

European Identities: Centre and Periphery

Abstract presented at Europe in Discourse: Identity, Diversity, Borders. Hellenic American University, Athen, 23.-25. september 2016.

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When discussing European identities, or indeed a common European identity, it is useful to take into account the existence of different *narratives* upon which identities are built. One way to analyse such differences is to draw attention to the opposition between the *centre* and the *periphery* in the EU (Baron et al. 2015).

The European narrative, as it can be reconstructed from the texts of the treaties, is one of a new beginning for Europe, a rupture with the past, an era of peace, democracy and the rule of law (e.g. art. 2 TEU, Treaty of Lisbon). This is consistent with the fact that the three major founding countries, France, West Germany and Italy, had performed their own breaks with the past shortly after the end of World War II. It is, as it were, their individual histories that are projected onto the history of Europe in order to create a coherent, legitimising and inclusive narrative for (Western) Europe.

Other countries have joined the EEC/EU, some of which have a different background. This is for instance the case of Denmark, whose narrative differs in important respects. It emphasises the fundamental historical continuity of the Danish nation on its march towards the nation state, democracy and the peaceful development of the welfare state. But this narrative, which forms the cornerstone of Danish identity, is an exclusive one, stressing national specificity, the nation's fight against foreign attempts to dominate and its struggle to fulfil its "historical mission", the welfare state.

If we compare the two cases, we see that the European Union acts as is typical of the centre of an *empire* (Zielonka 2007): it strives to control, but also to include the periphery, hence its narrative must be wide, welcoming and inclusive, inviting everybody to participate, as is characteristic of an *institutionalised identity* (in the sense of Castells 2010). The inclusive character of the community is stated explicitly in the preamble of the treaty of Rome: the purpose of the creation of the European community is to preserve and strengthen peace, democracy and liberty, and countries sharing this ideal are invited to join in.

The Danish narrative, however, is typical of the periphery: since it only concerns itself it cannot but be exclusive in order to maintain its own identity and freedom towards the surrounding world, and more specifically, the centre, which is conceived as dominating and, in the last resort, threatening. It is thus a kind of *resistance identity* (Castells 2010): its purpose is not to invite others, but to strengthen the ties within its own national community.

We then can see how the assumption that collective identities, in particular national identities, are based upon narratives about the nation, and how the analytical tool provided by the notions of centre and periphery can shed an interesting light upon the kinds of opposing identities, not only in the case of European vs. Danish, but also in other cases of identity clashes where member states seem to react hesitantly towards the European Union.

Key words: centre-periphery, narrative, empire, institutionalised identity, resistance identity.

References

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