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Young People's Discursive Constructions of European Identities

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Abstract

For over 20 years the European Commission has tried to promote a sense of Europeanness through education, but the meaning of this is contested. For some, European identity is associated with the European Union, and for others in Western Europe is linked culturally to Greco-Roman civilisation and Christianity, with eastern contributions barely mentioned. Some argue that European identity is formed in relationship to the other, be it America, the East or Islam. It is also seen as part of the EU's ideological project to fight discrimination, racism and xenophobia and to promote values of tolerance and respect. This paper considers different ways young people in Belgium, Luxembourg and England construct European identity by examining the discourses they use in constructions of Europeanness.

Introduction

In the last 20 years the European Commission has been attempting to promote a sense of Europeanness among its citizens, in which policy education has played a key role. In an increasingly multicultural, multi-faith Europe, the issue of European identity is more relevant than ever. However, its formation and meaning are disputed. Literature has emphasised how European identity is increasingly becoming associated with the European Union. In cultural terms, Western Europe is frequently mentioned as the peak of the Greco-Roman civilisation and Christianity whereas eastern contributions are barely mentioned. Some theorists have argued that European identity is formed in relationship with others: America, 'the East', Islam and Turkey (van Ham, 2001). Additionally, the construction of a European identity has been seen as an EU ideological project to fight discrimination, racism and xenophobia and hence to promote values such as tolerance and respect for human rights.

This paper considers the different ways young people in Belgium, Luxembourg and England constructed European identity by examining the discourses used in their constructions of Europeanness.

Methodology

This paper draws on empirical data from an ongoing research. The sample consisted of 90 pupils (aged 15-19) from nine schools: state and European schools (institutions set up for the children of EU officials) in Belgium, Luxembourg and England. Each country includes three schools: two state schools (one mainly working-class and one middle-class) and a European School (almost exclusively middle-class). Qualitative methods were employed in data collection, namely: 18 focus groups/paired interviews with 79 pupils and 36 individual semi-structured interviews. The conceptual framework adopted

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is social constructivist. A combination of a discourse analytic approach and a thematic analysis is adopted. All names used in each interview extract are pseudonyms.

1 Objective constructions of Europeanness

1.1 European identity: culture

'High culture'
Culture has been used in young people's talk during their descriptions of Europe which has been portrayed as old, developed and 'civilised'. It can be argued that essential to these discourses is an assumption of cultural superiority. However, there was one student mentioning a negative aspect of European history: colonialism.

Culture was also used as a way to distinguish Europeans from other groups. A 'European culture' was talked about as being associated with a high culture in contrast with Americans. This high culture seems to be articulated in Europeans being more culturally educated and 'culture-rich' of other nationalities.

> Europeans are more able to express themselves than someone like Americans because we are more educated in different things such as arts, performing arts or literature. (Max, m, 17, SS, England) (2)

Related to the 'culture-rich' discourse is the concept of mobility. Being mobile, both geographically and culturally – travelling to or living in different countries – was seen as a characteristic of being European. These discourses seem to construct Europeanness as being determined by access to cultural capitals as it can be argued this mobility makes one 'culture-rich'. However, not everybody has access to such resources and therefore, the issue of mobility might result in the creation on an elite identity. Essential to these discourses is the notion of social class. These classed discourses construct Europeanness along middle-class lines making it an identity available for a specific group. This view is rather exclusive and is loaded with elitist assumptions. However, culture discourses are only part of the story.

1.2 European identity: cultural capitals and the EU

Cultural competency
Embodied competencies and cultural capitals were concepts within some pupils' constructions of European identities. Europeanness was talked about as the ability to mix in and to speak languages. These forms of capitals are increasingly valued in western societies and especially in the European Union and they can be seen as means for mobility. In other words, these assets and skills increase individual's chances to move (geographically and culturally). It seems then, that the concepts of embodied competencies and capitals are closely linked with the discourse of Europeans as mobile subjects mentioned above.

European Union
Young people have associated European identity with the European Union through indicators such as EU membership, rights and the single currency (the euro). Indeed,

'Europe' has been used as shorthand for the European Union. EU membership has been considered an important factor in being European. This political perspective is a rather exclusive view as it excludes those European countries that are not EU member states. It establishes limits based on membership, of who might be included or not as 'European' thus creating new 'insiders' and new 'outsiders' within Europe. This political discourse extends itself onto a civic discourse where Europeanness was seen by some pupils as implying rights such as the ability to travel freely within the Union.

Symbolic constructions of Europeanness and Europe associated with the EU were also present in young people's talk. The main symbol mentioned was the European currency – the euro. However, other symbols such as the European flag and emblem were also mentioned by a small number of pupils. This might suggest that the euro may be the most powerful symbol used by the EU for the promotion of a European consciousness. Implicit in this symbolic construction of European identity is the creation of difference. As Hall (1997) argues, symbolic systems of representation can function as important markings of difference. Indeed, many young people constructed Britain as different from other European countries due to its non-adherence to the euro.

1.3 European identity: a geographical space

Europeanness as 'living, being born or working in Europe'
Geographical criterion was important in perceiving Europeanness. Most students defined 'European' by using clear-cut categories such as either someone who lives and/or works in Europe. Many others defined it as someone who was born, has been brought up or studies in Europe. A few students had a somehow inclusive construction of Europeanness as they considered migrants living in Europe for a large period of time as being European.

> [A European] doesn't have to be necessarily somebody who comes from France or Poland. It can be someone that has lived for 20 or 30 years and fell in love with Europe. (Jordi, m, 16, ES, Belgium)

This seems to suggest that a European identity is readily available to people both outside the EU and Europe. Although this can be seen as a rather inclusive perception of Europeanness, it implies a conditional inclusion. Despite it being based on a very long period of residence (i.e. 20-30 years) it is also dependent on the 'love' one feels for Europe. The observation of this student contrasts with the view of a 'Fortress Europe' where all migrants are considered 'foreigners'. Additionally, this European identity takes into account the present societal make-up of Europe as a multicultural continent.

Frontiers and borders
Many of the young people view 'Europe' as a geographical term: a continent, a region in the world. Europe's external borders were mentioned with specific reference to Asia. A student, in his geographical narrative about Europe, constructed both internal and external boundaries.

> Geographically, Europe is limited to certain countries. So we have Eastern Europe, Western Europe which does not exist… Well, there's not so much

> difference than before but there are borders. Europe, if we look at a map, is limited; there's Asia and the beginning of Europe… Turkey is not in Europe if I'm not wrong. Well, I can be wrong but… If Europe enlarges itself outside its geographical borders, then there's little interest in calling it Europe.
>
> (Pepito, m, 17, ES, Belgium)

This extract suggests that there is a need to draw boundaries to be able to define Europe. As such it can be argued that Europe needs frontiers to be 'meaningful'. The extract also implies two types of divisions of Europe. First, based on internal borders, is a division between the East/West which has also been found in many pupils' talk. Although for this pupil differences between the East/West axes are not as noticeable as they used to be, they still exist. Induced in this suggestion is the idea that the Cold War 'communist Eastern Europe' vs. a 'democratic Western Europe' has shifted. Indeed, in present Europe, partly due to European integration, differences between the East/West are shifting. The second division found has to do with the setting of external borders: Asia and Turkey are seen as not belonging to the European geographic space. This confusion and doubt about Turkey's being or not part of a European space mirrors many arguments and debates about its EU membership eligibility.

For pupils in this study, external borders seem to have more importance than internal ones in their constructions of a geographic Europe. The EU's removal of internal borders seems to create a sense of a secure area where the significance of borders is downplayed. Young people tend to be more aware of – and probably as a consequence to the eradication of internal borders – the new external borders of the EU. This seems to confirm the significance of the social construction of borders as markers of inclusion and exclusion in identity construction.

2 Subjective constructions of Europeanness

2.1 European identity: an ideology

Shared values

There was a common agreement among young people that being European stands for a shared system of values and beliefs associated with liberal democracy. For the vast majority being European is related with attitudes of mind. Open-mindedness has been considered the most highly feature of being European. Tolerance and acceptance of other cultures were also considered important values shared by Europeans. For pupils, Europe seems only to stand for positive values: an open, tolerant and accepting Europe. If we look back at European history, it is easy to come up with examples that contradict these humanitarian values (i.e. unrestrained nationalism, totalitarianism, imperialism, etc). Moreover, it is important to note that Europeans have become increasingly bitter and aggressive towards asylum seekers and religiously intolerant. Only very few students acknowledged some events that seem to embody oppositional values:

> Europeans they have a long, a long history of sort of colonisation and trying to get over the rest of the world. (Alan, m, 18, SS, England)

From this extract it is clear that Europe consists of contradictory experiences which embody oppositional values and neither of them should be neglected. The European Union discourse of tolerance, respect and so on, is based on what we, as Europeans, have in common. Although it can be argued these values are not European *per se* but are universal, it is fair to say they are predominantly European. For example, all EU countries have abolished the death penalty. Indeed, this is part of the requirements for EU membership: if a European country does not embrace and honour these rights and values, it will not be accepted in the European Union.

A European 'mentality'

European identity was seen as a 'mentality' involving two main distinguishing features. First, it is a commonly held value based on the acceptance and respect for diversity as well as the wish to know about different cultures and viewpoints.

> [A European] shares this European mentality of saying: yes, Europe it's...a territory of many nations, many cultures. ….A mentality of wanting to know many cultures, different ways of seeing life.
>
> (Jordi, m, 16, ES, Belgium)

This extract illustrates the conception of European identity as a 'mentality', which is seen as involving acceptance and respect for Europe's diversity. This in turn is based on the notion of multiculturalism where the pleasant coexistence of differing cultural groups living in a pluralistic society is at its core. Showing interest for other cultures as well as other ideas and opinions are also essential ingredients of this European mentality. Thus, European identity is based on willingness for intercultural relationships, which seems to be closely related to the discourse of Europeans as 'culture-rich' discussed before. In other words, it can be argued that curiosity facilitates intercultural relationships, which can provide cultural exchange such as knowledge and attitudes leading to intercultural competency – 'culture-richness'.

Second, this 'mentality' is about the belief on the idea of a 'united Europe' and the European Union. It can be argued that this European 'mentality' is based on a European ideal of unity, peace, human rights and quality of life. Cooperation, peace and prosperity were also essential concepts within young people's constructions of a European 'mentality':

> It's in my interest to help my fellow Europeans to achieve our goal and make everyone better off. Well, the European Union and all that was designed, I suppose, to stop wars and to improve trade relations and political relations. …. That's the European spirit in my opinion. …. And so anyone who believes in that idea or works in order to achieve those goals, I think they can be considered European.
>
> (Sam, m, 16, ES, England)

A 'European spirit' was referred to as involving cooperation between 'fellow' Europeans. By 'helping each other out' this common purpose can be achieved: peace and prosperity in Europe. Indeed, this seems to reflect some of the aims of the EU.

Although this ideal has not been achieved, it represents the best aspirations for a better Europe and a better world.

2.2 European identity: union and the 'others'

Union and security
Concepts such as unity and peace were fundamental in young people's constructions of Europe. Unity was talked about as a force that supersedes any possible conflicts between Europeans.

> I don't think a European country will declare war on another European country. They're united. (Mathieu, m, 17, SS, Belgium)

This extract can be interpreted from different angles. First, Europe is constructed as a place of peace and stability. By consequence, Europeanness means being pacifist. This construction is in clear contrast to the 'old' Europe which could easily declare war on its neighbours. However, one could say the Balkans illustrate a counter-discourse and are the antithesis of the peaceful and stable Europe. This 'new' peaceful united Europe brings an apparent sense of internal security and a feeling of safety among young people. Pupils when referring to Europe's union have also used terms such as 'family', 'community' and 'best group of friends'. Here, Europe is seen as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983).

Alternatively, this security discourse can be read at another level. The concept of security seems to invoke the notion of threat of an external group thus, reinforcing an 'us and them' mentality. This threat, based on a shared consensus on what/who is considered dangerous for Europeans, draws boundaries to differentiate Europeans from the 'other'. So, a European identity is likely to be constructed by contrasting itself with the non-European 'other'. Indeed, this has been the way most young people constructed Europeanness. I argue that young people's definitions of European identity are relational as they are formed in relation to non-European 'others'.

Europe and America
Various dichotomies between Europeans and Americans were manifested in the students' speech. In negative terms, pupils contrasted Europe's identity with that of America, which was seen as the main 'other'. However, for a very small number of students Europe and America were seen as 'one big family', as being part of the western world.

The notion of America as the 'other' was mainly based on ideological differences. American culture was frequently used as a point of reference to define what Europe is not. The former often seen as being a consumer-oriented culture, where economic growth and wealth are the ultimate goals. This culture has been contrasted with a European culture mainly by reference to concepts such as authenticity and diversity:

> I think Americans are **so** un-European …. You can see things that actually come from America and it's just trying to be new and high-tech and it's not actually trying to say much else. Whereas if you look at some of the stuff from

> Europe…you can really **think** about something and not just trying to be saying something that is radical but trying to be saying, something that it's true to them. … But with America, they've got a lot less identity, a lot less personality. All you see is big meals... Sort of, everyone's looking the same…
>
> (Jessica, f, 17, SS, England)

Here, there is a clear contrast of a European 'high' or 'good' culture vs. an American 'low' or 'mass' culture. Europe is seen as being uniquely diverse whereas America as homogenous. This suggests a European culture based on the idea of cultural diversity preservation – multicultural culture – vs. an American culture based on homogeneity – assimilationist culture. However, it is important to note, that Europe is experiencing a rise in intolerance towards religious diversity and asylum seekers. These facts challenge the idea of Europe's aspiration for cultural diversity.

America seems to represent a threatening 'other' which could be based on Europe's fears of American global cultural dominance. Although some pupils seem to be aware of America's influence on European cultures, this was not seen as a problem. Adding to this concept of cultural hegemony are the notions of domestic and foreign affairs. For many young people, the othering of America was founded in the nationalism, authoritarianism and militarism of Europe's own past. Patriotism was an essential feature distinguishing Americans from Europeans. The former are seen as patriotic and nationalist and the latter, by implication, as more cosmopolitan. Nationalism and patriotism are linked to an ideology which aspires to national superiority. This runs counter to humanitarian ideals of tolerance and respect, which were considered important values for being European.

Militarism and authoritarianism were concepts used in young people's constructions of America. America's military authoritarianism and hegemony were seen as clear opposites to what Europeanness is about. Americans are seen to be more willing to use military force to safeguard their own interests while Europeans were constructed as being more diplomatic and democratic. Thus, Europeans were clearly portrayed in a very positive light whereas all the negative characteristics were attributed to Americans. Europe is attempting to cut itself off from its bitter past and to reinvent itself by seeking to construct a new identity. Having experienced extreme nationalism and militarism in the past, these ideologies have no longer a place in Europe – at least in the European Union. In this new identity construction, Europe's past becomes its own present 'other'.

Europe and Islam

Europeans were constructed against an Islamic 'other', mainly with reference to Turkey. However, there was almost no spontaneous othering of Turkey. With some exceptions, only when asked direct questions concerning Turkey's EU membership, pupils start talking about it. In contrast, Islam was a spontaneous othering.

> Europe's borders are a bit the catholic religion, in a way... But if we look at a map, it's not for nothing that, for example, Turkey is not in yet. Turkey is not a catholic country.
>
> (Rachel, f, 16, SS, Luxembourg)

Religion has been used as a tool in the construction of boundaries. Christianity was used to differentiate Europe from Turkey – considered a Muslim country. Christianity, Catholicism in particular, was seen as a closer culture to the European culture.

> To be Catholic it's somehow a very close culture to that of being European, more or less. … Muslim culture it's different. Of course you can be European and Muslim. But you have to know, two rather different cultures … The way of living, also in the way of treating women it's not really the kind of Catholicism.
>
> (Alberto, m, 17, ES, Belgium)

Pupils used gender and the lack of human rights as reasons to create Muslims as the 'other'. Here, Europeanness is constructed as 'liberal' and 'respectful' through the othering of Muslims. Although the interview extract above seems to portray a rather exclusionary view of Europeanness, it also reveals that being European is not incompatible with being Muslim. Across all interviews, young people seem to agree that Europeans can be Muslims as long as they embrace the fundamental values of European societies mentioned above.

The debate on whether Turkey could become a member of the EU was generated in the group interviews where many pupils constructed Turkey as Europe's 'other'. Turkey's EU membership generated a mix of opinions and two main oppositional views. On the one hand, Turkey's inclusion in the European integration process is seen as important and as disproving the thesis of Europe's as a Christian continent, a fortress Europe. On the other hand, Turkey was constituted as 'other' by their lack of human rights. Its prospect of joining the EU is seen as a threat – as a bridge towards the extremist Islamic 'other'. It could be argued that the fear of terrorism creates a shared view of protection among Europeans. This fear of the 'terrorist Muslim' was evident across many interviews. In this context, concepts such as danger and protection from the threat of the 'other' can help in the construction of a European identity. The concept of change was brought up by many pupils – in order for Turkey to be accepted as 'one of us', it needs to follow European rules. This, in a way, invokes the fear of Turkey's possible imposition of their own culture and rebel against Europe. This fear of Europe being 'taken over' by Muslim Turkey was found across all the three countries in this study. However, this fear against the backdrop of a growing Muslim population in Europe becomes the ultimate challenge for Europe. This raises the issue of how can Europe, who is trying to construct its identity on shared values such as tolerance and respect for cultural diversity deal with this challenge? Being this a vast population within Europe (and the EU), there is a responsibility to include this 'resident other' as part of Europe's own identity.

Challenges for the construction of European identity

The findings indicate two challenges for the creation of a European identity. The first is resistance. A rather small number of students resisted the idea of a European identity and questioned its usefulness. For them, European identity was seen as a divide between people with a restrictive character. This type of resistance – and any resistance – can prove to be counter-productive to the creation of a European identity. The second

challenge lies on its abstractness as a concept, which in some cases resulted in various students being sceptical towards the development of a European identity.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how young people, from a particular background, constructed European identities. These constructions involved both objective and subjective definitions of 'European' that can be seen as being organised around oppositional discourses: clear-cut and fixed constructions and more contested and disputable constructions, respectively.

Objective constructions through discourses of culture tended to portray Europe as culturally superior. Themes such as cultural capitals and the EU were central in young people's notions of Europeanness. European identity was also created as a territorial identity based on clear-cut factors such as place of residence. Europe has been geographically narrated as a place involving frontiers thus, highlighting the importance of borders as markers of European identity.

European identity was also constructed in subjective terms. Being European was generally linked with the sharing of liberal values: open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. These values form the base of what some young people call a 'European mentality', which is based on the ideal of unity, peace and human rights. European identity – a relational identity – was commonly contrasted with America and Islam. These were not general comparisons between Europe and the 'other'. Instead, Europe's 'others' represented a threat and comprise people that might be here, too close. This suggests Europe's fears help to create a shared view of protection among Europeans. A Europe that constructs its identity separated from its 'other' may lead to intolerance and exclusion and this is exactly what the EU is trying to fight against.

Notes

1: KCL (SSPP) granted me the travel to Istanbul to attend the CiCe conference.
2: Interview extracts have the following information: pseudonym, sex, age, school type (either state school [SS] or European school [ES]) and country

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