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MEANINGFUL CONCEPTS: COLLECTIVE EUROPEAN IDENTITIES

1. *Introduction*

Do Europeans have a collective identity or is it likely that they will develop a shared identity in the near future? Social scientists are concerned with these questions because a shared collective identity is usually regarded as a necessary underpinning of democratic procedures. Especially if Europeanization should go on, a shared collective identity might at least be helpful, if not essential. In any case, collective identities enclose information about the acceptance of institutions and organisational orders and about potential support for politics and measures. Thus, knowledge about collective identities can be regarded as useful for politicians and social scientists.

European identity has been the focus of social scientists for decades. Before the founding of the European Union (EU), Eurobarometer surveys, which measure the self-identification of respondents, were the main data base. Since the 1990s, research activities and theoretical discussions have multiplied. However, up to now we do not know much about the ideas people connect with 'Europe' and the 'EU'. Very few attempts have been made to study what lay people have in mind when they speak about the EU or when they call themselves European. In the following paper we present findings from explorative research on the content of lay concepts of European collective identities.

2. *Research on European identities*

In the near future do you see yourself as [Nationality] only? As [Nationality] and European? As European only?

These Eurobarometer questions provided the data core for most of the research on European identities. The distribution of answers among the European population has been discussed widely. But what does this data tell us about European identities? Obviously not much. We know which categories respondents would use for their self-description, but we learn nothing about the meaning connected with the term 'European'. Since the 1990s, the research repertoire has been developed and the Eurobarometer questionnaire has been expanded. It includes a lot of information about the opinions of Europeans on a wide range of issues associated with the EU. However, surveys like the Eurobarometer offer only *isolated pieces of information*[1]. Other approaches are more promising, because they connect theoretical and empirical concepts more closely[2]. Bruter, for example, has developed a questionnaire that draws on three concepts: a general identification with Europe, a civic European identity construction (measured for example through the relation to symbols of unity like the European flag), and a culturally determined identity in which a common culture is seen as the basis for the community of Europeans [see Bruter 2005]. The advantage of this approach is the connection between in-depth conceptual considerations and empirical research. However, the conceptual side is deeply influenced by the model of identities associated with the nation-state. It would be better to use a more general concept of 'collective identity', because it may well be the case that European identities are constructions of a new kind.

Most discussions of European identity are based on somewhat similar concepts like those used by Bruter[3]. Especially widespread is a distinction between a so called

[1] For the combination of such data see Citrin and Sides [2001]; Green [2007]; Fligstein [2008].
[2] Since the 1990s the concept of European identity has been examined extensively. Publications which deal with European identity are numerous. Due to lack of space here we can only refer to some carefully selected examples.
[3] For an instructive conceptual overview see Ifversen [2002] and compare Haller and Ressler [2006].

essentialist, or communitarian, notion (which presupposes an encompassing homogeneous culture as the basis for a community of people) and a constructivist notion of collective identity (which presumes that the units for identification and identities are constructed in discourses)[4]. Often, researchers believe that a European identity would have to be constructivist in nature [see Haller and Ressler 2006]. The idea that a European identity cannot be essentialist is seductive, but it may be misleading.

Recently, Eriksen and Fossum have distinguished between three constructions of European identities which are all somehow related to the EU [see Eriksen and Fossum 2009; Fossum and Menéndez 2009]. The first model envisages democracy as directly related to the nation-state and the EU level structure is seen as a functional regime set up to address tasks the member states cannot solve when acting independently. In the second model the EU is seen as a multinational federal state. Lastly, the third model is premised on democracy beyond the nation-state; the EU is understood as an organisation based on the mutual acknowledgement of citizens' rights and duties, but the community of citizens is not understood as a kind of nation and the EU is not regarded as a kind of state. These three types of collective European identity offer a useful summary of the conceptual discussions[5].

Another strand of research tries to find out those who identify themselves as European. It is well known that young and well-educated people identify themselves more often as Europeans than others; but research has now moved beyond the standard socio-structural indicators to more theoretical concepts. Fligstein adopts the idea that identity can hardly be untangled from interest and interaction [see

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[4] A somewhat different approach is followed by Tietz [2000] drawing on the distinction between *community* (*communio*) and *society* (*commercio*). This approach, however, overlaps with the others [see Biegon 2006; Kantner 2006].

[5] One of our own studies has adopted several aspects of these conceptualisations [see Brzezińska *et al.* 2011].

Fligstein 2009]. Thus, people who have something to gain from the EU will accept its activities more easily than others; and people with frequent contacts across borders may more often see themselves and others as European than people without such contacts. The differentiations between 'winners' and 'losers', and between mobile and immobile people, certainly carries some truth. However, while identities may be influenced by interests and interaction, we do not have to accept the idea that interest is the main thought in peoples' mind. While experience certainly has an influence on perceptions, we should not ignore the power of ideas and imagination. To say it in other words, the explanatory weight of this approach remains to be proven.

Questions of identity are related to public discourse, and thus research on the European public sphere has been connected to research on identity questions. One example is especially interesting: Medrano analysed the framing of the EU by actors in the public sphere [see Medrano 2009]. His findings demonstrate that overall economic and cultural frames predominate and that different groups of actors prefer different frames. For example, political actors tend to emphasize political and especially cultural aspects of the EU, while trade unions give more attention to social issues. Besides this, general lines of country specific patterns exist. The use of the framing concept is promising. However, this research deals with the views of political and civic elites; it does not tell us anything about the European identities of everyday people.

Overall, we find many more conceptual publications than empirical research. What is especially missing in the discussions about European identities is knowledge about lay concepts of European identity.

3. *Explorative research on lay concepts of European identities*

Our research started from the idea that European identity is something new and, however it may look, we cannot

expect that it will simply resemble the old national concepts of collective identity. Moreover, European identity is built up in a context of cultural plurality and diversified world views within the European countries. Thus, it is plausible to expect not one, but several more or less complex patterns of European collective identities.

If the notion of European identity is open to unexpected constructions, it should employ a general concept of collective identity (see 3.1). Additionally, a method designed for the discovery of patterns of meaning is needed. Generally, qualitative methods are appropriate for research on symbolic systems; but pure qualitative research will typically include only small numbers of respondents. If the goal is to map the patterns of European identities, higher numbers of respondents should be involved. One method, which is seldom used in sociological inquiries, combines the advantages of qualitative and quantitative approaches: Q methodology (see 3.2).

3.1. *A general concept of collective identities*

Collective identities can be defined as symbol systems and symbolic contents related to a 'collective' or an imagined group [see Peters 1998; 2003]. The collective is defined through the shared symbolic space. The definition of the collective through a shared symbolic space does not imply that all of its members share the same ideas. In contemporary functional differentiated and culturally plural societies a political community will usually encompass different groups (people with different attitudes, goals, values, and so on). However, as long as these groups refer to the same political community, they are members of a collective in the sense the term is used here.

European citizens are potential bearers of European identity, but we cannot assume that all of them take part in a collective identity, nor can we expect that all respondents see all European citizens as members of one and the same collective (members of 'their collective'). Different groups

may define the extension of the collective differently; for example, some individuals may count all European citizens as European while others may include only Western Europeans. As long as both talk about 'Europeans', we can understand their ideas as contributions to a discussion about the nature of the collective of 'Europeans'. However, we do not believe that all people belong to a collective, nor do we assume that everyone should be a member of it.

The most important elements of collective identities are: criteria of membership; collective self-images; self-attribution of certain characteristics; collective ideals and ideas about principles of social order; specific feelings of obligation; solidarity and trust among group members; collective pride and honour; collective memories and expectations for the future. Collective identities may (but do not have to) include a separation from other groups.

Collective identities refer to a specific field of meaning. Questions to them are questions like: who are we? What kind of group are we? What does it mean to be a European? What binds us together? How do we interpret our common past? What are we striving for?

It may be, however, that Europeans do not have a strong European collective identity but mainly a feeling of belonging to the European space in some way (for example as a citizen of a member state of the European Union). Overall, collective identities may be of different variety and solidity. They do not necessarily contain all of the listed elements; they may be vague and diffuse or highly differentiated and articulated.

Certain identities exclude each other; in other cases membership in different collectives is possible. Collective identities can differ in their inclusiveness or exclusiveness, and in their emotional quality and intensity. Additionally, constructions can differ in their coherence. Theoretically, all these dimensions are variables and their combination is an empirical question.

This general conception of collective identities includes many possibly relevant aspects of content and form. To employ it in a study on European identity is not an easy task.

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Moreover, 'European identities' are an especially difficult issue because it is not certain what the term 'Europe' implies. It can be taken as a geographical, cultural, or political term. Moreover, a person may speak in different contexts about different terms of Europe. Overall, research on European identities is a complicated endeavour. That makes the choice of the method even more important.

3.2. *Researching systems of meaning with Q Methodology*

Classical survey methods, like those employed in the Eurobarometer, are useful for research which focuses on well known phenomena and concepts. However, European collective identity is a new phenomenon. To know more about its patterns we need research methods that can deal with symbolic meanings. One method that has recently come to the attention of several researchers is Q methodology[6]. It is designed for the exploration of subjective opinions and attitudes of a participant group: «Q methodology strives to take the subject's own perspective seriously [...] and to model the entirety of a subject's orientation to a domain» [Dryzek 2005, 204]. However, it is not designed to analyse the opinions of individuals as such (individuals as single cases); it is a tool for the detection of typical opinion patterns held by groups of participants [see Watts and Stenner 2005; compare Müller and Kals 2004]. Subjective opinions are important for the method, but what makes the method specific is its focus on opinion patterns. Essential for Q methodology is the idea of relatedness and interconnectedness of thematically defined statements; a basic assumption is that meaning depends on patterned relations.

In the following section we will briefly introduce Q methodology. The method is based on a ranking procedure: a set of statements is ordered by the participants accord-

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[6] The notion 'Q methodology' is used in the literature to refer to specific procedures of data collection and interpretation, as well as to their underlying methodology.

ing to the grade of importance which they ascribe to every statement (or by strength of agreement with a statement). To illustrate the method we will refer to material from an explorative study on European identities in Germany.

To do research with Q methodology we need first of all a set of statements on the topic under study, in our case 'European identities'. This set of statements is called the Q set. The selection of statements is an important step for the study because the set must be broadly representative of the opinion domain at issue. The different dimensions summarized in the general concept of collective identities (see above) offered the frame for the Q set; most of the content was taken from conceptual and empirical publications. Additionally, we used material from group discussions among students. The statements that form the Q set of our study refer to diverse issues like: the importance of European and national belonging; ideas about the nature of the European Union; the relevance of European traditions; evaluations of cultural diversity; characteristics of Europeans; comparisons and relations with Eastern and Western countries; the importance of religion; comments on boundaries and boundary crossing. The Q set was composed of 67 statements[7].

Conventional test procedures try to construct instruments which hold the meaning of notions and statements constant. Contrary to test procedures, Q methodology does not impose an *a priori* meaning to statements. It does not only leave room for interpretations, but interpretation by the participants is a necessary component of the data production procedure: «It is the subject who is doing the investigating – investigating the statements» [Dryzek 2005, 204]. Thus, the respondents were asked to judge each statement of the Q set according to its subjective importance. Every participant brought the statements of the Q set into a subjective ranking order. The researcher sets the range for the rankings. We set the range between +5 (most important)

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[7] A Q set somewhere between 40 and 80 statements is considered satisfactory [see Watts and Stenner 2005, 75].

and −5 (totally unimportant). The subjective distribution patterns are called Q sorts.

After the ranking procedure all respondents were asked to explain their Q sorts. At the very least, the extremes and every positioning of statements that seemed in any way remarkable should have been commented on by the interviewees. Thus, it is not important that we can never build an exhaustive Q set; respondents have the opportunity to complement the statements. Additionally, all respondents were asked to comment on the meaning of central notions like 'Europe' and the 'EU'.

The Q sorts are the raw material for a statistical analysis which searches for patterns, similarities, and distances between the ranking of statements[8]. The statistically produced factors are interpreted through the interview material. Overall, Q methodology is strongly connected with qualitative methods of interpretation. In sum, Q methodology draws on: *rankings of given statements* as data production procedure, *factor analysis* to identify types of subject positions, *interpretations* of the survey data supported by additional information from the participants. In the following we present some of the main general findings from two explorative studies on European identities.

3.3. *Empirical findings*

Our first explorative study on collective European identities surveyed social science students from two German universities (Bremen and Wuerzburg), and a small number of non-students from a rural region in Southern Germany. It is well known that the young and well-educated population groups show the highest propensity to identify with the

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[8] The Q sorts of all participants are compared with a statistical factor analysis. The analysis in this study was done as a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation. We employed the programme *PQ Method* by Peter Schmolck which is available as a free download on www.rz.unibw-muenchen.de.

European Union. Thus, chances to meet European identities are especially high among this group. Since the aim of the study was the detection of patterns of European identities, a sample of students was a good choice. While we can expect different distributions of identity concepts across the whole population, we do not have any reason to expect that collective identity constructions among students *differ completely* from constructions in other population groups. However, if the identity patterns among students would radically differ from patterns among other population groups, the value of the study would be reduced. Thus, we decided to add to our database additional interviews with ten young people who had a middle or low level of education.

The research questions in this study were the following: which identity patterns do we find? Do identity patterns differ by region? Do students and non-students share identity patterns?

4. *European identities in three different German regions*

In the first study, 45 students from Bremen and Wuerzburg and 10 non-students from a rural region in Southern Germany were interviewed[9]. The final analysis differentiates between five identity patterns which will be briefly presented in this section[10].

1) In the first identity pattern the EU is mainly identified as guarantor of democratic rights. The focus of this

[9] Miriam Fischer and Maria Bornemann were the interviewers at the universities of Bremen and Wurzburg respectively; and Sonja Seger was the interviewer for the non-students.

[10] In the statistical examination a 5-factor analysis turned out to fit best with the data. A factor is only accepted when its Eigenvalue exceeds 1.00 and when at least two Q sorts load significantly on the factor [see Watts and Stenner 2005]. In the 5-factor analysis 47 sorts (from a total of 55) are factor exemplars. The five factors together explain 47 per cent of the variance. In the following we will not speak about the technical details of the study, because we do not have enough space. More information is available on request.

construction is the relation between the EU and Western-democratic values. The following statements are emphasized as important in this pattern: the EU fosters human rights; Europeans are orientated towards values of freedom and democracy; Europeans are tolerant to cultural differences; They are orientated towards values of equality. Some respondents strictly reject any kind of chauvinism. In any case, the EU is perceived as an important institution, and to be European is more important for the respondents than belonging to their nation. Democracy and human rights stand in the centre of this construction. Europe and the EU are strongly and positively related to human rights. Additionally, 'Europe' is seen as a peace project. The respondents support a general openness towards the world, they hold up the idea of group rights and they value cultural plurality as something positive.

The pattern is clear and the construction includes many characteristics of Europe and the Europeans, but it is not complete. For example, questions about the political organisation are hardly integrated into the picture. However, we can guess that the respondents would agree with further moves towards Europeanization, but they would disagree with attempts to strengthen the role of nation-states in the EU; they would especially want the EU to be open to the world. We call this construction a *cosmopolitan European identity*.

2) In the second construction, political structures are set to the fore: the EU is seen as a political confederation based on cultural similarity. Political legitimacy comes from the nation-states and collective identities are imagined only in relation to nation-states. Additionally, Christian traditions and the belonging to the Catholic Church are seen as reference points for identification. The EU plays the role as a confederation and it is necessary in a globalizing world, but it is seen with reluctance. A more emphatic relation besides the national one exists only towards Western Europe which is seen as a community based on Christian values. However, priority is given to national political interests. The respon-

dents believe that sovereignty originates in the national population and they believe in the power of citizens.

This construction involves many dimensions of collective identities and shows a relatively high degree of coherence. The construction reflects a traditional-communitarian concept of collective identity. In so far as a collective of Western Europeans or a collective of Catholic Europeans are imagined by the interviewees, this construction can count as a European identity. Since the EU is accepted to a certain degree as a federation of nation-states, we could call the construction federalist. But we have to keep in mind that the collective identity of the respondents is neither related to the EU nor to Europe, but only to the nation and to cultural-religious groups (Catholics, Western Europeans). Thus, it might be appropriate to call this identity construction *national*.

3) The third identity construction is less developed than the first two. Three aspects define it: the respondents are more related to Europe than to the EU; Europe is defined by democratic principles and Christian traditions as well as by the separation of church and state; demarcations towards non-European states are emphasized. The Europeans are defined by solidarity among them. The EU is seen as an economic power in the world. The respondents do not say much about the political structure of the EU, but they believe that the European populations stand more behind the process of unification than their politicians. This identity construction is somewhat thin. However, the respondents underline that to be European is important for them while they regard their nationality as unimportant. While Europe is understood as a culturally (more or less) homogeneous unit, the respondents make demarcations between Europeans and others. The interviewees believe that Russians are different and they think that Russia could never become a member of the EU. Additionally, they emphasize that the USA should not try to influence European politics.

This is clearly a European identity construction, but it is hardly 'EUpean'. We can call it a *cultural European identity*: the respondents would accept European policies

as long as they have the impression that Europe's culture (as they perceive it) is respected and protected.

4) In the fourth identity construction the EU is seen from an *instrumentalist* point of view. The EU is regarded as an economic power in the world. The interviewees see the EU as a facilitator for exchange between member states and for the mobility of Europeans. On the one hand, the concept emphasizes internal diversity, while on the other the EU should represent the unity of the member states towards the rest of the world. Integration is accepted where it is seen as effective for individual and national ends, otherwise it is rejected. Therefore, the possibility to reject measures of the EU is seen as an important feature of the European political structure. Despite these restrictions, the respondents consider subjectively the existence of the EU as very important, while they view their nationality and their 'Europeanness' as unimportant. They think that trust in a country depends on the quality of its government and that trust in people does not depend on their nationality.

Overall, this construction is instrumentalist and is hardly emotional. Moreover, the respondents speak more about the EU as an organisational frame than as a collective and its characteristics. However, we count this construction as a European collective identity here. From the pattern we can guess that the respondents would agree with European politics as long as they have the impression that they gain from them. The EU is seen as a club that offers advantages to its members.

5) The fifth construction is characterized by its emphasis on culture and tradition. The interviewees hold their nationality as important, but they value their 'Europeanness' as more significant. Europe is defined by traditional values and Christianity and is seen as a peace project. The EU is regarded as an economic power with the potential to become a political power in the world. The respondents want the EU to speak with one voice (this is seen as essential), and they regard symbols of European unity as important. Europeans are seen as a community of solidarity. Overall, the respondents regard statements which signal demarca-

tions towards others as unimportant; however, they think that new member states should fit in culturally, and they fear that further enlargements of the EU would generally cause problems.

The construction has two defining lines: European culture, tradition, and the EU as an economic and political organisation, and unity and solidarity as the bonds of the polity. We may call this a construction of a *united Europe based on traditional values*. Thus, we can expect that bearers of this construction would not oppose further Europeanization as long as European traditions and values (as they perceive them) and the interests of Europeans are taken into account.

These are the five identity constructions revealed in our first study. The findings show the diversity of lay concepts of European identity. The conceptions are not complete, each includes only some of the dimensions of collective identities; some constructions are rather thin and only the third construction includes clear statements on the political architecture of the EU[11]. Yet, all five constructions can be read as collective identity patterns. Each one emphasises different features of Europe and the EU and all constructions have different implications. For example, constructions which are built on the idea of a homogeneous European culture oppose group rights and are generally sceptical towards cultural plurality. Constructions in which the European culture is conceived as plural are open to group rights; however it depends on the construction as a whole what is meant by 'groups' (for example: member states or minorities). Generally, the identity constructions show which kind of politics would be accepted by their bearers.

The findings demonstrate that the content, the degree of identification, the degree of emotionality, and the degree of inclusiveness of collective identities are variables against

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[11] These differences between the lay concepts are similar to differences between elite concepts surveyed by Medrano [2009]. Thus, differences between lay concepts may be connected with relations to certain societal groups like trade unions.

each other. That means, for example, that an emotional identity construction is not necessarily more exclusive, a developed construction is not necessarily very emotional while a thin construction can be the basis for strong emotions, and so on.

With regard to the questions if and how far identity constructions are influenced by the educational   level of respondents, our findings show that academics and non-academics share identity constructions. The cosmopolitan identity construction is only present among the academics in this sample; however, the sample is rather small.

With regard to the potential influence of regional con-texts, we conducted the study at two universities with quite different cultural backgrounds (provincial versus Hanseatic city, Catholic versus Protestant region). Regional differ-ences in identity patterns did not emerge. There might, of course, be differences in the distribution of certain identity constructions, but the concepts of European identity are shared across the regions.

At this point we can add some findings from a cross-country study. This second explorative study revealed similarities among identity constructions in different Euro-pean countries (namely Poland, Hungary, and Germany)[12]. Moreover, the comparison of the findings of the two stud-ies reveals many similarities in the identity constructions. Especially the cosmopolitan perspective and the national variant are quite similar across the different samples. These similarities are especially striking as we have used two dif-ferent Q sets: the first was very broad in scope, the second concentrated on EU characteristics and the relationship between EU and member states.

Finally, another finding from the cross-country analysis has to be emphasized here. The self-identifications given in Eurobarometer surveys are not connected with specific

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[12] Besides these shared conceptions we found country specific ones and conceptions that are only shared between two countries; most of these specific variants (but not all) are more national in their orientation [see Brzezińska *et al.* 2011].

patterns of collective identities. A person who calls himself/
herself, for example, 'German-European' may hold to a
national, a cosmopolitan, a cultural or a national European
identity or to an instrumentalist perspective. The self-
identifications of the Eurobarometer kind and collective
identity constructions are not systematically related, at least
not in our studies.

5. *Conclusions*

Our explorative studies revealed lay concepts of Euro-
pean identities. These concepts differ in their complexity,
but all of them stand for meaningful positions in a symbolic
space. Some constructions define Europe culturally and
do not say much about the EU, others combine a cultural
conception of Europe with the EU as its organisation. Only
one conception emphasizes the nation-state as a point of
reference; in this conception the EU is understood and ac-
cepted as a federation of nation-states. One perspective is
instrumentalist in its nature; here, the EU is seen as a club
that is supported when and so far as it offers advantages to
its members. Another perspective, the cosmopolitan view, is
outward-looking and defines the EU as a responsible actor
in the world. These different conceptions have implica-
tions. For example, if a person believes in a homogeneous
European culture, politics which stress instrumental gains
may not be supported if they infringe on cultural issues
and vice versa, those who look for gains, may simply have
no interest in cultural questions. Overall, it is obvious that
the constructions bear the potential for conflicts. The cos-
mopolitan and the national variant especially oppose each
other in most aspects.
Our findings support on the one hand the idea of a
kind of cleavage between people with and without higher
education because the cosmopolitan identity variant seems
to be alien to people without higher education; but on the
other hand, several identity constructions are shared by
academics and non-academics alike. With regard to the

question of similarities across countries, our findings show that among such different countries as Hungary, Poland, and Germany, people (at least students) share concepts of European identity[13].

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[13] If we analyse the data by country, we find additionally country specific constructions (most, but not all, of them are more national in character); but the shared patterns revealed in the cross country analysis do not disappear and do not lose their weight.

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