

Forum 3: Wo liegt Europa? – Europäische Deutungsmuster

Frieder Otto Wolf

European identity and the Others of Europe

It has become clear on the basis of recent debates (cf. Barroso et al. 2007) that any meaningful talking about European identity has to pass through the challenge of meetings with the Others of Europe – in a historical no less than in a contemporary perspective.

Reflecting on European identity leads to questioning its historical models and constructions – and to asking for an acceptable project for a European future which will see the peoples of Europa as a constructive part of world-wide humanity. Traditions alone do not provide a sufficient basis for this reflection – although the overcoming of false claims from invented traditions will be an important part of the task.

1. Identity(ies)?

A first group of preliminary questions deals with the philosophical problem of identity: identity is not an attribute or a mere datum nor, on the other hand, is it a mere project, a mere possibility that we can choose and update. The concepts of individual or collective, personal or national identity seem very difficult to understand. Therefore, the European identity is thus somewhat problematic, requiring some clarification.

We can leave aside the subtle issues discussed by a certain modern philosophy regarding the identity of objects - from the questions on the authenticity of a document or an artistic work, via questions on 'the identity of non-distinguishable objects' (Leibniz) to the dialectic constructions of an 'identity of the identity and of the non-identity' (Hegel) which do not refrain from introducing perspectives leading us away from our debate. With the exception of the problem of whether the identity can be considered as something that is a given fact, in an objective fashion, as was discussed in this context, we can concentrate on the question of the identity of subjects. Human subjects are not, nor should they be, mere objects, only 'things': in what they are, they are always defined, over-determined, by their own acts, by their assuming or rejecting what they deem fitting in a given situation. Hereby we have two opposite elements, well defined, that make up an identity. We can immediately note, on the one hand, that an identity is always the result of the acts of subjects, as acts of identification. For example, the nazi past of my country does not oblige me (or force me) to continue it. We should, however, also note that no identification is merely arbitrary, proceeding from a free choice, without reasons or objective foundations. It would, indeed, be scandalous if I not only rejected that past but would even state that it had nothing to do with my national identity, as a German. This given, and inevitable side of a national identity - which corresponds to the difficult situations found in the identity of human beings - can be of such considerable weight that we may try to escape it. Which is what I did, as a young man, when for the first time I went to visit the Folketing, the Danish parliament, camouflaged as a Portuguese, with a friend from Tavira who was travelling with me. Or what the so-called anti-German Germans do, in a much more elaborate manner, when they opposed, for example, the unification of our country to avoid another repetition of that criminal identity of the Germany of the first half of the twentieth century.

What is the meaning, then, of such a political and historical identity which is based on such an identification which is repeated by many? In order to understand it, could we base ourselves on Ernest Renan's famous formula regarding the nation: "The nation is a daily plebiscite, as the existence of the individual is a perpetual affirmation of life" (la nation est un plébiscite de tous les jours comme l'existence de l'individu est une affirmation perpétuelle de vie)? Only partially: because that formula only talks to us about actuality, the present, where, indeed, such an identity must always be [achieved](#). [It](#) neither talks about the past, with its inevitable weight, nor of the future, with its immovable openings. Thus we see its strength with its [weakness](#). [It](#) places us, very clearly, before the repeated acts which constitute our historical existence without, on the other hand, speaking to us about its conditions - nor of the conditions that we shall have to take upon ourselves as data, nor of the conditions that we shall have to create through our own acts, taking up our own initiatives in order to create a future project.

At least, on the basis of that formula of Renan's, we can justify, because that is how we began, our talking about the European identity, our speaking about political subjects, while the Europe referred to is not a subject, except in a metaphorical sense: just as the national identity, the European identity, could not exist without subjects assuming it on a daily basis. Thus, we can state that the 'reinforcement' of that identity can be no other than the increase of the identification of certain subjects as Europeans or, in other words, with an idea of Europe.

What does it mean to assume and to affirm in this fashion one's own European identity? And what can be the meaning of an increase of identification continuously repeated on the part of such subjects? I think, in opposition to Edgar Morin's subterfuge, that the European identity should be - and will be somewhat - something specific - and not only the simple affirmation of the proteic and innovative character of the European culture, of its own, continuous non-identity. Only thus, thinking of it as determined by something positive, can we envisage that European identity being 'reinforced' or the citizens' European identification being 'increased'.

We shall not be able to see this positive element, however, just by pursuing our internal reflections. Without meeting our Others we shall not be capable of grasping or even of producing such a positive given – which is there, undoubtedly.

And these others of Europe are no mere projections of European identity – they have an identity of their own and characteristics independent of their relations to Europe. The views from outside, therefore, constitute an essential point of reference for building a type of European identity that is fully compatible with a multi-polar globalisation.