is a substantial similarity between the way in which political myths work within nation-states and the European contexts (see, in particular, Della Sala 2010: 11).

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Conflating myth and narrative is a dangerous move that leads to questionable empirical findings. For instance, is the founding narrative of Europe as a vehicle to peace, stability, and economic growth (described by Della Sala [2010: 11]) a myth or a simple narrative? Similarly, how do we classify narratives depicting Europe as a third “power” between the USSR and the United States during the Cold War? Or those describing Europe as a civilian or a normative power (Manners 2010)? Are they simple narratives – perhaps misleading narratives – or truly political myths? Are myths of a “green Europe” (Lenshow and Sprungk 2010) or of the “EU as a gender equal polity” (Macrae 2010) real political myths, taking people to the street and inflaming the hearts of European citizens, or are they simple narratives? To produce a narrative, one needs only a more or less coherent series of events; more is needed to make a myth.⁴ In a nutshell, political myths are narratives that set a drama on the stage.

In addition to an understanding of myth that reduces it to mere narrative (or even to false story), we want to focus here on the specificity of political myth. All myths are narratives, in that all of them presuppose a story, but not all narratives are able to acquire the status of a myth. There are, indeed, many narratives, both political and otherwise, that leave us completely indifferent. While the concept of a political narrative entails that of a series of events organized in a more or less coherent plot, the concept of myth entails that of a surplus, of an emotional attachment that motivates political action.⁵

In more abstract philosophical terms, one way to put the difference between the two is to say that whereas narratives are more or less coherent plots that can provide *meaning*, myths are narratives that coagulate and reproduce *significance* (Bottici 2007: 123–6). The concepts of “meaning” and “significance” are only partially overlapping because something can be endowed with meaning (such as a mathematical equation or a series of events) but still remain completely insignificant to a given social group. Significance occupies that intermediary space, situated between what is consciously learned about the world and what we unconsciously apprehend about it, that renders the world we inhabit less indifferent because it is emotionally grounded.

⁴ The conflation between myth and narrative is evident throughout Della Sala’s article, from the first page, where he speaks about stories as if they and myth were one and the same, to the last one, where, after having spoken of European myth for the whole article, he concludes by saying that we need narratives (Della Sala 2010: 1, 16).

⁵ On the difference between myth and narrative, see Chapter 1 and 4 and Bottici (2007).

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As a consequence, as we will see in the course of this book, distinguishing political myths from simple narratives is crucial when it comes to analyzing the question of collective identity. If both collective and personal identity rest on a narrative, because answering the question “who are you?” demands that one tell a story, even a minimal one, about oneself, then the same does not hold for myth. By avoiding the Scylla of rationalist approaches that completely ignore the role of myth in contemporary politics, we should not dash ourselves against the Charybdis of mythologizing everything. Doing so would mean falling into a night where all cows look equally gray.

This project begins with the hypothesis that most attempts to think about the interplay between the myths and memories of Europe, as well as the EU policies that have followed them, have failed because they are implicitly based on a model (that of the nation-state) unsuited to a *sui generis*, multicultural, and supranational polity. By contrast, *Imagining Europe* explores the possibility that even a *divided memory* such as that of Europe can be a powerful reservoir of meaning in the construction of a common identity. But, if both myth and memory reflect the attempt to construct an identity in the present, what is the difference between them? Is historical memory simply a “white mythology,” as some have argued? By exploring the interplay between myth and memory in the construction of a European identity, this book shows that myth and memory are distinct, although often merged, given their common aim to provide a meaning to Europe.⁶

To analyze the interplay between myth and memory, as well as their different trajectories, in an attempt to assess when memory turns into myth, one needs to rely on a mixed methodology. Previously, the authors of this book faced the challenge of studying myth making in an empirical way by analyzing the dynamics whereby the narrative of a clash between civilizations has turned into a successful political myth.⁷ Myth making is an especially difficult object of study, not only because of its slippery nature, but also because it often operates in a pre- or unconscious dimension. As a consequence, the use of both written and visual sources is crucial. This is because myths are conveyed not only through theories or written stories, but also, and more fundamentally,

⁶ In this respect, our work also differs from that of Pakier and Strâth (2010), who question the possibility of speaking of a united European memory, but they do so without focusing on the difference between myth and collective memory.

⁷ See *The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations* for another example of applied research methods in relation to the social imaginary (Bottici and Challand 2010).

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through *icons* – images that, by means of a synecdoche, can condense the meaning of a whole narrative without linguistic mediation. As we will see, the image on the cover of this book is one such icon.

The empirical material treated in this book covers official EU and European Economic Community (EEC) documents, public officials' speeches, and newspaper articles and includes as well a thorough analysis selected from history textbooks from three founding member states of political Europe, namely, France, Germany, and Italy. History textbooks, in particular, provide an important source because they describe the “bottom line” of what a society thinks about itself and because they do so using both written and visual media. Whereas the other sources tend to describe what Europe is, these textbooks convey its meaning in a more indirect, sometimes subtle, or even unconscious way.

The specific scope of history textbook analyses will be described in the relevant chapters, but a few words are needed to explain the sample of textbooks analyzed. These textbooks were selected from the library of the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI), in Braunschweig, Germany, a leading international center collecting textbooks from all European countries. The vast catalog of textbooks and secondary literature on schoolbooks facilitated the selection of our sample. Textbooks were selected if they met five criteria: (1) they deal with contemporary history, generally that of the twentieth century; (2) they are suitable for young people approaching the end of compulsory curriculum (*Liceo* in Italy, *Oberstufe* in Germany, and *Classes Terminales* for the French *Baccalauréat*); (3) they cover the period from the early 1950s to 2008;⁸ (4) they have updated editions, which allow for a study of European construction over time; and (5) they represent as many significant publishing houses as possible to convey the varieties of historical sensibilities or, in some cases, political orientations.

In addition to being founding members of the first European communities, France, Germany, and Italy have a broadly centrally prescribed curriculum allowing for a straightforward comparison of how European construction is represented in schoolbooks. Moreover, because they are among the founding members, their textbooks allow us to compare them using a long-term perspective (in terms of the

⁸ We both visited GEI's library in November 2006. Benoît Challand paid a second visit in September 2008, allowing him to add a few more textbooks for the period 2005–2008.

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history of the European construction⁹). The diachronic comparative approach is therefore a crucial component of our methodology. The elaboration of political myth is a process of working on a common narrative that takes place over time, via a constant process of reinterpretation of the same narrative core to adapt it to different circumstances. This process is often conveyed by social practices that need to be analyzed using a *longue durée* perspective.¹⁰ Although we focus mainly on sources produced in the past sixty years, we therefore occasionally look further back in time.

When dealing with issues such as myths that are, at best, only marginal to mainstream social research, one has to develop a methodological approach that includes symbols, emotional landmarks, images, caricatures, and other artifacts as empirical material. This explains why we have relied mostly on qualitative interpretative methods (discourse and visual analyses), although we also had recourse to quantitative analyses to spot trends. Within this perspective, we found particularly helpful the methodological insights provided by Emirbayer's notion of a "relational sociology" (Emirbayer 1997). Emirbayer places the focus on fluid, dynamic, and mutually constitutive social relations that are central to the process of elaborating common narratives, regardless of their myth status. Social processes, such as group identification and the elaboration of myths, are complex phenomena that interlink different forces and interpretations. It would be genuinely naïve to believe that such processes can be clearly distinguishable from one another.

⁹ This might explain why we have not included Central and Eastern European textbooks in this empirical research, although the themes of memories in these countries will be addressed in Chapter 3.

¹⁰ For some historians, it might sound exaggerated to speak of *longue durée* for an analysis covering the six decades of post-1945 European history. Yet, it is striking to see how the social science literature tends to iron out historical evolution in its proposition of what are mostly *endogenous* theoretical models to explain and understand European integration (e.g., federalism, functionalism, inter-governmentality, etc.). A cursory look at books belonging to three different strands of the literature dealing with European integration (European History in general; History of European Integration; and Theories of European Integration) demonstrates that the Cold War in the making (and therefore the potential threat of Eastern European communism) was essential to understand the birth of the first European Communities. This, however, does not emerge substantially in the work of *ex post* theorists of European construction. *A contrario*, theoretical approaches, when touching on these threats, tend to depict them very schematically and negate any possible inputs from the Other that a political Europe might have faced at various points of its history.

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Rather, mirroring processes, tendencies to mimic, or refusing to follow one's model are frequent elements found in the social processes of identification.

Put in more philosophical terms, processes of elaboration of common narratives are as *instituting* as they can be *instituted* for a given social group:¹¹ Although there may already exist such a strong shared identity that one group is ready to go to war against another, the very brandishing of this threat of war can also be seen as a tool for creating a sense of cohesion and thus reinforcing identity. The response preceding an imminent war can be both *instituted* by preexisting identification and serve in *instituting* a new sense of identification. Similarly, political myths can be the result of an existing identity, as well as being the means for creating a new identity. Otherwise stated, they can be self-fulfilling prophecies.¹²

Because of these combined methodologies, we must keep an indirect eye on the role that *institutions* play in the process of establishing political myths or in sustaining various projects supporting collective memories in Europe. Institutions need not invariably be formal (organizations) or codified (laws, constitution), but, within a neo-institutional perspective, they can also be considered “the informal norms of behavior, such as habits, customs and ideologies” (North 1990: 36–7). Thus, the process of Europeanization, a process potentially leading to a greater sense of identification around the creation of a supranational entity such as the EU, can be influenced by formal decisions or texts (e.g., the 1973 Copenhagen Declaration on European Identity¹³ or the draft of the 2005 Constitution) or by informal diffusions of shared interpretations of what “Europe” means in, say, the history textbooks that pupils use in different European countries or the public debates taking place in major European newspapers.

It should now be clear that *Imagining Europe* aims to establish a research agenda rather than seeks to provide an exhaustive analysis of

¹¹ Within this understanding resides, according to Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), the ultimate test of *radical* democracy for any social group: the capacity to question (and therefore to establish) the social imaginary. See also Chapter 3.

¹² We have dealt extensively with the notion of political myth as potentially self-fulfilling prophecies in Bottici and Challand (2006 and 2010).

¹³ All official EEC and EU documents discussed and interpreted in this book can be found in the European Navigator (<http://www.ena.lu>), a Web engine presenting each document in historical context. For the Copenhagen Declaration, see <http://www.ena.lu/declaration.european.identity.copenhagen.14.december.1973-020002278.html>.

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all European myths and memories, the potential sources of which are infinite. To examine them all is clearly outside the scope of this book. Here, we want to show how the way in which we imagine Europe has dramatically changed over time and place, as well as discuss why and when historical narratives have turned into mythical ones.

In sum, with this book, we hope not only to help fill a lacuna in the literature on European identity, but also to provide a topical intervention for current debates. As has been widely acknowledged, following the failure of the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, Europe is undergoing an existential crisis in which its fundamental meaning is being questioned.¹⁴ In particular, since 2011, European institutions have been facing a deep economic crisis, centered on the stability of its single currency (the euro) and on the Greek, Portuguese, and Irish financial bailouts. Whatever the destiny of the European project, the very fact that, when faced with such a crisis, many called for more integration, illustrates that even if the architecture of a political Europe faces the prospect of failure and collapse, there remains a vivid sense that shared identity can be a means to rescue the European project. The problem is to determine what is precisely shared in those feelings; that is, which images of Europe are able to convey a sense of who we are as Europeans? *Imagining Europe* addresses this problem by offering a vital yet often neglected aspect of European identity to the conversation, that of the interplay of myth and memory.

This book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with identity and memory and the second specifically focusing on myth. This reflects our view that memory and myth are two different things. Thus, we argue, it is more interesting to see when they patently overlap rather than conflating them from the beginning. The opening chapter provides a general theoretical framework for the notion of identity and legitimacy. We argue that identity is a crucial issue because it is one of the conditions of the perceived legitimacy of a polity. This also applies to the EU, understood as a postmodern political space. First, the chapter critically analyzes the idea that the EU, given its supranational nature, can and should rest on a simple instrumental or output-oriented legitimacy. In opposition to this view, Chapter 1 also develops the idea that Europe needs a more complex form of

¹⁴ Other critical Europeanists share this sense of urgency in debating Europe away from ahistorical teleologies (Schulz-Forberg and Stråth 2010: 148).

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legitimization than that required by traditional Westphalian nation-states. Nevertheless, Europe must rely on the construction of a common identity. By distinguishing between those who look at the potentiality of the European cultural heritage and those who focus on the need for a political identity, the chapter concludes that the EU should search for its legitimacy in an identity located between its cultural past and its political future. Otherwise stated, identity is not merely the product of what we have been in the past, but also the projection of how we perceive the future.

Having shown that identity is one of the conditions of legitimacy, in Chapter 2, we continue by exploring the role that collective memory plays in the construction of European identity. After analyzing the links between memory and political identity in general and between memory and European identity in particular, we propose to substitute the concept of “collective memory” with “collective remembrance.” Collective remembrance is offered as a theoretical tool better equipped to capture the ongoing process of elaborating a traumatic past like Europe’s. This will enable us to look at a variety of sources, all of which qualify as sites for the elaboration of what we call the “politics of remembrance.” In particular, the analysis of acts of collective remembrance, which take place at three levels (institutional, public, and pedagogical), will demonstrate that a struggle is underway to define the past in light of the construction of a political identity in the present.

Chapter 3 maps the conflicting cognitive representations of a political and historical Europe. This chapter addresses attempts to define a common European memory using the theme of the Holocaust, as well as the resistance that these attempts encounter in former Eastern European countries, where elaborating the traumatic past of Soviet purges and occupation has been given priority. By focusing on the transformations of the Cold War discourses on totalitarianism and democracy, we identify persistent forms of alterity that reproduce an East-West divide despite the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. We then show that cognitive debates about Europe allude to constantly shifting relations between various parts of Europe and between Europe and its neighbors. A relational conceptual vocabulary is proposed to describe the debates on Europe following 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Cleavages and social distancing can be expressed in terms of different temporal locations (allochronism) that, when merged with a normative stance, can lead to a situation of *heterochrony*; that is, a situation