A theory of collective identity
Making sense of the debate on a “European identity”

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Abstract

This paper argues for a robust notion of collective identity which is not reduced to a psychological conception of identity. In a first part the debate on the concept of identity raised by several authors is taken up critically with the intention to defend a strong sociological conception of identity which by definition is a collective identity. The basic assumption is that collective identities are narrative constructions which allow controlling the boundaries of a network of actors. This theory is then applied to the case of Europe showing how identity markers are used to control the boundaries of a common space of communication. These markers are bound to stories which those within such a space of communication share. Stories that store in their narrative structures social relations provide projects of control. National identities are based on strong and exclusive stories. Europeanization (among other parallel processes on the global level) opens this space of boundary constructions and offers opportunities for national as well as subnational as well as transnational stories competing with each other for shaping European identity projects. The EU – this is the hypothesis – is providing a case in which different sites offer competing opportunities for continuing old stories, start new stories or import old stories form other sites, thus creating a narrative network on top of the network of social relations that bind the people in Europe together. European identity is therefore to be conceived as a narrative network embedded in an emerging network of social relation among the people living in Europe.

Key words: collective identity, narrative analysis, European identity, network analysis, sociological theory

1 Identity – a contested concept

1.1 Identity as an issue in the debate on Europe

Collective identity has been at the centre of attention in societies that have been formed in the course of the making of the nation-state. The nation however has not been an exclusive focus. Collective identity can equally refer to cities, to regions, or to groups such as political parties or even social movements. Since some years collective identity has also become an issue with regard to Europe where public debate is increasingly concerned with the problem of a European identity that is seen as lacking or as needed. But why do societies, groups and even a union of nation-states such as the EU need an identity? For a person an identity allows being recognized as something particular vis-à-vis the others. But why do groups up to nation and even transnational phenomena such as the EU need an identity?

The argument in the following is that the distinction between the identity of persons and the identity of groups and societies is an empirical one. Persons and societies are cases of identities. Persons have an identity by positioning themselves relative to other persons and by giving to these relations a meaning that is fixed in time. An identity guarantees the being a person in the flux of time. The same holds for groups: a group has an
identity if it succeeds to define itself vis-à-vis to other groups by attributing meaning to itself that is stable over time. Identity as an analytical concept covers all these cases: identity emerges by linking past social relations with those in the present. In some case even future social relations are included; in this case identity is linked to ideas of salvation or fate that include future social relations in our present existence. All these “constructions” emerge within a specific type of social relations in the present and allow interrupting the permanent change of social relations thus creating an identity in which persons, groups or societies can see themselves and be seen by others as being “identical” over time.

Everyday common sense in our society uses the concept of identity in a different way; it sees identity is something that a person or a group has. Contrary to this common sense, sociological sense sees the person or the group as a special case of identity that has emerged in a highly particular type of social relations: persons are transformed into individuals in social relations which are defined as relations between “free and equal people”. This is the modernist form of social relations of transforming persons into something that has an identity, i.e. individuals. This modernist form of social relations also transforms groups into something that has a collective identity, i.e. into nations. In the historical move from subjects to individuals and from kingdoms to nations we observe a shift in the construction of identity. Identity is reconstructed since it refers to a different type of social relations. In such social relations identity becomes a particular preoccupation of “individuals” or “nations”, as the permanent work on identity repair and identity confirmation shows.

As an analytical concept, identity denotes something that holds across all these cases: providing stable meaning in the flux of social relations. Since identity in this sociological usage refers to social relations, any kind of identity is by definition social. Individuals and nations in the society we live in constitute the two poles of identity constructions. In-between we have a series of social forms such as couples, families, associations, classes, regions, or ethnic groups which can be seen as intermediate cases of identity. The two poles of identity constructions are not fixed since changing social relations might produce forms of identity beyond and the nation, an issue that is at the core of the debate of European identity and that makes this debate theoretically important.

In the following a theoretically robust notion of collective identity will be presented. This task is carried out in the next section in a critique of the critical statements on the concept of collective identity that have come up in the past decade. It consists in recuperating it from the fragments of the deconstruction of this concept in recent theorizing. The constructive argument in this recuperation effort is based on two assumptions. The

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1 I leave aside the idea of humankind as an identity construction beyond the nation since it leads to the other pole of the identity of individuals. Humankind is the sum of such individuals. Whether the idea of cosmopolitan identity goes beyond this aggregate notion of individual identity has to be seen.

2 Forms of identity beyond the individual are another theme which is raised in the context of debates on “subjectivity”. 
first is that that processes of identity construction vary with the complexity of social relations. The second assumption is that processes of identity construction have a “narrative structure”. These two theoretical moves then help to reassess the ongoing debate on the identity of the Europeans or of a “European identity” which preoccupies elites, sometimes people and which keeps busy a rather significant part of the public debate and increasingly scientific debate on “Europe”.

1.2 Identity – reconstructing a contested concept

In an often cited paper Brubaker and Cooper {Brubaker 2000 #1571} have raised a strong attack on the concept of identity in the social sciences following this lead. They make three strong arguments.

Their first criticism has been that reputed authors\(^3\) using the term do not really need it. They use identity only as the marker of an intention (to be culturally sensitive). Identity is not related to the social analysis that has been presented elsewhere in their work. A second criticism of Brubaker and Cooper is that the notion of collective identity necessarily implies some notion of primordialism. Assuming that collective identity denotes something beyond shared values or norms then there must be something more substantial than this to justify its use. The constructivist position starting with a non-essentialist position ends up in essentialist notions of collective identity. Constructivism produces outcomes that contradict its basic premises of fluidity and multiplicity. A third criticism is that we already assume a groupist social ontology which forecloses the analytical grip of the diversity of patterns of non-groupist social forms; we exclude by definition the possibility of non-groupist social life, the possibility to live social relations without claiming an identity. Yet the solutions which Brubaker and Cooper offer do not resolve the problems addressed by them.

The first argument forces us to specify the added value of using the notion of collective identity as an analytical category. This is an obvious postulate. Categorical ornamenting or fashionable category-dropping should be avoided. We should either propose a strict sociological notion or leave the concept to psychologists who interpret identity as a phenomenon of the human mind. My proposal is that we can make a strong sociological concept out of it as long as do not mix it up with psychological notions.

The second argument that some substantialism is implicit in constructivist accounts of collective identity implies that substantialism is in some sense “bad”. The implicit answer of Brubaker et al. is that we should assume a world in which the social no longer needs an overarching naturalizing symbolism. However, there are social situations in which primordialism pops up. Thus the theoretical answer should be to identify situations in which constructions of collective identity vary between primordialism and artificialism.

\(^3\) The authors cite {Tilly 1995 #6716}, {Somers 1994 #7617}{Somers 1995 #6671} and {Calhoun 1994 #6952}. 
The third argument against the “groupist ontology” raises the issue of the mechanism through which social actors relate to each other. Collective identities are, the argument says, “groupist ontologies” which in fact they are. They are symbolic forms through which a world of social relations is mirrored. These ontologies exist and have a structure and are the result of social processes that can be reconstructed. Doing away with such “ontologies” is missing the object of a theory of collective identities. Groupist ontologies become the more important the more social interaction is mediated by cultural techniques that establish sociality without the presence of the other. Such forms of indirect sociality need a social rationalization that invokes the social. Therefore we have to assume that there is something that they have in common beyond the co-presence of the others. The theoretical assumption that follows is that the idea of collective identity emerges when cultural techniques (such as bureaucratic formula, written texts, computer interfaces) serve as interrupts of social interaction and generate indirect social interaction. To act beyond natural bonds, i.e. through cultural techniques, means to generate an abstraction of social experience.

The argument then is that there is an increasing need for such collective identities in complex societies when indirect social relations increase in quantity. To forestall the macro-theoretical argument: The more a human society is differentiated, the more it needs a collective identity. The central hypothesis that derives from this assumption is that collective identities vary with the structure of the system of indirect social relations. The theory does not assume that collective identity is unitary, coherent. This is only one way of organizing the social bond among people. Collective identity can also be fuzzy, multiple. It is the variation of identities which requires explanation. The theory proposed explains this variation as being contingent on the structure of social relations among people. In other words: the network structure linking a people shapes the construction of the identity of that network which then is used to reproduce this network structure. Thus collective identity constructions are a central building block of social relations. Therefore we should not give up the concept of collective identity, but make better use of it.

2 Collective identity construction as projects of control: adding narrative structure to evolutionary process

2.1 The function of collective identity

The functionalist argument implicit in evolutionary theory tells us that it is necessary to create bonds which oblige people to pay taxes, to send their kids to schools, or to die for the country. On a more abstract level it says that I accept that things are done to me by

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4 This also implies an argument against psychological theories that see collective identity as something that people need to identify with. I rather take a Durkheimian view seeing collective identity as a social fact imposed upon us and forcing us to identify with (the success being variable).
others which I accept only by those with whom I have a special social relation, a sense of some commonness. This commonness obliges people to accept the social norms imposed upon them.\(^5\)

The argument that collective identities are collective rationalizations of social relations points to the trans-psychological character of collective identities. The link between identity and reality is to be constructed independently from psychological assumptions about human needs or motivations for collective identity. The psychological grounding may even turn out to be a variable that varies with the form of collective identities. This happens when groups turn toward outside references for a collective identity. As Pierre Nora argues: « Moins la mémoire est vécue de l’intérieur, plus elle a besoin de supports extérieurs et de repères tangibles d’une existence qui ne vit plus qu’à travers eux » (\{Nora 1984 #14834\} : XXV).

Collective identities are social constructions which make use of psychological needs and motives for providing an answer to the question „whom do I belong to” or to the question „whom do we belong to?” Collective identities make use of such psychic references in specific social constellations. This happens regularly in social relations bound to concrete social interaction. It also happens in social relations that transgress the realm of social interaction such as constructions of national identity and produce situations of “effervescence collective” as Durkheim described it. The more indirect social relations are, the more important become social carriers such as texts or songs or buildings which store collective identities. To the extent that collective identities are linked primarily to individuals in concrete interaction situations, emotional ties such as the sense of proud and shame become an important mechanism for reproducing collective identities. To the extent that collective identities are linked to objects as their carriers, these objects become carriers of generalized emotions that are built into the object, into images or texts. Such generalized emotions are embodied in what can be called “narratives”.

This argument thus takes serious the emotional aspect of identity constructions. There is something in the social relations that goes beyond the sense of shared interests and reciprocal solidarity. But this does not imply to return to a psychological notion of a sense identity or of identification. It rather leads us to think social relations in terms of shared meanings, i.e. narratives that people share “emphatically” with each other. This sense of narrative sharing has to do with the sense of being part of a particular “we”. This can be called the “narrative bond” that emerges in some social relations (but not in all of our social relations). Thus a collective identity is a metaphor for a specific type of social relations that are embedded in the last instance in a narrative network that is as dynamic

\(^5\) This argument takes up the problem of the non-normative foundations of obligations. This again raises the infinite regress of asking where solidarities come from. To avoid this infinite regress they are taken as being functional for creating networks of social relations without social interaction.
as the stories are that are produced and reproduced in ongoing social communication mediated by these social relations ({Eder 2007 #23}).

2.2 A relational theory of collective identity

Collective identities are analyzed as narrative networks that emerge in evolutionary processes; the path of development of such networks is prescribed by the structure of the narratives at play. The proposed theory argues that in complex societies strong collective identities will emerge and that narratives people share to live in this complex world will remain the basic building stone of identities. The difference to the traditional world is that everybody lives through and with an increasing number of narratives that mediate social relations. This also increases the contingency of the developmental path prescribed by narrative networks.

National identity constructions are the last instance of a collective identity with a clear path prescription, the making of nation-states. National identities do what collective identities do in general: they are stories that combine a series of events in texts, songs and images which some people recognize as being part of their particular we, i.e. as a collective identity. In addition, national identity constructions have succeeded to impose themselves as a hegemonic identity in a territorially bounded political community. This exclusiveness is built into a story which links people defined as citizens of a political community. This story is transmitted to and learned by new generations, practiced in national rituals and objectified in songs (anthems) and images (flags). Counter-stories exist in those political communities in which two hegemonic stories compete (such as Belgium or Canada). Yet even in these cases the two stories are often aligned into one national story, told in different languages.

This national solution is increasingly contested. Narratives appear which tell different stories about who we are. The problem is the coexistence of many hegemonic stories. This creates not only a practical problem but also a theoretical problem: How to conceive the narrative network underlying a political community in a situation where we have many narratives floating around and referring to it? The case in point is Europe.

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6 In {Eder 2000 #1636} I tried to treat identity construction as a process of contestation in protest groups which provide a quasi-natural laboratory for the making of a group out of boundaries. In {Eder 2006 #93} Europe is taken as a space of communication linking networks of social relations and story production.

7 This point has also been made {Ash 2007 #22053} who argues that Europe “should” combine a series of stories that distinguishes it from the national member states.
3 Making sense of a “European identity”

3.1 From identification with Europe to European identity constructions

Research on collective identity construction in Europe is dominated by some variants of the social identity paradigm. Social identity theory claims that identifications have group-specific effects in terms of distance and proximity. This paradigm is useful because it allows making use of existing survey data which measure the degree to which people start to be „proud” of its “institutions” (at least to trust them) and „identify” with Europe (conceived in political or cultural terms) (Kohli 2000 #1889). Another way is to emphasize symbols of state power, such as a flag, a hymn, a representative building, or the memory of a successful political act such as the act of unification which can be represented in a flag (with 15 stars) which are made the object of “knowledge” or “identification” with Europe. Taking such indicators at face value requires assuming that strong identifications and good knowledge imply strong identities. But there is a long way from identifications to identities and there is no necessary parallelism between strong identifications and strong identities. A collective identity is different from what is measured when we look at the degree of identification with a predefined set of symbols. Such research tells us about a feedback effect on the individual level in the process of collective identity construction. It tells us nothing about the mechanisms of identity construction that might provoke such feedback effects. Such research does not make theoretical sense of collective identity construction in Europe.

The substantive result of the research on identification with symbolic representations of European political institutions is that they continuously show a weak sense of belonging referring to Europe, much less than exists in the nation-state. The political community as a legal space with rights and duties does not provoke identification, which means that they lack meaning beyond national culture. Since the basis of strong identifications with political symbols is dependent upon the culture within which they make sense, research has turned to cultural symbols in order find something that is worth to identify with in Europe. This search was guided by the theoretical expectation that what makes national symbols worthy of identification also holds for European symbols. Some were searching this meaning in some kind of republican idea of Europe. Others were search-

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8 From this theoretical perspective a series of practical and basic research has been carried out. The Commission has organized its own database on this basis (European Commission 2001 #1129). Bruter 2005 #22076 has provided an interesting account of what he calls collective identity construction from below which means to construct European identity by aggregating individual preferences and opinions on Europe.

9 There is also a methodological problem with such surveys since they provoke answers to questions might people do not really ask themselves. This is the well-known critical argument of Bourdieu 1980 #16451 against survey research. The argument has been well supported empirically by Champagne 1988 #12002.

10 Here the idea of constitutional patriotism has tried to give such a cultural meaning to a legal space. So far this has not worked as the Eurosceptic sentiments have shown in recent years.
ing it in some kind of cultural idea of Europe. Interestingly enough, this debate reproduces the classic debate on the making of a nation over a republican conception of the nation and a cultural conception of the nation (Brubaker 1992 #8705; Giesen 2001 #1165).

While searching for a European identity in terms of identifications with Europe, the space of communication in the EU expands. Something is happening that does not show up in the surveys. The problem is therefore to figure out how this expanding space is filled with new symbols that provide a sense of boundary of that space. This sense of boundary is not necessarily linked to the symbolic representations of the European political institutions or of a particular European culture. This sense is rather emerging in the course of constructing increasingly dense networks of social relations in Europe that need a collective identity as a project of their control.

The proposal is to look not at political or cultural symbols but at stories that emerge in the making of a network of social relations among those living in Europe. There are at least three modes of telling such stories in Europe which are not reducible to the national tool-kit for constructing collective identities. There is a story based on a successful process of unification, i.e. the story of the European integration process as a successful economic and political project, which founds a European citizenship narrative. This is the story of the making of a rich, yet socially responsible continent, the story of an economic yet social Europe. There is another story that emerges from the memory of a murderous past of Europe. The space of communication based on shared memory is a potential source of strong feelings. Stories telling a shared past constitute boundaries with high emotional value. There is finally a story that relates to Europe as an experiment in hybrid collective identities, not as a “melting pot”, but as a “diversity pot”, which is a story in the making. The three stories, the story of a successful Common Market as a citizenship narrative, the cultural story of a shared past and the story of a “new” social bond of diversity emerging in Europe might produce day feedback effects in the mind of Europeans – but to do so they first have to have emerged as stories.

The thing which binds Europeans into a network of social relations on the European level does not show up in established research. It only provides some indications of individual resonance to what is asked in the questionnaires which themselves rely on the model of the old European nation-state. Collective identity remains hidden in the black box of aggregated individual responses. Their answers are like remote effects of processes working in the back of these individuals. To excavate more systematically the symbolic forms within which emerging identifications with Europe make sense and grow, is the task ahead.

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11 This is an empirical statement issue that research on a European public sphere has generally corroborated. This is not yet an empirical claim regarding the “normative quality” or “identitarian quality” of that sphere. For a more elaborate attempt to make sense of that space, see {Eder 2007 #23}. 

3.2 From normative claims to the analytical description of collective identities in Europe

A second strand of research on a European identity which is based on a normative approach does not fare better than the socio-psychological approach. The basic argument is that a democratic Europe needs a people conscious of itself as a people. This argument has been formulated as the “demos”-problem. A demos is the constituent of a democratic polity (the “people”), and as such it needs a collective identity that goes beyond the idea of a people as a bunch of private interests. Democracy in Europe needs a people with an idea about itself that binds beyond the private egoistic interests. Ideally the bond should be strong to such an extent that it accepts redistributive measures by political institutions. This bond could even be conceived as something that motivates people to die for the political community they live in. To die for a symbolic bond is simply a mode of sharing which mobilizes the strongest possible emotions. Having such a normative standard in mind collective identities are classifiable as varying between the poles of being weak and being strong in terms of emotional attachment to a good thing.

We could translate this normative argument into the conceptual framework of the theory proposed above and provide a sociological instead of a normative argument. Arguing that European collective identity is so far a weak identity simply says that the story of the common market does not suffice to control the boundaries of a space of communication linking free and equal individuals into a political community. It is argued that “Europe” needs a different story than that of exchanging goods through the medium of money (i.e. the Euro). Euro coins provide a story for delimiting a common symbolic space which involves people in their being rational individuals seeking their advantages. It needs more, a story which tells people that they are citizens of a political community. And maybe it even needs a still stronger identity since it must generate a sense of a particular responsibility and recognition of the other European citizens which goes beyond recognizing them as co-citizens. This argument however has always troubled normative democratic theory since it produces a further problem that is hard to tackle within classic political theory: that those following universalizable rules for each other need a special sense to some (those who are members of community) and less to others (those who are not members of the political community). This special sense is no longer based on universalistic arguments, but on narrative images.

The normative debate helped to denounce the idea of a Common Market as a mode of living together; it gave power to political institutions which started to engage in fostering and making a European identity. What this identity finally implies remained rather imprecise: beyond the acceptance of political institutions this debate produced more dissensus than consensus on what a European identity should look like. The debate therefore remains inconclusive.

12 It is obvious that such arguments follow the lead given by the strong link between democratic statehood and national identity, claiming that only nation states so far have been able to realize robust democratic structures.
Rather than taking this debate as an explanation of identity construction it can be taken as a series of events in the process of identity constructions that is going on within and outside these normative debates which are used to construct a particular narrative as a special (even elected) people. Normative arguments are a part of narratives; they are embedded in narratives clauses that convey meaning to argumentative debates (Eder [Im Druck] #22210). Normative debates are therefore an important part of the process of identity construction, part of an ongoing story that is produced in arguing about Europe.

3.3 The reference object of a European collective identity

Making theoretical sense of collective identities that have emerged and continue to crystallize in the course of European integration is a sociological program directed at and against socio-psychological and normative approaches to European identity. Sociological approaches tell us whether, how and to what extent identity markers emerge in social processes that are situated in time and space. Normative discourses on collective identity are part of collective identities, explicit justifications of the boundaries of a network of social relations. Normative conceptions of a European identity are therefore part of the phenomenon that needs explanation. The same holds for social-psychological approaches.

To find another starting point for analyzing ongoing processes of identity construction in Europe is to take Europe as an empty signifier. It could mean anything ranging from the identification with a culture to a geographical unity ranging from the Atlantic to the Ural or to a unity that coincides with the legal realm of the European Union or to a unity that is defined by membership in the Council of Europe. We could take such “ideas” as proxies for a Europe to be taken as a reference object of collective identity. Thus we could talk about a cultural Europe, a geographical Europe, a Europe of Human Rights, and a political Europe. Thus Europe is decomposed into a series of “Europes” (in the plural) specified by an adjective. Nevertheless, the problem of the construction of the thing to which a European identity refers remains to be solved.

Collective identities refer to a space of communication the boundaries of which vary with what is communicated. This is an implication of the theoretical assumption that collective identities are constructed through stories. Stories that link people vary with the communicative network which they constitute. Thus the reference object of collective identities is a network of communication with boundaries which are identified and controlled by an identity. Networks of communication generate identities as a project of control of its boundaries (White 1992 #20455).

The boundaries of Europe could be defined – following the national model - by its political boundaries. In that case the legally defined space of the European Union is the referent for a collective identity. Legal definitions are grounded in stories that link people in that space in a particular way, mainly as citizens in that network. This network develops social relations as relations among citizens that can vary from dense to loose
relationships. The trend is so far toward increasing density, measured by the increasing number of legal regulations that impinge upon the life of European citizens. This legal definition of a network of social relations corresponds to attempts to define a political control project: linking the citizens into a political identity and thus controlling the boundaries of a legal space. This very specific condition (legal rules as based on stories that bind) generates political identities as a project of control of the boundaries of the European political community.

The story to this project is the European citizenship story which competes necessarily with the national citizenship story. National citizenship is the result of a long process of historical concept formation in which national identity emerged integrating social and cultural differences under a new concept: citizenship (Somers 1995 #6671). This same concept is now used for making a European identity: inventing the European citizen as the narrative core of a European identity. To make a difference some adjectives have been used to mark the difference of European and national identity such as the idea of cosmopolitan citizenship. Yet there is no way to avoid that national citizenship stories take up cosmopolitanism as one of their elements. Cosmopolitanism fits as well into the story of national as well as European citizenship. This story is since its beginning exclusively tied to nationally defined networks of social actors. Thus there is an inherent difficulty with constructions of a collective identity based on the citizenship story.

This citizenship story is enriched by the reference to the Common Market and to a Social Europe. Both are connected as the two sides of one coin and their combination often serves as a possible particularity of Europe that distinguishes it from the rest of the world. This object is integrated into the European citizenship story: the story of a successful process of European integration which transformed foes into friends, which transformed war into wealth and freedom (i.e., the “four freedoms”). It is further supported by defining the role of this EU-Europe to the outer world, i.e. to define Europe as an actor with a clear role in the world.

A second reference object is European culture, mainly defined as its traditions. The substance of this European culture is itself contested. Europe is rather a battlefield of cultural images that confronts the cultural traditions that have shaped Europe. This is particular “cultural heritage” of Europe. It finds it in its “values” which are opposed to the values cherished in other cultures. These Others are however shifting objects: the non-European world is projected on some particular Others, sometimes on the “East”, sometimes on the “Orient”, sometimes on “America”. Distinguishing a European culture

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13 See the contributions to {Eder 2001 #1072} which point to this ambivalence. The high investment of the EU (DG XII) into citizenship research over the last ten years is another indicator for the attempt to foster European citizenship as a shared belief (and story) in Europe.

14 This external dimension of a European identity has become a focus of much recent research on European identity. See the contributions to {Cederman 2001 #22060}, the research of {Kantner 2007 #22197} which emphasized the role of defense and foreign relations for constructing a “European identity”. See also {Risse 2008 #21535} who see foreign policy as a key to generating a European identity.
from such Others is a strategy for grounding a story about a European Self, i.e. a collective identity.

The difficulties with such a reference object which is taken as unique, clear and well-bounded lead to a third reference object based on the assumption that a European Self has never existed. Europe has many different cultures that have coexisted over centuries; this refers not only to the different national cultures that come together in Europe; it also refers to the Arab and Jewish and other Eastern cultures that have had and still have a strong impact on what we consider to be part of Europe, which are equally inside and outside of a European culture. And finally Europe has added the cultures of the Others in the course of migration movements over last decades which again will not be assimilated without having an impact on Europe’s culture. Thus reducing the reference object of a European culture to its “values” or “cultural heritage” is a simplification which does not take into account the contradictory cultural orientations and the contestations about their “Europeanness” in present-day Europe.

What kind of story can be told facing this diversity of a European culture? We can imagine a story telling about the many cultures and the forms in which they have encountered each other and shaped the course of cultural change in Europe. Stories are there in Europe, in Southern Europe stories about the coexistence of Arab and Norman culture, of Jewish and Christian culture, of Mongols and “gypsies” in Europe. These stories often tell terrible stories which does not mean that the end of the story is the hell. Thus it seems to be an open story, which can be continued and which is fostered in a Europe where these different cultures again clash – yet under conditions that differ from the past. Which collective identity is mobilized depends on the story that is chosen to identify the boundaries of a network of social relations that bind “Europeans”, i.e. those living in Europe and fighting for its cultural orientation, to each other.

The three basic stories, the story of a Common Market and a Social Europe embedded in the story of a European citizenship, the story of a unique European culture and the story of a hybrid Europe are incompatible. They will not coincide in terms of constructing a clear boundary; they rather construct different boundaries. They tell about different “Europes” (in the plural). Thus European identity emerges as something with varying boundaries, depending upon which story we tell. Whether there is a story connecting these stories and transforming them into one “European story” depends upon a series of restrictive conditions. According to the theoretical model presented above this has to do first with the evolution of networks of social relations in Europe and then with the structural properties of these different stories which determine their narrative connectivity. The question could be answered to the positive to the extent that Europe develops social relations in which the boundaries of economic, legal and cultural coincide as has been the case in national societies.15 Such homogeneity of the economic, cultural and the political dimension is not given in the European context. Europe is characterized by the

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15 This also holds for the United States. They share a common language which Europe does not. Constructing an identity under such conditions is thus more demanding than is the case in the US.
non-co-incidence of these different boundaries. Taking Europe as a unique culture disembedded from its political institutional framework goes beyond the national model yet keeps the assumption of a homogeneous culture. Taking Europe as a hybrid form of social relations gives up even the assumption of clear cultural boundaries of a Europe in search of its identity.

Looking at European identity as a project of control of a European society, the assumption resulting from the “evolutionary” part of the theory presented above is that in a European society being more than any other society in need of a collective identity we have to expect emergent patterns of constructing a collective identity in the context of culturally non-congruent multiple networks of social relations. Whether there will be a story of the three stories thus becomes a new issue for research.

A first observation is that the multiplicity of networks of social relations evolving in Europe allows more stories to flow within these networks. Since such systems are composed of loosely coupled partial networks, the narrative mediation of the loose coupling of a diversity of networks of social relations becomes the focal problem of these networks of social relations. Since coupling is – as the theory claims – mediated by narrative meaning the issue of how stories can link such networks of social relations and generate an identity of these networks is the key problem. Since social relations in such systems are held together by a multiplicity of stories, the solution of one hegemonic story no longer works. Europe is confronted with coordinating at least three hegemonic stories.

In the following these three model stories for constructing a collective identity for Europe are discussed more systematically. The idea is to distinguish three formal network structures of social relations on which projects of defining an identity for Europe are built. These will be distinguished as supranational, postnational, and transnational identity constructions of Europe. Three stories can be related to these model identities. They are used for making sense of these constructions and provide the collective resonance that can absorb floating identifications in Europe. Supranational identity constructions make use the plot of the “Jean Monnet success story”. Postnational identity constructions follow the plot of “And they will live in peace together forever”. Transnational identity constructions finally work with the plot of a “broker Europe”. These three stories provide narratives with which different models of networks of social relations, i.e. different types of societies can be produced and reproduced. These elements are organized in a specific sequence which gives narrative meaning to these elements. Thus identities can be analyzed as being more than a series of identifications with a market, a polity or a culture; they can be analyzed as a specific sequential pattern of organizing such identifications into a coherent whole which is a story.

\[16\] This proposal follows in part a typology that has been proposed by {Ifversen 2008 #42}:127.
MODELS OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN EUROPE

4.1 A supranational story for Europe: the Jean Monnet success story

A first model story links national stories directly to a supranational story. National stories become part of a network of stories which has a “star-structure”: national stories are linked by a centre which constitutes a connection between national stories via this centre without direct linkages among the units of this narrative network. It is only via the centre that the national identities are integrated into a higher one. This does not necessitate direct linkages among the national stories. The meaning of national stories is dependent upon their relationship to the centre: the closer to the centre, the more does it provide elements of an emerging European story; the more distant to the centre, the more such elements become irrelevant. Thus there is permanent struggle going on in which the link to the emerging story is contested.

This particular network structure can be called a supranational story since it relies on the emergence of a distinct story of something that is decoupled from national stories. This supranational story is the becoming story of Europe which so far has only a short life history (60 years). It can be prolonged by adding precursors, be it in the twenties of the last century, be it in the course of the 19th century.

Sites for constructing such a centre-oriented network are especially Brussels and Strasbourg. The Council of Europe is trying to tell such a supranational story, defining the boundaries of Europe in a larger perspective than a more closed EU-story does. Rituals of enacting this EU-story are European summits, European days giving meaning to Europe’s flag and anthem.

A case for such a supranational story is the story of Jean Monnet as the founding father of United Europe which can have a more efficiency-oriented version, a version leaning toward some idea of moral and political excellence of European politics, or a version of a common European culture that is defended and kept by European institutions. Also counterstories add to this supranational story. The critique of an Empire Europe, mobilizations against fortress Europe or the general critique of Brussels as a site of arrogance of power contribute to the making of a supranational story of Europe.

4.2 A postnational story for Europe: and they will live in peace together forever

A second model story is based on a particular mode of linking national stories. National stories are networked through direct links which do not crystallize around a centre. European identity appears as a network of national networks: This emerging network minimizes the distances between the parts of the network (maximizing its geodetic distances) and follows the pattern of a “clique structure”.

This clique network structure produces postnational identity as its control project. Postnational identity is the added value of merging national stories into shared stories. The distances between the national stories in Europe vary, yet their interaction forces them
to position themselves in relation to other national stories without ending up in isolation from some or all of these other stories.

The story that is told about Europe is then a story in which the relations between national stories and their actors are at stake. Winners and losers, heroes and perpetrators of the recent past and of the present are related, change position and try to find a new position in an emerging European script. Germans and Austrians are repositioned as well as Poles or Hungarians; Italians and French have to struggle for positing their heroes in this emerging postnational script. Euroscepticism and Euro-affirmativism spread across the national heroes. Euroscepticism is no longer tied to the English and affirmativism no longer the domain of the Germans. The emerging story turns into a postnational story where national actors try to relate their proper stories to those of the others by searching a position in a postnational plot in Europe.

Sites for staging this star-structured network are WWII rituals and Holocaust rituals where a European story is enacted. European film rituals or European soccer games provide an analogous opportunity for defining a social relation among Europeans that makes narrative sense beyond the nation.

A case for such a postnational identity is retelling the story of the winners of WWII by including the losers. Another case is the Holocaust, a traumatic story linking victims and perpetrators across nations. It also appears in counterstories of a Eurosceptic Europe which mobilizes the losers of Europeization across national boundaries in Europe in favor of the nation as the exclusive site for solidarity.\[17\]

4.3 A transnational story for Europe: broker Europe

A third model story can be identified which tells about Europe as a site in which cultural differences cut across national differences thus creating a different structure of cleavages among the people in Europe. This third model is based on networks of groups interacting across national borders and creating a unity out of an increasing diversity of national and non-national elements. This network structure differs from the others in the sense that it does not provide direct interactive links between its parts, yet produces an ordered network of social relations. It is a network integrated by the structural equivalence of the positions of groups of actors. Indigenous and immigrant and migrating people are related to each other as claiming or occupying structurally equivalent positions in an emerging European society.

Such a transnational story fosters the narrative of hybridity, the equal participation in a diversity of cultures in Europe. Sites for such transnational relations fostering hybrid collective identities are particular places in Europe in which hybridity has been lived for a some time. Cases are the commemoration of hybrid cultures in Southern Spain,

\[17\] This does not exclude the synchronic emergence of a global story of losers of globalization – yet the interesting case here is that Europe is a case for a “regional story” that still maximizes its distances to the IS story or other stories outside the EU and Europe.
Southern Italy, Sicily and Turkey or Europe or the commemoration of Europe’s Abrahamic past fostered by the reentry of the Islamic and the Jewish story into Europe’s Christian story. Stories on hybrid Europe are narrated as model cases for a Europe where distinct religious traditions succeeded in living together in peace and reciprocal enrichment. The Jewish story is seen as an instance of brokerage between Europe and the Other of Europe in a way similar to the Islamic story which can be seen as a bridge between Europe and the Other of Europe. There exist also counterstories of a transnational Europe which is “tribal Europe”, the idea of a Europe based on primordial ties that precede concrete interaction ties and which claim structural equivalence on the basis of some constructed common origin.

Such hybrid constructions reposition Europe and its Other in a way that transgresses the basic assumptions of the first two models. The first two models still assume a core substance defining Europe that is realized in social relations of communication and understanding. The third model provides a model story in which cleavages and unbridgeable differences undermine the search for a coherent “good story”, for the simple story plot of a good Europe. Yet there is a story to tell, i.e. the story of the art of living together. This art requires competent reflexive actors, engaging in demanding performances which do not presuppose understanding but take understanding as a rare and happy moment in a series of permanent misunderstandings.

Transnational identity as a project of control of networks of social relations that engage in permanent crossovers is embedded in a story which makes itself the object of a story: it is reflexive story telling. It combines many and different stories and mixes them in an unforeseeable way. Europe provides a site for such reflexive story telling which is increasingly used for hybrid constructions: a European Islam, a European Jewry, a European Christianity, a European secularism and universalism which emerges from the encounter and hybridization of traditions and cultures in and outside Europe. Europe in this sense is an experimental site for a collective identity that differs in all respects from historical experience.

5 European identity as a case of transnational identity construction

5.1 Collective identity made out of multiple stories

Europe has more than one story. At the same time, this society has developed a discourse about itself in which it thematizes itself stating that it has so many stories that bind and separate. Thus European society is an ideal case for studying the link between increasing complexity and the search for narrative bonds.

How are these stories combined? Is there a story of the stories, a meta-story to tell in Europe? A meta-story that might gain hegemonic status as the national story did in the modern nation-state. This question cannot be answered in an affirmative way. The answer has to be decomposed into the sequential ordering of these stories and their points...
of contact. We have to look at the temporal dimension of the use of this tool-kit in which some boundaries of what constitutes Europe have been left aside, others gained in prominence and older ones reframed. We have to do with a dynamic process that accompanies the construction of Europe as a political community from its beginning. The creation of a narrative network is a process exhibiting sequential patterns and generating constraints for reproducing the social relations created so far. In this sense, collective identity is a process of creating a space of social relations which never ends.

Yet it is possible for the analytical observer to block the future of such processes in a thought experiment and describe in which sense the future to come can be fixed. The idea of the nation has succeeded in blocking the future of collective identity construction for even a long time. The temptation to fix it forever has ended in a series of national civil wars and ethnic cleansings which undermined this process of telling one story with a fixed end. The process of creating a collective identity in Europe in the same vein would end up in analogous two bottlenecks: the first is that it would be premature to block the process of organizing social relations in terms of one collective identity because there are many collective identities that are used for structuring an unsettled space of social relations; the second is that blocking the future might in principle be counterproductive since it will create high identitarian conflicts over which boundary has to be recognized and which one not.

When we block the making of a European story, then we see something that is more artificial than any of those that have managed to provide the narrative network for social relations such as ideas of “nation”, “empire”, “lineage” or “cast”. Terms such as hybrid identity are en vogue and point to the temporary and unstable mix of different stories controlling the boundaries of a space of communication. Europe has a moving boundary which depends on the story we mobilize. To give precedence to the political story is an unwarranted move. Political identities compete with other stories. The emerging competition of political and cultural stories in the debate on the link between politics and religion is an indicator of a moving link. The link between the economic story and the cultural story is equally dynamic as the fights about a neo-liberal economy and social economy show (Boltanski 1999 #2388).

A European narrative is a dynamic combination of different stories that will produce a dynamic form of collective identity, i.e. favour a permanent process of constructing and reconstructing a European identity. To reduce it to a neo-liberal or a cosmopolitan or a traumatic identity misses the emergent property of their parallel existence. This is still a highly abstract conclusion yet it points to the basically temporal character of identity constructions which vary in terms of their openness toward the future.

Collective identities coming out of such processes are increasingly multidimensional and multilayered. Stories by which identities are constructed do not simply co-exist but they rather influence each other and produce emergent properties through multiple forms of recombination. Evolutionary theory proposes “recombination” as a result of processes of generating new elements (stories) and their selection in the course of build-
ing up social relations among human beings. It however has nothing to say on how such recombination works. This is an open terrain that is to be filled. Theoretically speaking, we have to expect structural restrictions and opportunities for stories to combine or to separate. Instead of identifying “collective identities” as entities we should see identities as evolutionary products of processes in which stories are combined and recombined.

Europe is an ideal case for such a theoretical perspective: Europe produces stories about itself in the permanent confrontation with stories about the Other which again is producing effects in the Other who produces his own stories by looking at the first as the Other (the case in point is the reciprocal storytelling that takes place between Europe and Turkey or Europe and Russia). Such reciprocal storytelling produces shifting identities in which permanent identity mutation takes place. These processes can be halted by political identities with the risk of entering into identitarian struggles with cultural identities. They can be halted by cultural identities with the risk of entering into conflict with political identities. And economic identities can try to block the future while provoking political and cultural identities. What could come out is a story of conflicting stories, a reflexive meta-story in which we tell each other about the futile attempts to block the future. But this is speculation.

5.2 Summarizing the argument

The debate on European collective identity has so far not been able to establish a systematic link between the forms of collective identity constructions and the networks of social relations in which this process is embedded. Thus theorizing European identity has lost its empirical foundation. This loss has been compensated in two ways: by a thin theoretical strategy which is to reduce the issue of collective identity to the issue of the extent of identification with Europe, or by a thick theoretical strategy which uses nation building as the model for collective identity construction in Europe. The thin strategy does not tackle collective identity constructions since identifications are elements of collective identity construction, but not its organizing core. The thick strategy assumes that Europe will develop in a way analogous to the national story which is an unwarranted assumption. Variations in public proud or identification with Europe as measured in surveys indicate the resonance of a people to stories that serve for identity construction. A collective identity might produce identifications, and thick identities produce a lot of strong identifications. But collective identity is not the result of identifications, it is rather the object to which identifications refer. The explanation of the construction of collective identity must therefore be sought independently of the identifications that it produces.

The proposal made in this paper has been to analyze the construction of collective identities in Europe by looking at the sites where debates on its identity take place. The market has been mainly devalued and even denounced as a site for a collective identity, in spite of the fact that the success story of the Common Market would have offered a
The central debate on a European identity focuses on a politically defined collective identity, such as the discourse on constitutional patriotism in Europe or on a secular legal culture in Europe such as the one represented in the Council of Europe. However the cultural symbols mobilized by this Council are universal values that not only people in Europe share. This reduces boundary controlling effects and undermines the construction of a strong collective identity. Another variant is the claim that an ethical self-understanding is binding those living in the EU together (Kantner 2006 #110). These arguments are not explanations of processes of identity constructions, but elements in stories providing projects of control of the boundaries of “Europe”.

Thus we have several sites in which stories circulate that compete for hegemony in the process of collective identity construction in Europe. Its social basis is a society that constitutes itself in cross-cutting circles. These networks do no longer coincide as they do in the national situation. Thus the social embedding of identity constructions poses a new theoretical problem: the idea of a society that consists of partially overlapping networks of people. Each of these networks has its own stories that compete for representing each of these networks. This produces a dynamic of identity construction which needs analytical description and theoretical explanation. Analytically we have to understand the complex interplay of many stories circulating in partially overlapping networks. And we have to identify when and where stories can be linked with other stories, by identifying the structural restrictions and opportunities for the connectivity of stories. Thus we can take serious the idea of Europe as a multilayered society of partially overlapping networks in which a plurality of stories is circulating and a new story of stories can be created and narrated. For the time being we have to reckon with a plurality of projects of collective identities in Europe which vary in their combination in time. This plurality might turn out as an advantage: instead of imposing a hegemonic big story Europe can live with a diversity of stories that need only one property: to offer nodes as docking stations for other stories. Thus story-telling in Europe will be an open process, capable of taking up new stories without assimilating them. The only criterion that counts is: to be able to continue to tell a story.

Identity is a contested concept – this has been the observation at the beginning. The end of the theoretical story is the observation that Europe is a space with contested stories and that it is through contestation that stories that bind can be told. In this space the linkages between stories will multiply and link many other stories that so far nobody considered to be part of Europe. The emergence of a new society in Europe and the temporary blocking of its future in terms of constructing a plurality of European collec-

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18 Such arguments can be found in arguments about the Euro as a common symbol for market exchange or in ideas about the EU as a symbolically loaded marketized world (Risse 1999 #22111).

19 This approach has developed a series of variants. The most visible has become the idea of a deliberative Europe as the core of its cultural foundation or even its collective identity. See as a good example the contributions to Eriksen 2005 #203.
tive identities is the phenomenon that we have to understand. This makes the analysis of a “European identity” a demanding theoretical, methodological and empirical task.

6 Conclusion

The conclusions to be drawn from the foregoing discussion are recipes for further research. For the moment I see four such recipes for organizing research on collective identity in the context of Europe and for generalizing from this context to some model of collective identity beyond the nation:

- Identifying sites and stories of the narrative network that emerges in Europe
- Identifying the story structure organizing this narrative network
- Describing this narrative network as a project of control of social relations (and its boundaries) in Europe
- Explaining the turning points in the evolution of the narrative network by the social relations among people, regions, civil society organizations, economic organizations and finally nation-states that emerge in the course of Europeanization

By applying these recipes we do not need psychological assumptions such as a minimum of „identifications with Europe“ for seeing „identity“ in Europe and explaining its emergence and evolution. If there is a collective identity, then identification will come – more or less, depending on social structures that develop in the emerging society in Europe.

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