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## **The Presence of Europe. Temporalities and Levels of a European Process of Identity?**

“Identity” has become a key word in cultural and political semantics. As such it “has reached the level of generality and diffuseness, that A. O. Lovejoy complained of many years earlier in respect to the word *romantic*: it had ‘come to mean so many things that by itself it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign’” (Gleason 1983, 914), as Philip Gleason stated already in the beginning of the 80ies of the last century. The word ‘identity’ seems to have lost its semantic identity. In this presentation I will try to sharpen the outlines of the concept “identity” by looking at it through the lense of memory. But before I start, some remarks are necessary.

I do not think that the question “What is identity and cultural identity should be at the very heart of social theoretical reflections and sociological thinking”, as the organizers of this conference proclaim. In my view it is enough, when processes of identity are describable in a certain theoretical language.

Especially concepts of collective identity have been criticized very harshly (see for example Niethammer 2000), because concepts and politics of identity have been and are used for legitimating the harshest violations of human rights in the last centuries, ranging from genocide, mass rapes, attacks on civil population, to terrorist attacks and so on. In constructing a “we” the others are often devaluated, demonized and finally killed.

In theorizing identity anew I do not want to fade out those atrocities and crimes, but to regain an important theoretical and empirical field of research, an important field, important not at least because of the violence that was and is connected to identity. Images and ascriptions of identity and in particular collective identity are a powerful incitement in a lot of social situations. That holds true also for European Identity, if we look at the border politics, the wars in Yugoslavia and right now in the Ukraina.

In order to conceptualize and describe identity with the concept of memory I would like to outline both concepts in a first step. In a second step I will distinguish two modes of remembering identity, a future-oriented one and a mode more oriented

to the present. In a third step I will give a short introduction into the temporalities involved in the analysis of identity, before I close with a short conclusion.

## **A=A**

To ask for identity in an analytical way means to ask for Hegels empty tautology  $A = A$  (Hegel 1986, 38 ff.). One way of dissolving this tautology is to temporalize it. That is the usual way, when we talk about identity. A comparison of an assumed unit at different points of time is necessary in order to produce identity. The result of this comparison is identity or better: the judgment about identity as every comparison could fail or leave a rest. A judgment on identity could be directed to the own unit or to another unit. Therefore it could be self-referential or other-referential.

As a device for this comparison I would propose memory. Memory is an operation in the present that provides the material for judging about identity. Memory does not provide the past condition of an unit as such. That would be impossible. It provides a processed form of the past, processed in a selective and generalizing way. So, the more accurate expression is: “A equals the presented processed A referring to a former state of the unit in time”. The former state of the unit could also be a formerly expected, constructed or imagined one. Therefore, identity could be also conceived as a comparison with an anticipated future state of the unit. And maybe this is the most dangerous form, because it (often or always?) involves a demand for action to establish the anticipated state.

It should be clear right now that identity viewed this way is not and can not be a fixed state or an essence-like attribute. It is just the unstable result of the permanent processes of comparison. Unstable also, because in every comparison there is also at least a little change both in the generalized form that is presented and in the present form that is compared. So much for identity, now I will turn to the concept of memory.

I would propose to conceptualize memory as an operation that presents results of past information processings to present processes of meaning generation. But we have to be careful here, because there are three important problems. Firstly, we have to distinguish between different forms of processing and generalizing information. Secondly, we have to distinguish between different levels of memories and thirdly, there is the problem of the constitution of an unit.

At first, the different forms of processing are results of different processes of generalization depending on the form or the “materiality” of memory. There are at least

three kinds 1) bodily types, habits, emotions, implicit knowledge, that are processed in and tied to bodies 2) language types or semantics, that are processed linguistically 3) formalizations produced in and through different media. These different forms of generalizations cannot be transformed into each other without problems. Processes of transfiguration, transformation or translation are necessary (see Renn 2006), which in itself have oblivional and cumulative potential. In the case of identity this means that identity is constructed out of generalizations of different kinds. There are emotional, habitual, semantic kernels, story lines, narratives, and so on, that are combined to the generalized identity of one unit.

Secondly, we have to distinguish also different levels of memories. As modern societies are very complex and include different levels of the social, memory effects or references to the past occur on different levels starting with bodies and memories of the psychic system or the consciousness, and ending with institutions, organizations, the national and the transnational level, and the multiple fields of social order. As the different levels are not just an aggregation of elements of lower levels, but have their own forms of meaning construction, their own logical connections, in Durkheims words: are social facts of their own right, it is not sufficient just to add up the contents of single memories to get the overall contents. Again, we have to take into account different forms of interference, superimposition, interaction, and overlapping between memories on different levels of the social.

Thirdly, there is the problem of distinguishing the units of social memories. In the outlined complex relations of memory operations it is difficult to carve out clearcut units of social memories. It seems to be easy in the case of an individual memory. But even a individual memory contains a lot of social matters and, as Halbwachs (1992) has shown, a lot of social frames. And it uses a multiplicity of media technologies in order to reconstruct past events. Is the diary, the blog, the social media account part of the individual memory or not? Is the past stored in the body (Connerton 1989) part of that unit or not, when most of it is generated in social interactions and is not accessible by explicit reflection? And what is the unit of a social memory, say of a group or an organization? That holds true also for the units of identity. To be sure, there are attributions and ascriptions of being a unit, both self-referential and other-referential. An important question is: who is accountable as a unit of social memory and therefore as a unit of identity?

So in a first step, it seems to be necessary to ask for social memories and their operation in present performances of meaning, if we ask for European identity. In such an analysis it is also necessary to ask for the anticipations that trigger present meaning performances. For an analysis of European identity through the lense of

social memories we have to take into account the different forms of generalizations, the different levels of social order, the problem of forming a unit of memory and identity and the complex interferences of self-references and other-references that structure a given situation. That is a quite complex frame for analyzing identities. In order to reduce complexity a little bit (or to raise it even more), I would like to propose two different modes of remembering identity.

## **Two modes of remembering identity**

To lighten up the diffuseness, that surrounds and obscures the concept of identity, one important step is to distinguish between two main strains of usage of the term identity: a prescriptive or normative mode, oriented to the future, and a differentiated-reflective mode, oriented to the present. Both rely on processed and generalized past for their judgments of identity.

### **The prescriptive mode**

The prescriptive or normative way of using identity focuses on “collective identity” as an aim for (political) activity, a state of the unit to be produced. In this mode identity is a way of conceiving a political unit as an articulated and articulating unit. This involves self-reference and other-reference on different levels of the social, the construction of a “we” that is essentially bound to the difference to other groups. The decisive point for this mode is the anticipated or expected state of being for the social unit in question, be it ethnic or religious purity or be it, as in the case of Europe, the construction of an ideal unit or a supranational state. This mode is present especially in discourses and narratives, both political and scientific. A wealth of discursive actors is involved in the production of an ideal Europe and a lot of money is spent in this mode.

Mostly, this mode is active when a European memory is demanded or diagnosed. An authentic European kernel of historical events is constructed, be it Holocaust and Second World War or be it the experience of Stalinist regimes. This kernel is laden with values and intentions of different sort and origins and comes especially to the forth in times of political and economic crisis (König 2008, 9). These discourses try to collect genuine moments of Europe as a background of experience (Erfahrungshintergrund) and put them together to one European past, ranging from the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome, from medieval occidental christianity, from Napoleons wars to the current war against terror, but focusing on the

experiences of violence in the 20th century. European Museums, like in Brussels, Marseille, Berlin, or Schengen, present European pasts, cultures, and life-worlds in their diversity laid out as the fundamentals of a cultural memory of Europe.

The prescriptive mode – on the fundament of a generalized past, collected and constructed in such a way – focuses on the construction of Europe as a unified state and political actor similar to the the emerging nation states in the 19th century. In reaching for a shared narrative of past conflicts the different, nationally coined interpretations should be integrated to a common european identity through “discussion and recognition of disputed memories” (Leggewie). The inner core of this identity based on memory is to be the Holocaust as a negative myth of foundation, which was officially instituted in the Declaration of Stockholm in 2000 of most of the European nation states, when the 27th of January as Holocaust Memorial Day was introduced. How conflictuous such a construction is, is shown by the introduction of another European memorial day in 2008 for the victims of Stalinism and National Socialism on the 23rd of August. The latter is only institutionalized in the eastern countries of the EU and in Sweden. It will be difficult then,

The generalizations of Europe used in the prescriptive mode have a certain normative bias and focus, a generalization of anticipations, on a Europe to come. The way to this future is paved with stones cut out of a coloured past with different attributions of Europeaness. That means, there is a special temporality at stake in these discourses and narratives. These holds true also for the discourses of the internal opponents of Europe. They are just posing a negative image of Europe with the liquidation of the European Union as an aim.

Just a short parenthesis: Yesterday the question was raised, why we need a European identity. The answers were the building of a community of commons, the normative integration, and the defense of a civil society segment against systemic imperatives. I think, the most important answer is that a powerful Europe as a player in world politics needs committed citizens and committed soldiers, workers, functionaries and so on. The more of them, the more powerful will Europe be. That was always the end of the means of identity. So, I do not need a European Identity.

### **The differentiated-reflective mode**

Beneath and besides the prescriptive mode there is another mode of of producing identity to be analytically distinguished. In this mode constructions and materialities are counted as European and in doing and acting so, a certain image and attribution of Europe is taken as is and is presented and/or reflectively taken into account for

present action. In this mode we have to distinguish the different fields of social order, to give a few examples:

- There are juridical identities of Europe, written down in constitutions, laws, treaties, and all kinds of legal transactions. Europe is present there not as ever the same, but as a changing space and order of juridical validity, changing in time and in specific contexts. And as such it is used or translated in social interactions, and therefore reproduced.
- There are economic identities of Europe in the European Monetary Union, materialized in the Euro, in the single European Market and all kinds of economic processes taking place in the geographical region across national borders, from labour migration to travelling goods. This includes different economic borders, internal and external ones and the permanent crossings of these borders.
- There are political identities of Europe, materializing in the European bureaucracy, in the political institutions of Europe, in a common foreign policy (e.g. in the Ukrainian conflict), and in the quite violent border control and anti-migration politics.
- There are European identities in higher education and in the scientific field. The European Higher Education Area, more widely known as Bologna Process, the ERASMUS-Programme, the European Research Council are working institutions in this field, that frame action and further regulations.
- Such a large geographical unit is also differentiated in the dimension of space. We do not only have nation states composing the European Union, but also acting units on the level of regions, municipalities, and other administrative districts and units. Town or region twinnings are an example for lower level crossborder contacts.
- There are a lot of European Identities in media (re-)presentations. Of course, the prescriptive mode is located especially in media discourses, but we have a lot of present Europes there also.

The point here is not so much completeness, I do not know, if that would be reachable at all, but to give a picture of the complexity at hand; to show that there are a lot of Identities of Europe around as results of comparisons in the social processes taking place in that heavily jointed western cape of asia, in that geographical region called Europe or taking place elsewhere on the globe, but referring to an unit called Europe. Europe is taken into account in many processes of meaning generation, in

many situations, and in many contexts. Europe is there as a source of formalizations, as a resource for funding, as a economical, political, cultural unit, as a frame for actions and generalizations, as a differently interpreted semantic core. And there are nearly as much Europes there, as there are differentiated social levels, fields and units. And there are multiple axes of differentiation (see Renn 2014)

The comparisons and judgments in this mode of remembering identity are oriented to the present situation, the present context, the present action. If Europe is remembered here, it is a formerly experienced Europe, a Europe that is taken as is, not with the intention to change it. Three remarks are necessary here:

- The distinction between the two modes is an analytical one. In the streams of meaning generation both modes mix up.
- The streams of communications, people, commodities, capital, and knowledge and so on build up centers and knots, that form and ground relations of power, which are used to back specific pasts, specific images of Europe, and specific interpretations of Europe.
- I am not all sure about the last remark: Europe is present in many situations. But it is not all the time reflected as context or frame of action, it trickles down into the routine grounds of everyday activity. So maybe there is an implicit mode of European Identity, a kind of prepredicative judgment in Husserl's terms. Europe is then not only taken for granted, but just functioning without reflecting about it. But is there a implicit knowledge in systemic structures?

## **The temporalities of European identity**

As so many Europes are present in the complexly interwoven processes of meaning generation, looking at them through the lense of memory offers the descriptive analysis of the temporalities involved in the comparisons and judgments about identity. A first step was made with the distinction of the two modes of remembering identity relating to their temporal orientation.

Another analytic focus could be the different pasts and different futures that are integrated into one judgment of identity. That also involves the analysis of the particular temporal structures in the judgments about the identity of one social unit, the different repetitions and overlayings in that judgments.

And we could describe the effectuality or virulence of a particular identity. Identities do not have the same relevance in every time. We have to study so to say the

economic cycles or the biographical trajectory (Verlaufskurve), to use a term Fritz Sch"utze has coined, of identities. The point here is, that identities are reproduced in action, but there are times, when prescriptive identities turn from semantics and discourses into violent action against others. Rogers **Brubaker2007** has studied ethnicity in a Romanian town in this perspective. May be that is one of the main problems of social theory, the nexus between concepts, images, identity judgments and action. Under what conditions and contexts does antisemitism, nationalism, religious fervor, and so on, turn into action against others, situationally as in form of a pogrom or systematically as in the struggles for pure identities.

## Analyzing identity

To sum up, I would plea for a descriptive analysis of identities and proposed the concept of memory for grounding such a research. For such a research in European Identity I would propose to get the unit in question into the focus, but to avoid fast ascriptions. Instead we have to look, which ascriptions are to be found in the field. What counts as European in them? That means also, to get the own conceptions, hopes and fears concerning Europe clear.

So instead of looking for *a* European Identity, I would propose to look for “ascriptions” of European in different social memories and the role they have in the performances of identities of different units. And it means to analyze their specific temporalities and their specific trajectories. Europe is present, but it is not present as a whole, as a (more or less thoroughly) integrated social unit. It is part of open processes or better: couplings of meaning performances that are constructing identities.

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