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The Mirage of European Culture

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Abstract

Can we speak of a European culture? To answer this question research is done in literature on the history of the United Kingdom, France and Germany in the 21th century. How do politicians, journalists and scientists think about Europe? Can we speak of European traditions and mentality? Or are national traditions still dominating? There are different kinds of motives for striving towards a European identity, be they economic, political, cultural and social. In this article, I argue that a European culture in effect does not exist. If we speak of a European culture we are referring to a Western culture at the utmost. Europe is a chimera. In health and on immigration for instance, each Member State makes its own choices. European unity is collaboration for economic and political reasons, drawn from shared strategic elements which promote particular aims. The European institutions suffer from a lack of cultural and democratic legitimacy. In that sense, Brexit can be construed as a natural reaction to that flaw, and as exemplary of European culture expressed at a national level.

Keywords: European culture, European identity, Europe in crisis, national traditions, Brexit

Research Done

For this article, a literature search was carried out in the electronic book catalogue of the Utrecht University Library in the Netherlands. The research was aimed at three of the European Member States: United Kingdom, France and Germany, as they are the most influential. Accordingly, the search was restricted to books in the languages English, French and German. Key words that were used included: “history” (in the three languages) and “United Kingdom”, “Great-Britain”, “France”, and “Deutschland” respectively. Subsequently, the set of books from 2000 to the present were screened which resulted in 50 books in total for study, distributed broadly equally between the three languages. Because language was a selection criterion, a text in one language could be about aspects of a country with its distinct idiom. In this article, I would like to analyse the arguments advanced in the selected books as far as they relate to the European project and to investigate the underlying mental and cultural assumptions of the arguments. Although such assumptions are not on the forefront in books of academics, they are always present.

Euro-scepticism

On June 23, 2016, the British government held a referendum about the EU membership of the United Kingdom. To the astonishment of many, the British people, with a small majority, voted against remaining in the EU. As a champion of the remain-camp, Prime Minister David Cameron was forced to resign shortly thereafter. His successor, Theresa May, decided to give effect to the will of the majority of the people to leave the EU; Brexit became a reality.

There is a strong tendency in literature and in public discourse at the time of the referendum which held that the European project was especially complicated for the British as the main parties were split internally on this issue.¹ In fact, Euro-scepticism was spread everywhere across Europe. At the European elections of 2014, the Euro-sceptic parties were very successful. The Front National of France and UK Independence Party (UKIP) were even first in the national vote.²

For explanations of Euro-scepticism, intricate reasons are given, such as the views of the governing elites on the European project, the complexity of domestic politics, and the Europeanization of national politics. In one book about the UK challenge to Europeanization, it is even a central proposition that the Euro-scepticism in the UK was intensified in response to the economic crisis within the Euro zone.³

However, it is not so much a Euro-sceptic attitude which is relevant, but more so an absence of European mindedness. For example, in a very challenging book on the power of nobility in contemporary Europe, the European Union perspective does not play a distinctive role at all. In former days, of course a European perspective as such was present as the nobility was the first to have bonds with families in other countries, such as with marriage, and they were travelling across Europe and had a cosmopolitan focus. Interestingly enough, this is not the case anymore:

¹This effect of feeling part of a community or body can extend beyond national borders, notably among the high aristocracy where alliances with members of foreign aristocracies are not uncommon, and where exchanges and cosmopolitanism are frequent. This weighs most heavily with the members of the most traditional factions of the

aristocracy; however, a growing proportion of the descendants of the nobility pay little attention to this today, and most of their practices appear not to be influenced by it.”⁴

So the tradition of a cosmopolitan and European oriented aristocracy faded away and in that sense no common ground with the past exists. The Second World War symbolized in that respect a rupture with tradition. But do we see that some other European orientation come into its place?

The End of the Cold War

The European community was a reaction to World War II and also a consequence of the Cold War between the Soviet ideology of Marxism-Leninism and the Western values of capitalist democracy. When the Cold War ended more or less at the beginning of the nineties, the external threat against the European project felt away and therefore the identification of the Member States with each other decreased:

“Did the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 mean the end of the Cold War in a more fundamental sense, because the state that had set out in 1917 to export communist revolution was now on the scrap heap of history? That was the assumption in the heady days after the Soviet collapse, especially among triumphalists in the United States who anticipated the dawning of a unipolar era in world history in which America was the ‘sole superpower’ and the source of universal values.”⁵

And neither was taking part in the European Union positive in terms of legal consequences. For example, in the UK it challenged the way in which constitutional matters and administrative law were organised. Thus in an introduction of a textbook on administrative law the authors note that:

“EU membership has challenged the fundamental precepts of the UK constitution and that this challenge is consonant with other pressures for constitutional realignment that are both internal and external to the UK legal order (devolution, globalisation, etc.).”⁶

The end of the Second World War not only triggered the founding of the European community of the Western European States, but also marked the beginning of the split between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the communist society in the Eastern European States. As a consequence in 1945, European identity was split into two parts in such a way that the consequences are still effective and visible to this day. As the West in the end won, however, an imbalance was unavoidable:

“However, there is not only an imbalance regarding the visibility accorded to memories concerning Eastern European countries, but also a potentially problematic Western imposition of the ways in which memories are to be dealt with in the East.”⁷

The exclusive and hegemonic accounts of Western European memories proscribed the Eastern European perspectives. As a consequence, Eastern European Member States have little empathy with the European project. They tend to pursue policies of their own as much as possible.

Is there a European Unity?

After the reunification of Germany in 1990, a debate took place in Germany about the extent to which fundamental rights should be integrated into the new national constitution. As European constitutional processes were on their way, many Germans felt that the time for a nationalistic order was over. In the end, the German anti-nationalistic movement won and Germany waited for the adoption of a European constitution. The European Fundamental Rights Charter of 2000 and later the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 complemented such a national identification.⁸ Thus, Germany was oriented towards a common European constitutional framework which also provided for fundamental rights.

It seems a bit ironic that the Germans, whose behaviour in the Second World War led to the birth of the European Community, identified themselves in such a thorough way with the European cause. However, they were almost the only ones. After the adoption of the 2000 Charter, the Member States decided to go for an even more unifying approach and to strive for a European constitution in 2004. In a democratic caprice it was decided that Member States could choose to hold a referendum. Consequently, the French and the Dutch voted against the European constitution in 2005; the majority of voters could not identify with the common European cause. As a result, the European Union suffered from a degree of instability.

The EU can have a progressive influence, but such influence is not necessarily viewed in a positive way in the Member States. In a book about fundamental rights in Europe, a contributor describing how the EU legal framework addressing gender equality was introduced into the Romanian constitution notes that the accession to the EU also raised awareness of gender issues. The discourse of fundamental rights in general was reshaped in Romania. However, the concept of gender equality was perceived in Romania as a Western European idea and therefore as “exogenous” and not a real political objective.⁹ The end of the Cold War did not lead to a European culture, because the political integration led and still leads to frictions between the different cultures and traditions between East and Western Europe.¹⁰

In December 1991, Croatia and Slovenia held referenda about their future with or without Yugoslavia and subsequently declared their independence. Serbia as the most powerful Yugoslavian state did not accept this and declared war:

“Es gelang den Regierungen der Europäischen Gemeinschaft nicht, diesen Konflikt zu beenden oder auch nur abzumildern. Das lag an der Uneinigkeit der Europäer sowie an ihrer mangelnden Bereitschaft, gegebenenfalls auch mit militärischen Mitteln einzutreten.”¹¹

The nadir of this conflict was the massacre at Srebrenica. In this place thousands of Muslim Bosnians had fled for troops of Bosnian Serbs. In July, the Serbs conquered the city and took about 8000 male Muslim Bosnians into the woods to shoot them to death. This massacre became the symbol of the Yugoslavian civil war and of the impotence of the European Member States to reach a common point of view and to impose such a view in a conflict, taking place in Europe itself. In the end, the United States intervened, and by military action enforced a truce. There was no common European position, shared values or identity anywhere to be found on this issue. Ultimately, the European Member States proved dependent on their more decisive Western ally, which as part of the Western World, commanded the disobedient Serbian and also Slovenian and Croatian States to make peace in Europe.

Shared Memories and Traditions

In a study about the changing place of Europe in “global memory cultures”¹², the editors refer to significant investments made by the European institutions in commemorative projects and in research grants in cultural memory studies. However, as they note, a common European memory or a cultural identity of Europe does not even seem to exist. In the editors’ view, memories exceed the boundaries of the European Union and have a transnational character. In the end, a national identity is far more fundamental than a European one, and when confronted with the dangers of the world a European Member State ultimately stands alone. For example, in dealing with the influenza pandemic of 2009, each individual Member State took care of buying its own vaccines. They even competed with one another for the best deals. A European identity does not appear to exist in these domains.

Furthermore, a French book on the history of current intellectuals does not refer to the European Union or Europe at all. The book deals with intellectuals in Italy, Germany, the UK, Belgium, France and Spain, as well as non-European countries as Quebec, Argentina, Suisse, Russia and the USA. The aim of the study is to investigate the different configurations in which intellectuals operate:

“Il s’agissait de tenter de rendre compte d’une diversité historiographique: tout autant qu’un moment de sociabilité entre spécialistes d’une même discipline, ce colloque se voulait, en effet, l’occasion d’entreprendre un état des lieux. Ce sera au lecteur, assurément, de décider si un tel objectif a été atteint.”¹³

Apparently, Europe as such is not deemed relevant in this regard. There seems to be no European framework for intellectual life. Naturally, some people do not identify with Europe at all, such as most French communists for example. Communists do not believe in the ideal of European integration, because they strive for a non-capitalistic world in which all people are united. But in that sense, there is no difference for a communist between identification with the national state such as France or a federal state as the European Union. However, anti-European sentiment is not only present with communists, as appears in a study about French socialism, which was one of the two great political pro-European forces in France after World War II:

“Si les pro-européens de gauche ont joué un rôle essentiel dans la construction européenne, ils ont dû se battre âprement à l’intérieur de leur propre camp, contre les adversaires de l’idée et contre ceux qui approuvent l’idée, mais contestent la méthode par laquelle celle-ci est réalisée.”¹⁴

So even within a country and among the same political group, there is no shared idea about what Europe could mean as a community. The pro-European Christian Democrats in France which faced the same challenge as the socialists on the left and tried to Europeanise the right wing, proved more successful. That success did not last for long, because of the upswing of the radical right, notably Jean-Marie Le Pen and his Front National.

In a book about the history of the judicial power in France from the 16th century until the present, the author signals that the trend will be a more European one. He believes that the Europeans themselves will influence the way in which the judicial power will be arranged on a European level, and ends his corpulent book with the following remark:

“La réussite de la construction judiciaire européenne au cours du XXIe siècle dépendra en fait de la volonté des Européens et des rapports qu’ils entretiendront avec leur justice; comme cela a été le cas en France de 1500 à nos jours, les justiciables seront les principaux responsables des évolutions, quelles qu’elles soient, et les institutions judiciaires devront se conformer à leurs aspirations pour obtenir une crédibilité.”¹⁵

It is rather optimistic to assume that the European citizens are in control of the judiciary. At the same time, the author states that discord in Europe is caused for an important part by the legal system and the judiciary. Member States have a judiciary system of their own. In France a system of written law used to exist alongside a system of common law, but in the end the two systems were unified. The author argues that a similar legal unification process should be

applied in Europe. It must be said, however, that if all citizenry of the European Union could decide about which judiciary should come into existence, then it will be undoubtedly a divided outcome as the legal systems nowadays vary a lot. It will be a chimera.

Europe in Crisis

The European Monetary Union (EMU) was agreed upon at the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992. However, the Member States refused to give up their sovereignty in fiscal and banking matters and stayed sensitive about their say into labour markets, wage policy and social policy.¹⁶ On January 1, 2002, the introduction of the euro as the single European currency took place. Most architects of the EMU thought that the euro would contribute to a strengthening of the European economy, in similar manner as the introduction of the single market had done. The European Commission in its study “One Market, One Money” stated that various economic benefits were to be expected as well as positive effects for political union objectives.

But already in 2008, the EU was afflicted by financial and economic crises, such as the imbalances and levels of debt in Greece, Portugal and Ireland:

“As the Euro Area financial, economic and sovereign debt crises made clear, legitimacy is a core issue in a monetary union. [...] In its early phase, the integration process gained legitimacy from the economic growth of the ‘golden sixties’ through the formation of the Common Market.”¹⁷

In preparing the EMU, the architects sought to put a face to the European Community from the perspective of their national economies, instead of thinking about what should give the Community a stronger identity of its own. The 2008 crisis led to a negative feeling about European integration among citizens. Many came to view the EU as a policy failure, and the passive support for European integration faded away and gradually turned into nationalistic tendencies.

A result of the crises was that aid measures to alleviate social suffering increasingly stopped at the national borders. Ostensibly, feelings of social solidarity did not extent much beyond these borders, linked as they were to strong national identities. In this respect, no deep European identity exists. As the authors of a book on the globalization of international society conclude, the economic crisis and its aftermath are exposing the superficial nature of European solidarity. They explain the fragility of European identity as resulting from the specific geopolitical circumstances that led to its very existence, specifically the United States needing an ally against Soviet expansionism after World War II.¹⁸

Furthermore, Germany, whose confinement was an important leading motive for founding the European Community, became the richest EU-country and was among the EU countries also the most favourable in its attitude towards the EU. Whether governed by conservatives or socialists, it always stayed loyal to its “integrationsfreundlichen Tradition”.¹⁹ However, an author of a book about the history of Germany up to the present is very critical about the institutional character of the European Union:

“Heute benötigt die EU einen demokratischen, einen bürgergesellschaftlichen Vitalitätsschub; alle Bürgerinnen und Bürger Europas sind gefordert, dem famosen Projekt aufs neue Enthusiasmus einzuhauen.”²⁰

However enthusiastic said author is about the EU, he believes that a real political identity, let alone a nation like identity of the EU, as found in the USA, is lacking in the EU.

In another book about Germany in the 20th century, the author describes how in Germany people, as in other countries, identify with their history: “Europa ist unsere Gegenwart, aber unsere Geschichte bleibt im Nationalen verwurzelt.”²¹ Similarly, in a book about the history of Luxembourg, which is located in the centre of the European Union and even has some European institutions seated within its territory, it is striking that only the title somewhat reflects those facts: “Histoire du Luxembourg. Le destin européen d’un ‘petit pays’”. In the book itself, the European dimension seems something on top of the nation state itself:

“En raison de son positionnement géographique au cœur de l’Europe occidentale et de sa tradition de coopération européenne, le Luxembourg est bien placé pour élaborer des projets communs avec les régions qui l’entourent.”²²

Subsequently, it appears from the text that Luxembourg is more oriented towards collaboration with its neighbours – France, Germany and Belgium – in order to develop the infrastructure of its surroundings, as opposed to identifying its future with that of the European Union. In fact, there is no reference to the European Union in this respect.

Moreover, the increasing immigration presents a strong challenge for European solidarity. The EU Member States are obliged to take care of refugees. However, this is often misinterpreted as the Member States being forced to accept all *immigrants*, as opposed to real refugees only. During the refugee crisis in 2015 David Cameron was unwilling to reach for an EU based solution, but demanded a specific British and national approach. As a result, advocates of leaving the EU, including Brexit supporters, tend to think that immigration can be managed by a national immigration policy, because such a policy should make it possible to install a system of qualification-based immigration, a level playing field for all immigrants. Different provisions could be applied to refugees, as national politics deems necessary, including with respect to the available public services.²³ In reality however, the problem of refugees is not connected with the peculiarity of EU law, but with the general norms of international law.

Although the European Union continues to be in crisis, every governmental institution can be made better. However, the dominant approach towards the EU is negative. What are the positive arguments and feelings? Even in the context of the Dutch referenda of 2005 and 2016 about European issues, voters were generally unable to give compelling positive (i.e. pro-Europe) arguments. Accordingly, it seems safe to conclude that there is little identification with the European project left.

Brexit

In a recent book about Euro-scepticism in the UK, the phenomenon is traced back to the characteristics of British politics. However, the question is also if there are explanations available in terms of the characteristics of *European* politics. But that question is not addressed in the book. According to the analysis presented, Euro-scepticism is not so much due to the EU itself, as it is caused by the perception in the press and public opinion, which tend to view the EU in a negative light, namely as bureaucratic, anti-democratic and economically flawed.²⁴ The rise of UKIP as a political party is explained by its responsiveness to the growing discontent about European integration. UKIP is seen as a populist reaction to an existing inclination among the people.

Another author considers the European Union as flawed, because it is a mechanism for the redistribution of wealth across its member countries, meaning the wealthier and more developed countries are financing both the EU institutions and the other poorer or less developed countries.²⁵ Following this line of reasoning, one is also inclined to suspect that for the UK, the EU acts as a restricting factor in terms of trading opportunities, and that the struggle with their own national identity is essential for understanding the Euro-scepticism. However, underlying these arguments, there seems to be an implication that Europe has no legitimacy at all:

“The primary principle of political legitimacy in the modern world is that those who make laws and give orders should be co-cultural with those who they expect to obey them.”²⁶

The author argues that the EU is in fact resisting this principle of political legitimacy.

In his Bloomberg speech of January 23, 2013, then Prime Minister David Cameron pleaded for a drastically reformed EU, with better rules for the single market, and more power to the national parliaments in order to enhance democratic legitimacy. And he announced to hold a referendum on the desirability to continue British membership of the EU. Cameron’s plea only concerned *political* legitimacy in a narrow sense.

In a book about administrative law, the authors conclude that EU law has had an impact beyond its immediate areas of influence, as UK courts have also applied principles and doctrines of EU law to issues of domestic law, which the authors designate as the “spill-over” function of EU law. However, the authors also warn the reader of the special character of British traditions in law. Moreover, they claim that a common European legal tradition does not exist:

“Although we have seen that domestic law can benefit when the courts borrow from their experience with EU law, it is to be remembered that EU law brings together a range of different legal traditions and that its corresponding principles and so on may not always complement those of the common law.”²⁷

Authors of a book dealing with the implications of Brexit, mention a lot of subjects in which the EU has brought improvements. These include better living standards and educational, social and cultural capital, environmental protection, improved consumer protection and food labelling, freedom to travel, work and live across the Union, labour protection, security and safety. In the view of the authors, the EU has acted and acts as a platform where countries can contribute to the solution of global problems that can only be addressed collectively.²⁸ Whatever the merits of these arguments, the interesting thing to note is that the authors only mention concrete achievements, and do not speak of a European identity.

Concluding Remarks

As concluded by the authors of a European Union handbook, “all we can say with any certainty is that [the European Union] is more than a conventional international organization but less than a European super state.”²⁹ They describe how unclear the nature of the European Union is in terms of a governmental institution. They note that there is little agreement among either scholars or politicians about how to understand the EU.

The making of a European community has been a project of cosmopolitan political elites from different countries. In the literature, Europe is mostly viewed as a flawed project. The original idea behind founding a European society was to have a bulwark against Germany so that a European or world war would never occur again. And the founding of Europe was accompanied by the beginning of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet bloc. With the end of the Cold War, the internal challenge for Europe started.

Because of the absence of a European culture, mentality or identity, the European Union seems a bit of a chimera. When national feelings are aroused, decisions will be made nationally. In the old Greek world, seeing a chimera was an omen of disaster. Worse than seeing a chimera, is looking at a mirage. Because whatever may be of the European Union, apparently European culture is considered as a mirage, we tend to see something that may not really be there.

Author

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²⁶ Burrage, *The Eurosceptic’s Handbook*, 28.

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