



The Challenge of Cultural Diversity: A Test for a Common European Identity

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Abstract

Europe is facing challenges to its common identity, which is threatened by both the great cultural diversity among European nations and the large influx of immigrants from other parts of the world. Faced with crises that call into question the real possibility of a common European identity, the European Union must strive toward underlining common European values and the importance of history. While the diversity of values in Europe is also reflected within the EU, it is crucial to try establishing harmony regarding strengthening a common culture as well as respecting diversity.

Keywords: *European Identity; Cultural Diversity; Multiculturalism; Interculturalism; European Union Values; Integration*

Introduction

One of the obvious challenges or threats to a common European identity is (too) great cultural diversity. It is useful to look at this challenge from two perspectives, one being the primary cultural diversity among European peoples (diversity of origin) and the other being the increasing immigration into Europe from very different cultures - in some cases from the other side of the world. Europe has faced and is facing several very significant challenges to its identity: from Brexit, globalisation, the terrorist attacks in Brussels, Paris and Nice, artificial intelligence, the rise of extremist political currents, to Russian military attack on Ukraine to expand its influence again, and new major waves of immigration. The concept of European culture and belonging is continuously tested, at times peacefully, and sometimes more aggressively. Social change has always taken place on the old continent, but perhaps more rapidly these days. People have different world views, which we resolve by joining a group, and this is what makes us different from all other groups. Belonging to a certain group creates us a feeling of safety and also a sense of purpose. Belonging occurs "because of and in relation to the systems in which we live" (Allen et al., 2020). Groups often compare and compete with each other based on different perspectives on the issues we are surrounded with. Personal identity refers to those characteristics of the self that

distinguish us from others, while social identity denotes to characteristics of the self that are a font of similarity to others, such as group membership (Talaifar & Swann, 2018). Once formed, social identities strongly influence behaviour and thinking.

Liberal Democracy, European Identity and Values

Liberal democracy is a positive gain for humanity, but it does not in itself make life more meaningful for people. In today's political environment, it is modern for politicians to increasingly rely on various human rights. Human rights "by their very design do not tell people what to do with their freedom", according to Weiler (2019). Humans are highly evolved beings and have always been searching not only for a way to survive, but also for how and what the meaning of our existence is. Religion and nationalism once offered answers to this. Today, the secularisation of Europe means that we pay less attention to the classical religions that preach duty and responsibility. Citizens' rights are at the forefront, but much less about duties and belonging to something bigger, such as the state. Weiler (2019) is convinced that no politician in Europe, and perhaps also in the United States, can make a statement along the lines of 35th President of USA, who once told Americans not to ask what the state will not for them, but for they for it, because of today's political climate, and the individualistic, rights-based system. The presence of patriotism is also not welcome in the developed world, which in Europe could perhaps be linked to a history of fascism and politicisation with a desire to divide. Patriotism, pride, religion were once extremely important to virtually everyone. Nowadays, because of the egotistical agendas of people who have global influence through the media and the politicians they have set up, it has taken on a very negative connotation, although I think that slowly it is becoming counterproductive, at least in some places. The republican version of patriotism, in which the state belongs to the individuals, is certainly preferable to the fascist version (which is the first thing many people think of), in which the attitude is the opposite. I believe that patriotism is crucial in preserving, first and foremost, the identity of one's own homeland, and then a common European identity, which should be based more on undeniable commonalities and not so much on divisive differences.

The accelerated integration and enlargement of the European Union after the World War II reinforced creation of a "Union of Values" in the Maastricht Treaty. The European Union encompasses more than merely the establishment of a shared economic area, but also seeks a political union that can foster a cultural affiliation and collective self. The goal of this was to put culture at the forefront of the third wave of European integration, as mission to strengthen European identity and increase the legitimacy of EU institutions by endorsing shared values and a common history as the foundations (Lahdesmaki, 2016). The fundamental values of the European Union are respect for democracy, individual liberty, fairness, justice and solidarity, adherence to legal principles, and recognition of human rights, including the rights of individuals belonging to minority groups. By promoting these values, the EU seeks to achieve the closest possible coexistence for all in Europe. Many of these values are commonly seen as the legacy of European Western civilisation - supremacy of law in ancient Rome, democracy in old Greece, and solidarity in Christianity. Although these values have gradually spread around the world, remarkably to the nations of the European area and to the socio-economically developed parts of the world, they are still part of the identity and "DNA" of Europeans. However, the progress of these ambitions for European cultural integration has been encountered a succession of challenges that may lead us to question whether the declared Union of Values is present or will ever fully come to life (Akaliyski et al., 2022). The Great Financial Crisis of 2008 revealed differences in the conception of solidarity between Southern and Northern Member States. The migrant emergency has given opportunity to Euroscepticism, populism, in addition clear detachments among European elites and their fellow citizens. The ability to take collective decisions when faced with major obstacles can be determined also by common social values. Even if agreement in principle on a set of core values is not the only condition, it is essential for the future of European Union as a democratic community (Habermas, 2012). This is also why the apparent disunity among EU Member States raises the doubt of whether the

union of values as proclaimed in the Maastricht Treaty ever came into being. Social scientists have always noted the great diversity of values in Europe and also within the EU. Europe is said to be more culturally diverse than any other part of the world (e.g. Welzel, 2013). There are still different northern and southern, eastern and western cultural clusters (a cultural cluster reflects a common past, religion, economic development, geographical proximity, etc.) in Europe, which still reflect historical differences. It is clear that religious and historical circumstances or legacies have an influence in setting societies on the path of cultural development. The more eastward one looks, the more obvious the differences in values compared to Western Europe. Consequently, EU nations are more closely aligned with one another than non-EU countries in adopting democratic and 'modern' values (Akaliyski et al., 2022).

Cultural Opposition and Social Reactions

Another interesting explanation of European cultural diversity is the idea of cultural opposition. Rapid cultural and institutional transformation can trigger a reaction from a section of the population who feel left behind or like strangers on their own land, known as the "authoritarian reflex" (Akaliyski et al., 2022). This feeling can push them in opposing direction to the dynamics of the liberal majority. This could perhaps be illustrated by a European example - the new wave of feminism is a reboot of social change in terms of the female-male role, whether the meaning of life is to create a new life, the rise of the LGBT population in Generation Z... Such a pace and intensity of change may cause distress in a part of the population who then resort to conservative principles or to more counter-radical ideologies. Although Europe seems for the time being to continue to believe in perhaps timeless beliefs such as democracy, freedom or religion, this will have to coexist in an age of scepticism, which is seriously draining and watering them down (Cooker, 2020). The time has come for progressive Europeans, especially in the west of the European Union, to sweep their own doorsteps. If they want to be critical of the right, for example of the Polish PiS party - as they have a right to be - they must also recognise that identity in Europe is not unambiguous; that history matters, that national identities in some countries are different from others, and that the eternal struggle between values and norms is always part of political and social life (Cooker, 2020). As a supranational community, the EU needs to be conscious of its embedded value structure and the historical roots on which is based, so that it can explore means to adapt its decision-making to reflect the fundamental cultural differences between EU societies, or to compromise in the context of ongoing integration.

All European cultures have a distinctive "selfishness model", which includes commitment to others and egalitarian principles, but also emphasises seeing oneself as unique. Europe has a distinctive value profile (Vignoles et al., 2018). It strongly supports harmony-egalitarianism rather than power-hierarchy and also the commitment to others, i.e. the belief that people are the same, equal, rather than individualism – collectivism, is what distinguishes European culture. It is important to stress, however, that although the various European cultures share some common characteristics, there are also significant differences between European cultures in aspects that are usually associated with an individualist or collectivist framework. The autonomy-embeddedness dimension does not unite the Europeans, nor does it distinguish it. European cultures, because of their diversity, could form a unique form of individualism, different from and inspired by that attained, for example, in North America (Gobel et al., 2018). European identity implies a culture that is not fixed, nor is it the outcome of a uniform group. In fact, European culture is constantly shifting and constantly calling for adaptation to new challenges, of which there is no shortage. The current changes in European culture and the prospect of Europe are taking place in the light of major migrations, no longer just within the continent, but from all over the world. European culture is situated in an exceptional socio-historical context where different cultures share limited geographical space, leading to prolonged coalition-building processes and the spread of hatred (Gobel et al., 2018). One of the main goals of European identity should be to balance individualism and egalitarianism, a belief in economic prosperity and solidarity. European culture can also be said to interpret what is considered non-European. This is another perspective on European identity, which highlights the divisive

aspect of European national identities. I myself believe that, while being aware of national values, we should rather focus on the designing a European identity based on a common heritage and common future interests.

The Challenges of Multiculturalism

European society is clearly multicultural. The EU is also collection of culturally heterogeneous countries and regions inside and across them. In a multicultural environment, multiculturalism aims towards ensuring that all cultures within society are honoured and may coexist together while preserving their unique identities. Multiculturalism is neither an inherent phenomenon nor only a reaction to a multicultural context, but "game for a suggestion received on the basis of a value judgment" (Muñoz, 2017, p. 150). Multiculturalism is potentially dangerous because, in practice, peaceful coexistence, when several different cultures coexist separately or in parallel in the same territory, can lead to an unequal distribution of situations, in particular due to harmful agendas and a lack of communication between the different cultures. The balance between economic challenges and a common European identity in relation to immigration is very important (Edo et al., 2018). Although politicians are able to diminish the economic concerns of the population, the cultural aspect still remains, which requires an approach that goes beyond the mere (short-term) economic benefit of migrants. Cultural integration is also needed, which may not be enough given the clash of different "regional" cultures and the potentially large shares of migrants as a percentage of the total population. Decentralised and more personal interactions between hosts and refugees foster intercultural understanding and acceptance, hence mitigating adverse effects on the welfare state and security. In addition, in order to preserve a common European identity, it is important to emphasise the process of assimilation, which has proved successful in the past in the United States.

Faced with a significant divide between major immigrant communities and their host country, which has at times led to episodes of unrest and related anxiety among the local population, many (political) actors have acknowledged the failure of multicultural policies to integrate new immigrants in practice - I am thinking here in particular of Sweden, France, Denmark, indeed Western European countries that had previously been staunch supporters of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has not only failed as a process, allowing separate, incompatible clusters of society to coexist. It was doomed to failure from the outset because identities, which are of course complex, were defined too simplistically according to their beliefs - for example, skin colour. In this process, migrants' identities are constructed to suit the political needs of attaching labels (e.g. Muslim) and are reassembled according to the prevailing clichés associated with them ("Muslims believe, feel, demand", etc.). Multiculturalist policies, driven by a myopic political desire to define identities, have in fact shaped the communities they claimed to recognise, with consequent demands that are not necessarily part of minorities' struggle for equality, but already privileges - in the US, the establishment of the DEI framework. This has happened Virgili (2020) explains, given that multiculturalists are inclined to refer to groups "almost metaphysically, as autonomous agents, rather than adhering to the banal reality of a conglomeration of people who share certain characteristics, traditions, views and goals" - while being very different from others. National politicians and Europe together should stop making new ones, repeal failed multicultural policies and advance visibly in a novel universalist model. For migrants, this would mean establishing compulsory socio-cultural integration programmes that explain local laws, culture and values that protect the freedom and equality of all, and accepting that these cannot be negotiated under ideological pretexts. As far as the wider social environment is concerned, in addition to politicians, judges, the police and other authorities, local communities, should not allow preferential attitudes or exceptions, which is what is happening here (court decisions). Last but not least, the various activists and intellectuals who are so eager to accept any request, if it comes from a "minority", should rather think that the smallest minority in the world is the individual (Virgili, 2020), while we all know that no two are exactly the same, and therefore it would be impossible to please everyone all the time.

Towards a Common European Identity

Perhaps the solution lies in promoting interculturalism. This is distinct paradigm from multiculturalism, and one that should avoid the concerns outlined above. Unlike much multiculturalism, it is harder to look for characterizations of interculturalism. It appears to refer to a desire, a model of governance (Muñoz, 2017). Among other things, interculturalism takes seriously the idea of respect and understands cultural pluralism and diversity. Furthermore, interculturalism implies designing public spaces and institutions that perceive differences. It can be assumed that Europe is essentially intercultural. In principle at least, the European Union is based on pluralist structures that demand respect for cultural diversity (Dobbernack & Modood, 2011). Interculturalism is also characterised by the promotion of open and diverse societies in law and at the legal level by the adoption of public policies grounded on the acknowledgment of collective and individual rights and respect for cultural diversity, all of which can also be attributed to the European Union. A common European cultural identity may be further developed in two ways; to begin with, a cultural identity based on history and on a common heritage; conversely, the identity of today's Europe could be centred on the European Union and the common values and common successes of EU. I believe that Europeans should take both directions. In any case, legacy plays a crucial role in shaping common cultural identity within each community (Muñoz, 2017).

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