

I want to ask, What does it mean to be European?

The word Europe has many meanings for many different people. Most commonly Europe has meant a melange of geography, culture, civilization, and religion. While Europe's meaning was previously quite stable, old certainties have disappeared. Now one must ask, What does it mean to be European? While it may appear that such a question would have so many answers as to be irrelevant, there has almost always been one dominant view. The question of what it means to be European is one about belonging, of how people feel themselves to be European. Answering this question reveals that to be European is to hold faith in a certain set of political values and ideals. This identity is one that many people find easy to hold in relation to national identities—that is, it is able to coexist with them—which I will illustrate with a few examples from the Eurobarometer series of public opinion polls. European identity is unique because its boundaries and borders are devalued and confused. Furthermore, the boundaries used to delineate the “Europe,” and thus European identity, are often in conflict with one another or do not line up evenly. The Self/Other distinction so fundamental to defining an identity is problematized. Instead of rigid opposition, European identity allows one to cross easily between Other and Self. As this identity is quite inclusive, one can become European, and in a relatively easy fashion. Because of the relative ease of entrance many new states have joined the EU, with the constant flux preventing a stable Self/Other distinction from crystallizing.

There is now the conflation of Europe and the European Union.

May 1, 2004 saw the entry of 8 Eastern European nations, plus Malta and Cyprus, into the European Union (EU). This historic expansion is described as the Eastern European “return to Europe” after the artificial separation of the Cold War. Of course

these states never left the European continent. Yet, there is something else at play: the European Union has become conflated with Europe. Thomas Risse notes that “the EU as an active identity builder has successfully achieved identity hegemony in terms of increasingly defining what it means to belong to ‘Europe’.” Thus a political entity has taken the place of a geographical one. In the current conflation of the European Union with Europe we see a new Europe, one that is “less a cultural discourse than a political organization.” Thus the cultural definition of Europe has been replaced by a civic one that emphasizes a shared political process. Risse notes that “states in Europe are increasingly defined as EU members, non-members, or would-be members. Their status in Europe and to some degree also worldwide depends on these categories.” Thus the notion of what it means to be European has changed, such that categories now rely on the EU as the basis of their definitions.

So, what is European identity?

In contrast to national identities, which are understood to be based upon a national culture, European identity is much more indefinite and inclusive. Anna Triandafyllidou and Willfried Spohn describe this relationship to culture as one of “cultural pluralism,” explaining that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of European identity. Lacking a common culture, Richard Münch says that the “common features within Europe are ... of an abstract type.” It is not a common culture or history that binds people together as Europeans, but a “varied, widely branched and finely differentiated network of more or less permanent loyalty relationships.” Likewise, previous collective cultures “are replaced by a pluralism of varied and widely branched associations and cultural patterns.” Unlike most, if not all, national identities, European identity is not based upon a common culture.

Instead, European identity is a civic identity.

Bernard Giesen's procedural model of collective identity explains well how European identity is found in common civic beliefs. Using Habermas' *Verfassungspatriotismus*, Giesen explains that European identity is "the identification with a constitution and the participation in its political practice that defines citizenship" and an "attempt to ground the body politic in the practice of political traditions." Thus European identity is a civic identity in which membership is on the basis of a shared political practice. This practice is not simply a shared set of institutions and laws that are collected in the form of the EU, but also political ideals and values. This should not be surprising, as practice must obviously be informed by values and ideals. Therefore, European identity is based on a belief in democratic systems, and specifically the democratic systems as formulated and developed in European nations and the EU.

The existence of this belief can be seen in the attitude sometimes expressed toward potential Israeli membership in the EU. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has publicly stated that Israel could eventually join, as has Bronislaw Geremek, former Polish Foreign Minister. Silvan Shalom, Israeli Foreign Minister, explained that "a possibility exists for Israel to join the EU, since Israel and Europe share similar economics and democratic values." The fact that politicians both inside and outside the EU are willing to consider Israeli membership indicates the presence and power of a civic European identity, for under traditional conceptions of Europe, Israeli membership would be immediately dismissed as impossible. While many Israelis immigrated from Europe, there are significant cultural differences. Furthermore, Israel is completely outside the geographic boundaries of Europe. By elimination one must come to the conclusion that shared civic values are the basis for these statements.

How then does Europe relate to others?

First, Europe is not a new national identity. Fraser Cameron notes that joining the EU need not mean a loss of national identity. Instead, membership in the EU adds to a nation's existing identity, and European identity is able to coexist with national identity. Eurobarometer polling data reveals a very stable relationship between national identities and European identity. Those that feel *more* national than European are in the vast majority, with approximately 85% of all respondents, while those who feel *more* European are only 11% of all respondents. The lack of any noticeable fluctuation over time, especially with European identity, indicates that European identity is not replacing national identities. Likewise, those who feel European *at all* remain relatively stable at around 55% of respondents.

If anything, feelings of European identity have declined since a high point a decade ago. This decline could be attributed to many things, though many believe it to be a growing dissatisfaction with the workings of the EU, rather than a rejection of European identity. It has been suggested that this process works in cycles, from a high point at the entry of new members to the low point of growing knowledge of, and dissatisfaction with, Europe, only to begin again with the next round of EU expansion. But given that the percentage of respondents feeling European has stabilized in the last few years, this cycle of fluctuating European identification seems to have ceased, with opinions now more stable and based upon long-term views.

In fact, European and national identities coexist

Triandafyllidou and Spohn note that as “an additional layer to the basic national identity,” European identity is not automatically powerfully felt. In fact, it may be secondary to one's national identity. Risse states that “‘country first, but Europe too’ is

the dominant outlook in most EU member states, and people do not perceive this as contradictory.” Such a position can be held and not be contradictory because, as Krystyna Romaniszyn notes, the development of European identity is “a process that enhances the enlargement, without causing a *thorough* reconfiguration of national identity.” Thus national identity has persisted despite the growth of European identity. Again one can find this assertion supported by the Eurobarometer polling data. One finds a clear distinction between those who feel more European and those who feel more allegiance to their national identity, with a spread of almost 75%, as mentioned earlier.

Cameron notes that “the primary cleavage is between those who identify only with their nation-state and those who combine national and European identification in various ways.” Eurobarometer polling data supports this observation. One sees that popular opinion tends to neatly fall into one of these two categories, with the percentage self-identifying as European in some form higher when the percentage self-identifying as only national is lower, and vice versa. For example, the highest percentage of respondents who self-identified as European was 63% in December 1994, which also saw the lowest percentage of respondents claiming no European identity, at 33%. One concludes from this data that European identity *is* doing away with identifying *exclusively* with one’s nation.

However, one must qualify the perceived strength of European identity by noting that if European identification has increased among those who used to self-identify exclusively nationally, it has not caused these same people to give up their national identities. One sees that the sum of the respondents who chose one of the two mixed identity options averages 5% more than those who chose one of the two exclusive identity options, of which national identity was the clear preference. The four of fourteen polls

where a greater percentage preferred the singular identities all occurred within the three year period of November 1996 to November 1999, suggesting that that this period may be an outlier, a period of time in which exclusively national identification enjoyed a short-lived resurgence.

One of the main reasons this civic identity occurs is because Europe's boundaries are confusing and conflicting.

The role of EU in the construction of borders and boundaries is a novel case, as it appears to be both strengthening and weakening them, which would seem at first glance to be irreconcilable. As seen both in the guaranteed freedom of movement of EU citizens and in the “Europe of Regions” notion, the EU downplays and diminishes internal borders between member states. At the same time the EU seeks a common external border policy. There is a strong exclusionary element in this policy, as seen in critics’ somewhat apt name for it, “Fortress Europe.” However, there are many cracks in the EU’s borders, making such a stark distinction between those within and without the EU difficult.

Europe is distinguished by its “overlapping and unclear boundaries.” As van Ham puts it, “Europe is characterized by borders and boundaries that pass everywhere, making the concept of internal and sovereign territory increasingly irrelevant.” Dominique Moïsi noted, Europe is “like a rapidly growing child. [It] does not know where its body ends.” The boundaries between EU and non-EU countries can be quite unclear. For example, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland participate in the EU’s Single Market, despite the fact that they are not members of the EU. Likewise, the first three, as members of the European Economic Area, have contributed development funds to Portugal and the countries of the 2004 EU enlargement. Norway paid an additional €567 million of

subsidies in a bilateral agreement. Thus the question of what it means to be European is complicated, as one would assume that the Single Market and development subsidies would be defining elements of Europe. The inclusion of these nearby countries in fundamental elements of the EU suggest that a wider notion of Europe, one that does not stop at the borders of the EU, remains. One might suggest that this is evidence of the continued power of a cultural conception of Europe. Another possibility would be that these countries are included in the civic notion of Europe thanks to their common belief in democracy and liberal economics. While it is difficult to unpack the reasons behind why these specific countries were included, it is most likely a mix of reasons, with the geographic and civic notions taking precedence.

However, inclusion and exclusion in Europe is even more complicated. Risse notes that Italy's main slogan to promote its membership in the Euro zone was "entrare l'Europa" (entering Europe). By almost all accounts Italy has always been in Europe, both geographically and as a founder of the ECSC over 50 years ago. Why then would entering the Euro zone in the 1990's be seen as entering Europe? Without developing too many conjectures about the Italian relationship to the rest of the EU and the idea of Europe, it is safe to say that there is a perception that to be (fully) European requires membership in the EU, and more specifically, accepting *all* the elements of integration. Thus "entrare l'Europa" reveals several important elements of European identity. First, Europe *can* be entered, that is, it is a state to which one may aspire. Implicit in this is a denial of essentialist notions of identity. Second, the fact that Italy is proclaimed to be (re)entering Europe, if one is to assume that Italy was previously in it, implies that Europe is a changing notion and one with which one must keep up or be left by the wayside. Thus, failure to participate in the Euro zone would be seen as quitting Europe. As the Euro zone

is a monetary union, this means that an important part of the current dominant discourse of Europe is based on economic values. This should not come as a surprise considering the EU's origins in the ECSC and the European Economic Community (EEC). However, while the continuity of institutional focus is readily apparent, this definition of Europe is not always.

The Self/Other opposition of Europe is now problematized.

Thanks to its shifting borders and inclusive, civic basis, European identity does not create hard and fast distinctions between Self and Other. As O'Dowd and Wilson note, the Other without is "distant, weak or nebulous." van Ham explains this situation very well: the belief that "claims about freedom, democracy, justice and the 'good society' can only be made within strictly demarcated spatial boundaries" has been called into question. "The blurring of the inside/outside distinction requires a review of the mental schemes" that are used to define identity. Thus it is difficult to distinguish what is and what is not European, as the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion are weak.

In European identity the Self/Other distinction is fluid, allowing one to move between categories. One author declared, "No one is born a European ... one *becomes* a European," and this statement has considerable truth. While the circumstances of one's birth remain relevant, the importance of broad, even universalist, civic values makes it quite easy for one to take this European identity as one's own. This can also work in the other direction, with those who betray European ideals considered un-European. This is readily apparent when one examines the EU's exclusion of anti-democratic countries, both past and present. Greece, Portugal, and Spain all only joined the EU after their authoritarian regimes fell and democratic systems were established in their stead. One should also consider the case of the Balkans. During the violent breakup of Yugoslavia

there was, not surprisingly, little enthusiasm throughout Europe to acknowledge the Europeanness of the Balkan states. A sort of paternalistic explanation for the conflicts were often given, describing them as conflicts between “a panoply of small, unviable, mutually antagonistic and internally intolerant states,” and thus totally different from modern, enlightened Europeans.

This emphasis on sharing beliefs, rather than territory, helps partially explain why Muslim communities in many European countries remain excluded, despite the younger generations being born in Europe. While it is true that much of this animosity stems from culture clash, some of it arises out of different civic values. This can be seen in the growing nativist criticisms, even from the Left, of Muslim communities as anti-democratic, misogynistic, and opposed to human rights. Thus these communities are excluded, defined as an Other to the European Self, despite existing within the physical borders of Europe. It is this excluded community that O'Dowd and Wilson describe as “the Other within.” The “fuzzy boundaries” of the EU, and thus Europe, make it difficult to pin down what is the European Self and the external Other. Risse explains that the creation of the Other is context-dependent, and “as much as there is no fixed meaning what Europe constitutes positively, there are no fixed European ‘others’.” O'Dowd and Wilson go so far as to claim that “Europe has never had settled boundaries.” The fluidity of boundaries means that Self/Other distinctions in civic European identity have not been able to crystallize. European identity in the latter half of the 20th Century had been defined to a significant extent around the contrast between the Western European Self and the Communist Other. However, EU expansion to the east following the fall of Communism has destroyed this notion; one has seen, according to Triandafyllidou and Spohn, “a geopolitical as well as a cultural reconfiguration of collective identities and redefinition

of boundary constructions.” Thus European identity does not have a clear Self/Other distinction. This situation maybe be temporary, though it appears possible that no clearly defined Other will arise to take the place of the Soviet Union and its satellites.

In conclusion,

To be European now means to believe in a set of liberal political values. Thanks to the conflation of Europe and the European Union, European identity is tied closely to the common institutions and ideals of the EU, rather than history, language, or culture. This collective identity is able to coexist with national identities, as it occupies a separate space. European identity is quite expansive, and it is relatively easy to become European. Boundaries and borders which have traditionally served to demarcate peoples are increasingly irrelevant thanks to their confusing and conflicting application to Europe, which serves to weaken and devalue them. Thus the Other to the European Self is largely undefined and elusive, though fundamentalist Islam appears to be taking on this role. To be European no longer means to belong to a narrow cultural project, but instead to participate in an inclusive political project. While not immune to the exclusiveness that has plagued cultural identities, the current European identity promises an expansive engagement with the world.