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Europe: Plurality of Identities

The essay is structured in two main parts. It begins with the definition of identity, continues with a historical view upon the European identity and, in the second part, it discusses the plurality of European languages, cultures, economic and political as crucial elements that define one's identity. Throughout, this essay is arguing in favor of defending the plurality of European identities.

What is Identity?

Identity is an umbrella term used throughout the social sciences for an individual's comprehension of him or herself as a discrete, separate entity. In sociology and political science, the notion of social identity is individuals' labeling of themselves as members of particular groups -- such as Nation, Social class, Subculture, Ethnicity, Gender, Employment and so forth.

How can we define the European identity?

Neither geographically nor culturally is Europe constituted as a clearly defined area or space. European identity can be determined only on the basis of its history. Historically, Europe has several roots that form what can be called the identity of the political and cultural history of Europe. The most important roots are Athens, Rome and, in a special way, Jerusalem. In as much as the culture of late antiquity entered into Eastern and Central Europe and shaped different Celtic and Germanic cultures, several different and interpenetrating cultural forms were established which would shape the coming history.

Europe, as a unifying political, economic and cultural entity, has been brought into being very much by missionary monasticism, the practice of pilgrimages and the rejection of the respective other, be it the Mongols during the 13th century, the Turks during the 15th and 16th centuries and overseas cultures during the 18th and 19th centuries.

However, there is nothing like "the" European identity or values (and neither can we speak of the Asian values, only about Chinese or Indian values). The European identity is comprised of a multitude of ethnical, national and personal identities, developed from the same historical roots, sharing some common values, but is far away from a unified European identity.

Different identities do not necessarily exclude each other but can complement each other. Therefore, local, regional and global identities can be related to each other. This holds true for political identities as well as languages, that includes dialects, regional languages, and communication in a "world language". In similar ways religious identities can be related to each other. Different identities influence each other through processes of amalgamation and exclusion. Identities are shaped in ever changing contexts and they are always a process.

From a personal perspective, we don't have an unique European identity and we shouldn't strive to reach one. We can learn and change through interaction with other cultures, without losing our personal or national values. Our aim as children of Europe is to preserve our diversity of cultures and identities as they represent our strength, our capacity to learn and transcend ourselves, to evolve, and to become better people and societies.

Language

Almost since the dawn of time, language, weapons and money have been the most powerful means of communication and socialisation created by human ingenuity. Of those three, language is the most important element of the cultural identity.

The identification of a European culture as such only began with Romanisation, thanks to the massive extension of Latin as the universal language of culture. The Holy Empire was able to reinforce this linguistic identity with the much more powerful force of religious conviction. It is this kind of fantasy, sometimes made real by the spilling of more than a little blood, that has kept us alive practically until the present.

History shows that languages are created by people but imposed by empires. Arnold Toynbee has already described the paradox that, while in the Old Testament the proliferation of languages is shown as a torment and a divine punishment against the arrogant architects of the Tower of Babel, the first gift given to the apostles at Pentecost was the gift of tongues.

The plurality of languages is today an important part of our cultural and historical richness and all efforts should be made to preserve our linguistic diversity. I remember watching on Discovery Channel the UNESCO short movies about endangered languages and realising that those people are losing not only their language but also their culture and identity and our world becomes a poorer place by losing a piece of its rich cultural tapestry.

Returning to Europe, there are two extreme scenarios possible: everyone speaks one language (a globalisation that will make us a lot poorer) or everyone speaks every language. The first scenario, which would entail the establishment of a *lingua franca*, was never politically desirable or practically possible. Nonetheless, English has by now become that which Latin was for Europe in the Middle Ages. The official Europe, in particular the European Commission, is quite taken by the second scenario: as many citizens of Europe should speak as many languages as possible, at the very least two languages in addition to their mother tongue. This aim is at the heart of the new European Action Plan for Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity.

In conclusion, from a linguistic point of view, Europe is a plurality of languages, and every effort should be made to maintain our cultural and linguistic diversity as this represents an important element of our identity.

Culture

In the knowledge-based society as Europe wants to become, the economy is to an extent based on culture and its free circulation. But more importantly, culture defines what we are: it comprises our traditions, values and our views for the future.

We can make a compelling parallel between cultural diversity and biological diversity, as regarding the evolutionary potential of our society. One such pattern that is regularly repeated in the self organizing growth and evolution of crystals, biological organisms, social organisations and consciousness in the persistent advance towards higher orders of complexity. Those systems that have the highest evolutionary potential in this regard are those that nurture a rich diversity within a coherent unifying structure. The greater the diversity, the greater the evolutionary potential of the society, as long as the unifying structure is maintained.

Arnold Toynbee found this pattern in his epic study of the growth and decline of the world's great civilisations. Civilisations in decline were consistently characterised by a "tendency towards standardisation and uniformity" in sharp contrast with the "tendency towards differentiation and diversity" of the growing civilisations. It appears a near universal truth that diversity is the foundation of development progress in complex systems, while uniformity is the foundation of stagnation and decay.

In order to protect the cultural diversity, on October 21 2005, UNESCO adopted an International Agreement on Cultural Diversity, which underlines the importance of every kind of strategy and measure adopted by governments to "protect cultural diversity". According to the agreement, the value of cultural activities, cultural services and cultural heritage lies not only in their commercial and market value. This is an important decision to bear in mind during discussions at the World Trade Organization. This may be the reason why United States government did not sign the agreement.

This agreement establishes the background and the framework for a common EU cultural policy. The goal for the European Union should be the creation of a common European cultural space in which diversity is encouraged and the production and circulation of culture – audiovisual, books, films, music, theatre and the performing arts – can best be stimulated.

Business and politics

From an economic and political perspective, things are quite different. In many businesses, companies are relentlessly merging and industries are consolidating across Europe. Billions in privatizations have returned huge swaths of the economy to the private sector. Competition has opened up national preserves such as energy and finance to outside rivals and the pressures of foreign shareholders. Increasingly powerful and multicultural corporations now help determine the direction of continental society. With national governments looking weaker, business is more and more driving policy. Considered from the economic perspective, the tendency is to form an European regional identity. However, the economy should not rule our lives. Language, culture, personal identities are far more important.

Conclusions

Economic and political actors are trying to build a regional identity on our continent. This is a movement all of us should fight against. I believe that through diversity of languages and cultures, Europe can maintain its plurality of identities. We should make every effort to protect our rich diversity of cultures, as this represents the ability of our society and ourselves to grow and progress.

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