



Imagining and Living Europe

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*Position paper for dialogue session: Is there a European identity shaped by technology?
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Is Europe a geographical category?

For answering the question 'is there a European identity shaped by technology', it is important to reflect on the notion of Europe first. This notion is often used in a trivial and unreflexive way, as if it is clear what Europe is. Many handbooks on European history do not reflect on the assumptions implicated in the word 'Europe'. Probably because it is too difficult to articulate a convincing point of departure. Still, it is unfortunate because many histories of Europe make implicit choices on their time- and space frame. For example, some books include Turkey (Ottoman Empire) and/or Russia in their history of Europe, while other focus on Western Europe only (this is the majority). Also for some books European history goes back to Greek civilisation, while for others it starts when the relatively modern concept of Europe gradually replaced the earlier dominant notion of Christianity, somewhere between the fourteenth and eighteenth century. So the notion of Europe and what it means to write a European history shifts between authors. In a way Europe can be seen as a 'tidal Europe' whose frontiers in time and space ebb and flow, depending on the preferences and historical situation of specific authors (and their language capabilities).

Since it is so hard to provide a precise and shared definition of Europe, many historians attempting to write a history of Europe do not discuss the issue. An exception is Norman Davies, who in his monumental *Europe. A History* does reflect on the difficulties involved in defining Europe. He comes to the conclusion that "in the end, therefore, intellectual definitions raise more questions than they answer. It is the same with European history as with a camel. The practical approach is not to try and define it, but to describe it (see Davis 1996, 46)." This leaves us with empty hands, of course. Davies himself has made the

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decision to focus on mediaval and modern periods, "where a recognizably European community can be seen operating. The geographical spread aims to give equitable coverage to all parts of the European Peninsula from the Atlantic to the Urals--north, west, south, and centre (vii)." How he came to this decision is not so clear, except for his strong wish to write a balanced European history and not a Western Europe biased history.

So the approach of Davies and others would leads us to define Europe basically in a geographical sense. It refers to the Peninsula connected to the world's largest land mass called Asia. Mainly a choice needs to be made where to draw the line between Europe and Asia, and this will always be arbitrary. The notion of European identity is almost empty in such a case, however, and the question central in this dialogue session should be reframed into: Is there a European history shaped by technology. Before deciding that this is the question which remains with us, I would like to look at some more depth to the notion of a European identity.

Europe - A Identity?

Does it make sense to refer to a European identity? Does it exist and in what sense? In answering this question, I would like to apply the notion of collective identity. This notion assumes that people tend to defines themselves on the basis of a set of ideas to which they can relate positively and which they share with others. These ideas help to define the community they belong to. The formation of such a community will not only lead to a definition of the Self, but also of the Other, and thus to inclusion and exclusion of people. For many people in Western Europe, The Other has often been Communism or Muslim countries, for example. The French identity has also been constructed through adding the US to the list of others (see Smith 1991; Marcussen et al.,1999). Some commentators fear that any search for a European identity will always result in building the Fortress Europe, since identity formation will lead to exclusion (Nederveen Pieterse 1991; Goddard et al., 1996).

When using the identity concept, it is also important to see that people are members of several groups, and thus will have multiple identities. Identities can, for example, relate to families, class, gender, and also a nation-state. This latter identity has become very strong in the last two centuries, and for this reason many historians have questioned the

possibility and legitimacy of a European identity. They maintain that key elements for forming a European identity, such as political legitimacy, a shared language, symbols, and a sense of history and memory are missing. However, others have argued, and I share this view, that this position is exaggerated precisely because people can have multiple identities, and a European identity does not have to be in conflict with a national one (see for example Smith 1991); One can even go further and point out that many national identities do integrate ideas about Europe from the start, and various meanings of Europe have been mobilized in the process of building nation states (e.g. French identity is constructed as a European identity) (see Malmberg and Stråth 2002).

In addition, we should remind ourselves not only that people will have multiple identities, but also that these identities work as a device of power. For example locating the European identity in the inherited Judaeo-Christian religion, the Greek-Hellenistic ideas, Progress, Reason, represents only a specific eurocentric and elitist set of ideas, which are (partly) rooted in the nineteenth century imperial project, and ignores Europe's multicultural realities (Nederveen Pieterse 1991). We need to look at various sites for the generation of a European identity and see how generated identities have operated in practice. We should look at colonially generated ideas about Europe as well as at Russian and lower class practices.

A final note is that a European identity should be conceived neither as a set of core unchangeable values nor as completely fluid and negotiable. Identities do change, but not frequently because a lot of work has been done to reproduce and maintain certain identities, and there are embedded in institutions (procedures, rules for behaviour, routines, collective understandings, myths), and in technology. Still, actors might try to direct the identity formation process in new directions, and if effective, shifts can occur. It is also necessary to make a distinction between stronger and weaker identities, and I would like to argue that a European identity is a weak one. It does not orient people's behaviour and thinking in strong way, and the content is rather fluid, hence it might be better to speak of European identities.

In research we could explore the contents of these identities, and see who is promoting specific elements, how and why, and if these European identities have become stronger and converge in the last part of the twentieth century due to the process of building some kind of new European state. Has Europe become more European in this sense?

My first conclusion (offered for discussion at the workshop) is that it does make sense to research a European identity, as long as we define a European identity as one among the several others, and see it as an emerging construct/structure that various groups can draw on, use and contribute to. Europe is an actor-category, and we can follow and explore the Europe-building work of actors. Using the now classical concept introduced by Anderson (1983) for studying nationalism, we can explore Europe as an imagined community. The construction of Europe (and Europeanness) is then conceived as a bonding process whereby people imagine that other people have the same understanding of what Europe is about, even though they have never met.

Technology and Imagined Europe

The imagined community Europe is built through nation-building practices, and here technology comes in because I would like to argue that technology development has been an important avenue in the process of constructing European identities. The literature which looks at Europe from a nationbuilding perspective is a new and young field. At this point in time, it does not discuss technology much.² It assumes that “Europe” (as a political and cultural entity) was created through the building of European economic and political institutions, and the attempts of these institutions to create a European identity, most notably the work of the European Commission and other agencies in the Union (see Shore 2000). For example the work to create a European passport, A European coin (Euro), A European flag, a standardized driving license, a European anthem (taken from the prelude "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony), a European Road Safety Year, European Fight Against Cancer, European Cinema Year, A series of European Cities of Culture etc. Other studies look at the way a European dimension has been emerging in the effort to build nation-state identities (Malmberg and Stråth 2002), or look at the deep impacts of both World Wars and the Cold War on the emerging of a new kind of European identity (Schumann 2003). In these studies the focus is on political and economic actors. Actors working on technological projects are missing. The design and development of artefacts, infrastructures and standardisation processes involved are not seen as important sites for negotiating and developing a European identity.

² The building of nations and nation-states has been researched more in depth, however also in this literature the role of technology is neglected. For a book on how nuclear energy contributed to the building of French national identity, see Hecht 1998.

In a new research project -Transnational Infrastructures and the Rise of Contemporary Europe (InfraEurope)- I am working on with a team of collaborators, we will apply the concept of imagined communities to the development of various transnational infrastructures.³ The building and use of transnational infrastructures created material and institutional links between European nation-states, and all this took place long before there was an explicit project of creating Europe, but it has contributed to the development of a European identity. Hence, the assumption is that European identities have been articulated in response to the development of transport, communication and energy transnational infrastructures and the resulting circulating and movements. Of course, the development of these infrastructures has been influenced by EU policies, but the extent in which these policies have been important has to be researched. In four Ph.D projects, studying different infrastructures, the following questions will be addressed: What visions of imagined Europe accompanied the construction of transnational infrastructures? How can we describe their content? What was emphasized and what was marginalized? Which kind of needs, purposes, users and usages were projected? What kind of changes can be seen over time? Which aspects are embedded in the design and lay-out of the infrastructures? Who is proposing which imagined Europe? What voices are heard and what voices are silent or silenced? Whose imaginations prevail in the construction and use of infrastructure? How can we explain this outcome?

Technology and Banal Europeanness

However, looking at the design of new infrastructures, standards, artefacts and other systems only neglects that the scope and nature of the emerging European identity will crucially depend on how the infrastructures were actually taken up by a range of users and in a broader sense all citizens. The construction of Europe cannot be reduced to the politics of “imagined Europe” materialized in transnational infrastructures; the research needs to take into account how a range of users appropriated them. Here, appropriation refers to the process in which users and citizens signify, reproduce, communicate, explore, and integrate these infrastructures in their daily life. The assumption is that the circulation of goods, information, services, and people brought about by the use of infrastructures created many sort of new ties among users and citizens. By using these infrastructures, users and

³ This project is funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). Project team consist of four Ph.D students: Irene Anastasiadou, Sorinela Ciobîcă, Frank Schipper, Vincent Lagendijk and several faculty members Erik van ver Vleuten, Geert Verbong, Gijs Mom and Johan Schot. In addition we collaborate with Arne Kaijser, Paul Edwards and Tom Misa.

citizens created **living communities** (instead of imagined communities) building new identities, experiences and relationships across Europe. What I want to indicate is that a concept such as imagined community tends to lead to a focus on the design and construction of a European identity through a range of Europe-building practices of elite actors. However, we also need to look at how people in their daily life do not forget and maintain their Europeanness. Here we might profit from the use of the concept of banal nationalism (introduced by Billig 1995). This concept might be used to refer to the reproduction of a sense of Europeanness in daily life. This happens through daily routines which keep people aware they belong to Europe, for example to through their pattern of consumption (driving a European car, consumption of food from a European country, listening to Euronews) or through the exposure to European landscape. In our research project we will ask the question if and how the use of transnational infrastructures helped people to remember their European identity.

My second conclusion (also offered for discussion) is that looking through the lens of technology has potential to offer rich and original insights on the construction and force of European identities (also in relation to other national identities).

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