

# Identity in the EU

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Clearly, identity is a crucial issue for the EU, in these times of identity politics. Can there be a European identity next to national and personal identities? How could that be?

## Confused identity

There is confusion concerning the notion of identity. First, a distinction needs to be made between personal and collective, cultural identity. The two are connected. People can hardly develop in isolation, so that personal identity needs cultural identity to feed upon, and people contribute to cultural identity. So, collective identity is inherently relational.

Discussion concerning European identity concerns collective, cultural identity, but it is important to keep in mind that behind collective identity there remains personal identity, and indeed that may be part of collective identity: a collective identity that leaves room for personal identity. I return to that later.

Related to this, there is much talk of authenticity, and that also is confused. Sometimes it refers to the nationalist concept of being a 'true', i.e. authentic English, French, German, Dutch ... person, at other times it refers to an opposite notion of standing out as an individual, being different from others, unique. This reflects the same confusion as that concerning identity.

The notion of collective identity labours under a misconception. Intuitively, identity tends to be seen in terms of a box one is in or out, and you cannot be in two boxes at the same time. So you have either a national or a European identity, cannot have both, you have to choose. And if you are not in the same box as I, we have nothing in common. Then Europe is divided into nationalists and Europeans. Race also is seen as a sharply delineated box, where you are in or out. The box suggests homogeneity within it. But if identity is being in some conceptual box, with others with the same identity, where does that leave personal identity?

The underlying thought derives from what I have called an 'object bias'. We have a disposition, inscribed by evolution, I propose, to look at reality in metaphor to objects moving in time and space (as proposed by Gary Lakoff and Mark Johnson: *Metaphors we live by*, 1980). This is an argument from evolutionary psychology: this way of looking at the world was needed for survival of the human being and its evolution. It goes back to the 400.000 years of being hunter-gatherers, when for survival it was crucial to adequately perceive the speed and direction of the sabre-toothed tiger, enemies, prey, the trajectory of a spear, the location of a lost child, ...

The problem at present is that abstract things, such as identity (and justice, happiness, meaning, trust, ..) are not like that. They simply do not behave like objects in time and space. If you carry a chair from one room to another, it remains the same, but if you carry the word 'chair' from one sentence to another, its meaning will change, as if it drops a leg or changes colour. Present survival of humanity may require a shift of metaphor to adequately deal with the abstractions that now dominate public debate.

In particular, an important part of the object bias is the container metaphor: we are 'in' love, 'in' a mess, 'in' a bad state, etc. This plagues the discussion of identity, and the metaphor is so basic, so much a foundation of thought and language, that one is not even aware of using a metaphor. There is a need to get rid of it.

## Networks

An alternative way of looking at identity is in terms of networks. As a person, one can be, and is, in different networks at the same time, overlapping, shared with others, more or less, connecting with others, directly or indirectly. These networks give access to different forms of capital: economic, social, cognitive, political and symbolic (as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu). Symbolic capital includes norms and ethics of conduct, and their expression in symbols and rituals. Personal identity builds on the networks one is in, and thus one has a wider scope and reach of identity to the extent that one is involved in more networks. Identity shrinks when left outside the networks.

Collective identity is now, in terms of networks, seen as a particularly dense set of networks, with many and relatively strong connections or 'ties'. 'Strong' here means: frequent interactions, multiplexity. i.e. number of different contents (economic, social, cognitive, cultural, symbolic) per tie, continuity (not ad hoc but lasting), and investments dedicated to the tie (economic, emotional). Particularly strong ties arise among family, friends, colleagues, sports clubs, etc. and next religious denomination, ideologies. etc. National identity is weaker, unless it is connected with ideology, particularly when that is related to race, religion, strengthened by symbols of some heroic past. Apart from that, in what way is national identity stronger than European identity?

Networks are not just ties with any contents. Shared symbols play an important role. Ties are cemented by their cultural and symbolic contents, such as language, shared, canonical stories and histories, role models, proverbs, sayings, which, here again, can be national but also related to family, job, profession, community, etc.

Networks go across national boundaries, and then so does identity, to the extent that one is involved in them. As they cross boundaries, they generally lose strength, in any of its dimensions of multiplexity, frequency of contact, continuity, and investment. European integration should mean that people share more and more in and across networks, with increasing density and strength. Hence the importance, among other things, of free movement across borders of people, knowledge and goods. But now, for some, that movement is seen not as a vehicle for identity but as a threat to it.

Does everyone want networks? No: libertarians and inveterate loners do not want ties but absence of them, absence of interference, in an ideology of autonomy, free markets and minimal government. And then they form tight groups among themselves, in defence of that ideology. That is more like the box again, without much need for contact, sharing some fixed perceived essence of being, with a few symbols to bind them, such as the flag and the rugged individual, the survivalist. With the loner one wonders whether this is a free choice or a withdrawal into resentment from feelings of disappointment and neglect.

## Populism

This uncovers a problem associated with the rise of populism. Populism on the right is associated with nationalism and, according to the container metaphor, this excludes Europeanism. You are in the nation, taken up in it, or you are outside. The underlying problem is that the lower educated and paid have less access to the networks, and have consequently begun to feel neglected, left out from the networks. The economic side of the problem is now widely recognized, but it is not only that.

There is another, neglected factor. That is that people have a natural urge to feel rooted in a local community, where people congregate in jobs, the pub after work, the church, community activities, sports, and mutual support and care. In the US, for example, there was a strong tradition of such communities, with an ethic of decency and mutual support. These

communities have long gone, torn apart by the economic logics of economies of scale, with a concentration of work in large firms, at increasing distance, shopping malls at the periphery of municipalities, replacing small shops in villages and city quarters, larger hospitals at a greater distance, etc. Next to the logic of large scale there is the logic of comparative advantage, according to which resources (capital, labour, knowledge) need to flow to where they are most productive, in uninhibited international trade.

These forces not only entailed a break-up of locality but also instability. Economic doctrine also demanded maximum flexibility, nothing to inhibit the flow of capital. But that discourages long term investment and investments that are 'specific' to relations, needed for their quality, not only social quality, but also economic quality of adding value in collaboration, in mutual investment in relations and teams. They even increase profit, in the production of specialties instead of low margin mass products. But those investments require some stability, sufficient time to recoup them, make them worthwhile. One should seek optimal flexibility: enough to prevent stagnation, but not so large as to discourage high value relationships.

The highly educated, being more mobile, footloose, and having access to more networks, could come along in the ensuing globalisation, surfing the international networks. The lower educated and poor were left behind, in lesser access to networks, and were left alone in their isolation in crumbling communities, and this yielded a build-up of resentment. For them, identity is still the box they want to be in, but that box has emptied, fallen apart under the forces of concentration and globalisation. They now blame Europe for uprooting local communities and old values of family, religion and community. The people voting for Brexit want to get back to 'little England'.

There has been a widening divergence, with an increase of economic, cognitive, social, and cultural distance between the lower and the higher educated and paid groups; between 'the people somewhere' and the 'nowhere people'. Increasing distances deepen the resentment. Both national governments and European administration have focused on economic costs, on efficiency of flexibility, increase of scale, concentration, and international trade, neglecting the political costs.

## Parochial altruism

Flourishing relations require trust. That is more difficult to achieve across nations and cultures. Why is that? Trust requires give and take. How far can that go? Does altruism exist? Can it exist? Empirically, altruism has clearly been shown to exist, in people and animals, especially certain primates. In particular the Bonobo ape, as Frans de Waal has shown.<sup>1</sup> It appears to be present naturally, instinctively. De Waal makes the point that if altruism were against human nature, had nothing to build on there, the task of morality to impose it would be impossible.

It was a puzzle how altruism could have survived evolution as an instinct, i.e. as 'something in our genes', next to an instinct for self-interest and survival. In evolutionary game theory it is demonstrated how such an instinct may nevertheless have issued from evolution. In the first approach it would stand no chance. Altruism is beneficial for survival of the group, but the genes are not in the group but in the individuals. In an altruistic group, opportunistic invaders would prey on the altruists and gain ascendance, proliferating their own egotistic genes at the expense of their altruistic ones. However, if there were also an instinct to detect cheaters, opportunists, and punish them, even at one's own cost, among a sufficient number of natives, then the opportunists could be locked out. Dissimilarity of outsiders, in appearance and conduct, because of racial and cultural difference, then helps to identify outsiders. The upshot then is *parochial altruism*, as an instinct: altruism with respect to members of the in-group,

combined with suspicion with respect to outsiders, and that is what happens in present culture wars. Note that it helps to have a clear demarcation between those to trust and those to mistrust, and that again reinforces the container metaphor.

That seems to explain current xenophobia, in Europe, between nations and particularly against non-western immigrants. Logically, a possible remedy would be to extend, by cultural means, the perceived boundaries of the in-group, to include more outsiders.

In a large literature, in psychology and sociology, *parochial altruism* has been extensively confirmed empirically, but with an important qualification.<sup>ii</sup> There is more weight on in-group love and preferential treatment than on out-group hatred. This may raise some hope against xenophobia.

Not surprisingly, in-group preferential treatment is stronger to the extent that collaboration is more important, reputation effects are stronger, and shared identity is stronger. That depends on the strength of ties, as discussed, and hence is generally to be expected more within than between nations. It is also stronger when inter-group competition is stronger. When policy is oriented at increasing market competition, as was the case for EU policy, one can expect parochial altruism to increase.

Surprisingly, perhaps, it has been found that parochial altruism, with its suspicion of outsiders, is stronger for more other-oriented or 'pro-social' individuals. One might have expected that they would be more benevolent towards outsiders, but that appears not to be the case. In other words, a stronger other-orientation does not reduce but intensifies out-group discrimination, in tandem with in-group altruism. Doubtless some populists are motivated by feelings of loyalty and commitment to their compatriots. By the mechanism of parochial altruism this may intensify their suspicion against foreigners.

Carsten de Dreu et al.<sup>iii</sup> investigated the effect of the 'love' or 'cuddle' hormone Oxytocin. Here also one might have expected it to reduce out-group discrimination, but the opposite appears to be the case: it intensifies in-group favouritism together with between-group rivalry and discrimination.

In his studies of apes, de Waal also found empathy within the group accompanied by distrust of any outsiders. However, while Chimpanzees are indeed mistrustful and aggressive to outsiders, Bonobos are not. Instead of war they make abundant sexual love with outsiders, as they do within their group, thus avoiding tensions and conflict between in-group and out-group. De Waal argues that humans have traits in common with both Chimpanzees and Bonobos, related to our having a common ancestor to them. Perhaps in our stance towards immigrants we should cultivate the Bonobo in us. Perhaps culture could do that.

Thus, a European policy of exchange, economically, socially, cognitively and symbolically, is needed all the more, to make altruism less parochial, stretching the boundaries of the in-group across borders.

## What to do?

Now the task is threefold. As has increasingly been acknowledged, the EU must turn from being only an economic union to also being a social union. What does that involve?

First, become aware, in EU policy making, that the urge of people for local roots is legitimate, natural, human. The EU should appreciate, authorise, perhaps enable, the development of local communities, on the level of municipalities and city quarters, with more autonomy and local parties, representation, budgeting, and planning.

An example is the municipality of Saillance, in France, and another the initiative in the English municipality of Frome.<sup>iv</sup> There, citizens, united in the movement of 'independents for Frome', wanted to set up a citizens council, but they could not bypass the party system in place. They then founded a party with the aim to introduce the system if they obtained a

majority. In 2011 they had 17 candidates of which 10 were elected, by which they obtained a majority, and introduced their system. The only thing they agreed upon in advance was a procedure for deliberation with citizens, in a ‘ways of working’. They showed that it worked, and in 2015 their majority rose to 17 members of the council. One must expect, and that is now also seen to some extent in Frome, that, here also, the higher educated appropriate the process of deliberation and joint decision making, and measures must be taken to prevent that, to keep it open and inclusive.

While in my view national referenda are tricky, because they often concern complex issues with wide, difficult to judge repercussions, on the local level they concern more concrete, practical, daily matters that are easy to oversee and discuss.

A second task is to break through the short-termism, in politics and in business, that blocks more stable, longer term relations, within and between firms, and in communities. That requires some intervention in the logic of financial markets. For example: some curtailing is needed of the rapacious practices of some ‘hedge funds’ who borrow funds to buy up a firm, then strip the firm to pay back the loan and pay for a fee to the hedge fund, selling off parts of it and throttling research and development, thus increasing the cash flow that builds value on the stock exchange, and then sell off the firm at a profit. This practice is defended as an incentive to firms not to leave opportunities for profit unexploited, but this form of exploitation undermines the firm’s longer term future, which carries less weight on the market.

Resentment among the population is also fuelled by firms avoiding taxes and pressing governments to grant advantages, in lower wages, less job security, less market regulation, lax environmental regulation, energy subsidies, under the threat of otherwise shifting their employment abroad. The EU should use its power to resist that, and no longer let economic factors automatically trump political ones.

A third task is to make networks, of all kinds, concerning economic, social, cognitive, cultural and symbolic capital, more accessible to all citizens, yielding a wider scope to participate and to develop identity. Special programs might help to make networks more accessible, inclusive. If there are exchange programs for students, ICT developers, scholars, artists, why not also for artisans, workers, farmers, housewives?

But something more fundamental is also needed.

## Norms and values

Networks require certain shared basic values and norms for their coherence and openness. Those should be part of symbolic capital. In a recent book on identity, Francis Fukuyama (*Identity*, 2018) used the term ‘credal identity’. If the basis of shared identity can no longer be religion, race, profession, or class, what is left is shared norms of conduct. Those can be the traditional liberal values of honesty, tolerance, willingness to listen to opposing views. But liberalism has neglected social values of solidarity and justice.

Freedom is not only ‘negative freedom’ from interference but also ‘positive freedom’ of access to resources, to forms of capital. There, economic freedom needs to be retained in the form of access to markets, preventing entry barriers imposed by monopolies or oligopolies. There is still need for competition authorities to guard against that. Social freedom entails access to care and mutual support. Cognitive freedom requires access to education. Political freedom requires access to voting and being elected, political parties, legal process. Cultural freedom requires access to affordable culture, and reliable news.

Behind this lie fundamental values in the classical ‘cardinal’ virtues that go further than the liberal values: reasonableness, courage, moderation, and justice.

Reasonableness includes not just bare rationality, but willingness to listen and reflect on opposing views, and extend the benefit of the doubt in case of disagreement, rather than jumping to instant judgement.

Courage is needed to accept the risks involved in a relationship that has any meaningful content and involvement. Resilience is needed against the inevitable setbacks of life. Part of present resentment probably is that people have been led to expect a better future, and when that did not come about, they were not ready for setbacks and disappointment.

Moderation is needed to not try and appropriate for oneself everything that comes across, in a willingness to share. An attitude to give and take is also needed for trust, without which relationships can hardly develop and work, and which also improves their intrinsic quality. The need for justice is evident, including the old freedoms of expression, association, elections, and equality under the law, and adequate social conditions.

There appears to be a growing awareness of the need for such virtues, among politicians and among business, even in finance. news today (7 August 2019) was the announcement that the Dutch Central Bank is issuing instructions to banks to moderate tax evasion even when it is legal.

Differences in culture, needs, preferences, cognition, and morality will remain, and are to be appreciated, with allowance for variety of individual identity. Differences can be difficult to deal with, and form an obstacle for collaboration, but also are interesting, a source of economic, intellectual and spiritual growth. For this, I employ some work I did, with associates.<sup>v</sup>

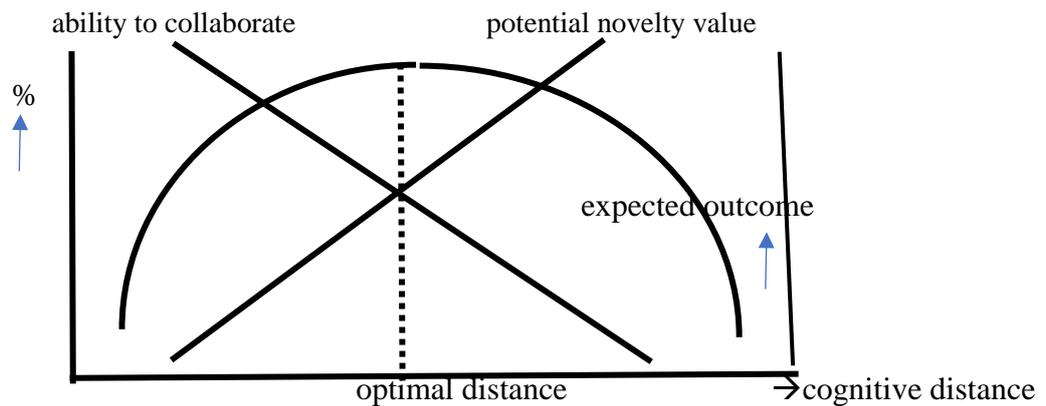
## Optimal difference

Different people develop their subjectivity along different life paths and thereby differ more or less in their world views. That is both a problem and an opportunity.

With people being subjected to the same laws of nature, these differences will be less for concepts of nature than for cultural views, concepts of humanity and society. Indeed, in evolutionary terms different cultures create their own cultural selection environment, by which individual survival, or the survival of ideas, is conditional upon adherence to cultural specificities. Difference between people, diversity, complicates collaboration and living together. But diversity is also interesting. One has blind spots and cognitive and moral prejudices, and to have a chance of getting away from them one needs knowledge, insight, skills from others. But when is difference too large? It can be too small but also too large. Cognitive difference has several dimensions: substantive, concerning cognitive issues of understanding, and moral and cultural, concerning ways of dealing with each other. Such differences offer an opportunity and a problem.

The opportunity concerns the potential for 'novel combinations' of ideas, with increase with distance. The problem lies in limits of mutual understanding and acceptance, which decreases with increasing distance. What one might expect to get out of collaboration may be construed as the mathematical product of the potential of distance and the ability to utilize it, which may be seen as the probability of realising that potential. If, say, the increase of potential and the decrease of understanding/acceptance are both linear, the product is quadratic, parabolic, with a maximum at a certain distance. In other words there is something like optimal cognitive distance. To profit from each other in networks one should seek partners at sufficient distance to make it interesting, but not so large that one can make nothing of it. This is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1 Optimal cognitive distance



The ability to cooperate has two sides: the ability to understand, called *absorptive capacity*, and rhetorical capability to help the other understand what one says and does.

Both absorptive capacity and rhetorical ability depend on accumulated knowledge and experience in collaboration, and hence the ability to cross distance is not fixed. In relations, by learning to deal with people who think differently, one can raise that ability, and can then deal with larger cognitive distance, which yields an optimum at a greater distance, raising innovative performance with ‘novel combinations’. There, fortunately, lies a reward for dedication to collaboration with people who think differently.

This important for the following reason. On the whole I take a dim view of the current development of markets and capitalism. But here is a bright point: there is an economic reward for those who learn to collaborate with people who think differently.

One can see the model as primarily an economic one, in collaboration between firms, but also as a political one. Refugees offer difference, and from that they and we can learn. But distance should not be so large that no mutual understanding is possible. A sufficient level of tolerance and empathy is required, and a sufficient level of integration. Immigrants do not need to fully assimilate, and perhaps they should not, to maintain variety and distance, but a minimum of integration is needed to make the crossing of distance viable.

Here, things are not improving, in present society, where people entrench themselves in their own perspectives, in ‘filter bubbles’ with little cognitive and moral distance.

This issue is connected with that of trust. That requires the ability to exercise empathy, to receive and give constructive criticism. That requires the courage to be vulnerable to criticism and to accept the risk of relations. It also requires benevolence in the form of extending the benefit of doubt when something goes wrong, not to immediately accuse and condemn but to listen to what is explained.

<sup>i</sup> Frans de Waal *The Bonobo and the atheist: In search of humanism among the primates*, W.W. Norton, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> See e.g. Carsten K.W. de Dreu, Daniel Balliet & Nir Halevy, ‘Parochial cooperation in humans: Forms and functions of self-sacrifice in intergroup conflict’, *Advances in Motivation Science*, 1(2014), p.1-47.

<sup>iii</sup> Carsten K.W. de Dreu, Lindred L. Greer, Gerben A. van Kleef, Shaul Shalvi & Michael J.J. Handgraaf, 2011, p. 1262-1266.

<sup>iv</sup> See the website [iffrome.org.uk](http://iffrome.org.uk), and for further cases [indie-town.uk](http://indie-town.uk)

<sup>v</sup> B. Nooteboom, W.P.M. van Haverbeke, G.M. Duijsters, V.A. Gilsing & A. v.d. Oord, Optimal cognitive distance and absorptive capacity, *Research Policy*, 36 (2007), p.1016-1034.