

Identities, be they personal or collective, are complex entities. Not only are they entwined with specific narratives, but they are also embedded within time. In fact, they belong to time; that is, there is always a time for building them, strengthening them, developing them, consolidating them, transfiguring them and a time for letting them go. To paraphrase TS Eliot, we could probably call this 'the time of season and of the constellations'. For season and constellations essentially allow us to enjoy our identities and to live in them, make us shake them off and abandon them, lead us to forget them in our embrace of new ones or to just push them in the background, thereby carrying on our business as if a certain identity did not even exist.

This 'time and constellation' bound reality applies to the European identity, too. In the 1990s, when the normative turn in European studies started having an impact and questions of democracy, legitimacy and identity in the EU were raised, scholars and policy-makers believed that the issue of the formation of a solid European identity revealed the limits (and, indeed, the edges) of European citizenship. The reader may recall that EU citizenship was a weak institution at that time and many saw it as a purely decorative element in the European Union edifice or as means of enhancing the Community's social legitimacy. Accordingly, adding flesh onto the bones of the Treaty on European Union's citizenship provisions (1992, in force on 1 November 1993) was seen as a key to promoting a sense of European identity. The latter was seen at that time to be urgently needed not only because the internal market cannot generate strong forms of identification and social solidarity among the participants, but also because its alleged absence made EU citizenship a pale reflection of its national counterparts which nourished and, in turn, were nourished by resilient national identities.

And yet almost twenty years following the birth of European Union citizenship, we have come to see European integration largely through the lens of European citizenship. The Court has made a number of significant contributions to its development and transformation, and the adoption of the so called Citizenship Directive (Dir. 2004/38),¹ notwithstanding the ensuing implementation gaps in several Member States, has transformed market Europe into a citizens' Europe. European Union citizenship is now 'the fundamental status of nationals of the Member States, enabling those who find themselves in the same situation to enjoy the same treatment in law irrespective of their nationality, subject to such exceptions as are expressly provided for'.² And as Advocate General Maduro has stated, 'when the Court describes Union citizenship as "the fundamental status" of nationals it is not making a political statement; it refers to Union citizenship as a legal concept that goes hand in hand with specific rights for Union citizens'.³ And further, 'Citizenship of the Union must encourage Member States to no longer conceive of the legitimate link of integration only

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¹ Directive 2004/38/EC, OJ 2004 L 158/77.

² Case C-184/99 *Grzelczyk v Centre Public d'Aide Sociale d'Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve* [2001] ECR I-6193, para 31.

³ See the AG's Opinion in C-524/06 *H. Huber v Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, delivered on 3 April 2008.

within the narrow bonds of the national community, but also within the wider context of the society of peoples of the Union'.⁴

Accordingly, the EU Citizenship Report 2010 (the sixth report on EU Citizenship) targets the obstacles faced by citizens in their daily lives and focuses on the enforcement of EU legislation in the Member States.⁵ The Commission's pragmatic approach has yielded twenty five concrete actions designed to dismantle obstacles to EU citizens' rights and to address their needs in their various subject positions, that is, as private individuals, consumers, residents, students and professionals and political actors. In 2013, the European year of citizens, the Commission will reflect on the progress achieved thus far and will put forward a comprehensive action plan designed to complete the removal of persistent obstacles to the enjoyment of citizens' rights.⁶

Given the maturation of European citizenship and its increasing centrality to the European Union's present and future, it seems to me that we can no longer believe that the question of a European identity reveals the limits of EU citizenship. Instead, during the last two decades the evolution of the remarkably experimental institution of EU citizenship has revealed the limits of what may be tentatively called, 'the European identity talk'. For it can hardly be argued that the European Court of Justice embarked upon the strengthening of EU citizenship in the 1990s and in the new millennium because judges became aware of statistics showing increasing levels of European identification among Europe's inhabitants. Nor did European citizens fill the streets and demanded more citizen rights because they became more 'European'.⁷ True, studies may find that the better educated and skilled European citizens are more likely to benefit from the European integration process and thus more likely to lend their support to it and that contextual factors and the varieties of capitalism may explain why unskilled workers in capital-rich states are sceptical of integration while their counterparts in labour-rich states may be supportive of the same process,⁸ but who could predict whether this might be the case in t+1? Peoples' subjective identifications fluctuate so unpredictably, that being a winner or a loser in time t provides almost no guarantee that one will display a positive or negative attitude towards European integration, respectively, in time t+1. Valuations change and identifications evolve, too, owing to a range of endogenous as well as exogenous factors. And it is often the case that discourses build collective identities but events unbuild them. Patterns of identification shift in light of economic, social and political exigencies and are often falsified by new circumstances.

This is, perhaps, one of the lessons we have learnt from the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone area. Despite being winners, German citizens react negatively to further bail out packages and to the French proposals about a closer economic union, with a centralised authority coordinating taxation and expenditure, even though they are aware of the severe economic as well as political costs

⁴ See point 23 of Maduro's opinion in *Nerkowska*, 28 February 2008; see also the Opinion of Advocate General Trstenjak in Joined Cases C-396/05, C-419/05 and C-450/05 *Habelt and Others* [2007] ECR I-0000, points 82 to 84.

⁵ European Commission, *EU Citizenship Report 2010: Dismantling the obstacles to EU citizens' rights*, COM(2010) 603 Final, Brussels 27.10.2010. The Report is accompanied by a *Report on progress towards effective EU Citizenship 2007-10* (COM(2010) 603 final) and a *Report on the Evaluation of the 2009 European Parliament Elections* (COM(2010) 605).

⁶ *Ibid*, at 23.

⁷ Interestingly, 79% of EU citizens claim familiarity with the term 'citizens of the EU' and awareness of the rights attached to EU citizenship remains overall at the same level since 2002 and 2007; The Gallup Organisation, "Flash Eurobarometer No 294. European Union Citizenship – Analytical Report," (October 2010).

⁸ M. Gabel, "Public Support for European Integration: An Empirical Test of Five Theories," *Journal of Politics* 60, no. 2 (1998): 333-54; L. Hooghe and G. Marks, "Calculation, Community and Cues: Public Opinion on European Integration," *European Union Politics* 6, no. 4 (2005): 419-43.

associated with either the collapse of the Euro or the fragmentation of the Eurozone.⁹ Similarly, if the EU embarks upon a closer economic and fiscal union, it will not be because European Union citizens have embraced the notion of a federal Europe. Instead, it will be because this may be seen as the option that is more likely to solve in an effective way the economic crisis and avert a Euro collapse which would endanger the whole of European integration. True, we are witnessing a sovereign debt crisis that has nothing to do with notions of identity. However, the crisis has stimulated the proliferation of narratives of 'us and them', shifts in the 'Europeanness' index of European populations and a rise in Euro-scepticism.

And while it may be imprudent to state that a European identity is no longer needed for the success of the European project, the evolution of EU citizenship as well as the crisis in the Euro-zone area force its reconsideration and a rethinking of the time and constellations that either make it a central political issue or let it fade into silence. Accordingly, I would suggest that, in addition to providing models for European identity construction and typologies about its conceptualisation, it is important that we also address other questions, such as 'who is raising the issue of a European identity?', 'when and for what purpose?', and 'how much weight is, or should be, given to it?'

These are important questions that have been thus far sidestepped in scholars and practitioners' quest for conceptualisations of European identity and understanding. They are important questions because they reveal contrasting perspectives about its content as well as its necessity for European integration depending on who is looking at it, when and why. National executives and political elites, for instance, may use the weak presence, or absence, of a European identity to criticise the EU, to make and remake national publics and as a means of creating subject positions domestically by contrasting them with European options. Ordinary members of their publics may draw on the European identity theme in order to complain about the poignant gap between rhetoric and rules on paper, on the one hand, and concrete realities, on the other. In this endless play of identity games, positions and perspectives are bound to shift as well as to become more rigid. There is no secure foothold, but this is not necessarily a problem. It has not been a problem for national identities, after all; if we look closely at events in the southern Member States during the last two years we see that the presence of a strong sense of collective identity does by no means make people less critical of the status quo and more willing to support it in times of crisis.

But what is then the future of a European identity? Should the flexible and dynamic development of EU citizenship absorb the issue of a European identity, particularly since the former creates a sense of shared belonging to a common European polity? Or is it the case that European Union citizenship itself needs to be accompanied by a narrative of a shared European identity in order to reach the solidaristic manifestations that elude it at the moment owing to determined attempts to preserve the boundaries of national welfare systems? The former question seeks to make the notion of a European identity almost obsolete while the latter depicts it as an addition.

Contrary to the underpinnings of both questions as well as the depiction of a common European identity as an end or the destination of the process of creating an ever closer Union, I would argue that the question of a European identity has already been settled. The answer lies where we started from – otherwise put, what we believe and call the end is, in reality, the very beginning. For nothing else could be the cornerstone of a European Union identity than peace and freedom. At the very beginning realising peace and freedom were the ideals that drove the project of European integration and these remain the preconditions that make discussions about European identity possible.

⁹ See S. Fleming, "The Devastating Price of Pulling out of the Euro," *The Times*, 7 September 2011.

In this respect, we can have the luxury of spending considerable parts of our lives without consciously thinking about them and of engaging in a number of interesting debates about the assessment of the present stage of European identity, the impact of the Lisbon Treaty and making the EU more visible in the everyday lives of its citizens. Peace and freedom have been the precondition of our present comfortable existence and of our ability to be able to make choices and life plans, including the capacity to be able to feel at home wherever we go in the European Union as students, professionals, service providers, workers or workseekers and tourists. The same applies to our choice not to take part in cross-border activity and to stay at home undisturbed by occurrences at the border and hostile tensions among countries. Peace and freedom are the underpinnings of our European identity made possible by the development and maturation of the European Union, including its unique model of citizenship. So despite all our debates, all the flaws we may find in European Union as well as national policies, and the misguided positions circulating in the media, we know that we can identify with the European Union because we will not be bombed, driven away from our homes, be tortured, battered, dispossessed and crushed by state power or foreign invasion. Otherwise put, the European Union has given so many ordinary people 'a break'. We have also come across menus of choices that enable and facilitate us and let us develop, explore and enjoy the multifarious creations of the diverse peoples of Europe. Safe in this identification, we can continue our business either without paying too much attention to European identity matters or witnessing so many other meanings, and narratives, of it coming and fading. For what is important is that what has to be achieved and made has already been discovered and it is this discovery we need to safeguard for the future. European identity is thus necessarily backward bound.

This, to an extent, also explains why the European identity can never be a mirror image of national identities; being at war within itself and with other countries is not the modality of European identity. In addition, the existence of an overarching identity is not needed in order to furnish the unity and the purpose of the European edifice. For this has already been achieved by doing things together, solving problems together, by designing appropriate institutions, reflecting critically on them, revising and redrawing the European Union architecture. True, the participants in this project must not be indifferent, that is, they must have a positive orientation towards European integration and a sense of commitment that stimulates their engagement, but such orientation and engagement have many shades and are manifested in different ways. Certainly, European citizens are not required to suppress all other identifications and to display unqualified acceptance of, and allegiance to, what has been decided. The language of sacrifice and patriotism is not apposite to the European Union; in fact, the latter has led us to revise our belief that a political order that cannot command personal sacrifice is either short-lived or illegitimate.¹⁰ In the plural European community people are free to choose whether or not to identify with a particular community or with more than one communities simultaneously and to revise or modify this choice whenever they wish.

Welcoming the modest reality of being European citizens and participants in the most unique and ambitious political experiment in human history should thus be our starting point. Appreciating this and all those things that we have taken for granted for more than half a century, namely, peace and freedom, is good enough. This, of course, is not to say that citizens, groups and policy-makers are not free to define their own sense of belonging to the European Union in unique ways, construct new agendas and initiatives and to identify possibilities for political action. Nor should we forget that in times of prosperity people are bound to neglect the issue of European identity and in times of adversity they will decry it. For this is a reality. But it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that European identity has always been work in progress. It is its business to acquire importance and new meanings, additional to those it had in the beginning. It will forever need building, endless invention and an institutional framework that builds on, and further advances, peace, freedom, the rule of law, social justice, respect for human rights and democracy. After all, this was how European

¹⁰ D. Kostakopoulou, *The Future Governance of Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

identity was defined for the first time in the 'Declaration on European identity' adopted by the Member States at the Copenhagen Summit in 1973. The nine Member States at that time expressed their determination to build a Community of law and democracy which 'measures up to the needs of the individual and preserves the rich variety of national cultures'.¹¹ Many things have changed enormously since 1973, but, I would argue, the building blocks for a political as well constructive notion of European identity remain the same.

As TS Eliot so wisely observed in his second quartet, East Coker,¹²

'In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not'.

Herein lies the answer to the question of the European identity. But evidently, this is an answer of a different kind.

¹¹ European Commission, "Annex 2 to Chapter II, 7th General Report," (1973).

¹² T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets: East Coker (1940)," in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 181.