Character, Identity, and the Construction of Europe

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The ambiguities of Europe as both cultural construction and reality can profitably be analysed from the perspective of changes in the ways in which its constituent nations are imagined. This paper explores how various modes of writing the history of Europe reflect a transition from conceptualising communities in terms of 'character' to imagining them in terms of 'identity'. Looking at Europe as a kind of imaginary rather than imagined community leads to a plea for a more relational view of 'Europe', and more systematic explorations of how Europe has been experienced and described by travellers and explorers from other parts of the world.

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When asked for a contribution to this conference I thought I could jump right into the midst of my current ethnographic material: the accounts of 19th century non-European travellers about their visits to Europe (Møller & Harbsmeier 1992, Harbsmeier 1994a, 1994b, 1997). Beginning to work on my paper, however, I had to realise that this material only could be made to speak to the theme of "Europe as Cultural Construction and Reality" on the basis of a more thorough, theoretical discussion of alternative approaches. What follows is therefore only an introduction in the shape of a critique of some of the dominating historical modes of dealing with "Europe". Trying to argue for a new, ethnographic or ethnological approach vis-à-vis these historical modes, I hope to be able serve better food for thought and discussion than I would have been able to if I had followed my original plan.

From National Character to National Identity

Our ways of talking about national differences and similarities have gone through a considerable number of changes since David Hume, Immanuel Kant and others made the concept of national character a respectable subject. Throughout the 19th century and until World War II, there have been many more or less serious attempts to lend some sort of scientific credibility to the concept of national character, which from its beginnings had been suspected of merely reproducing popular prejudices and preconceptions. Through the decades after 1945, however, the still widespread ideas about national character became increasingly discredited in the end mainly to be considered as a kind of anachronistic survival from the times of chauvinistic nationalism that definitely had come to an end in the *ragnarok* of the Great War.

In most European countries, the concept of national character had difficult times through the 1950s, 60s and 70s. From having been a central concern of historians and even specially designed disciplines like *Völkerpsychologie* and its even less successful French, English, Italian and other counterparts, national differences and similarities through these decades were relegated to much less respectable and more remote and marginal spheres of private conversation and a few provincial pockets of reactionary and anti-modernist longings for one or the other kind of lost *Heimat* and intimacy. In academic and official discourse, the concept of

national character only seems to have survived these decades in the shape of mostly rather dismissing references to the anthropological tradition of studies in "Culture and Personality", which furthermore was widely suspected for its affiliations to US-American intelligence services and post-war reeducation programmes.

In both the Eastern and the Western hemispheres of the new bipolar world order there was left little space for any official and academic recognition of the peculiarities of nations and national traditions, which however, as developments in the 80s and 90s have reminded us, did survive and prosper at all sorts of other levels. One of the most dramatic reconfigurations to take place through the last decades of the 20th century actually has been the reawakening and reappearance of the issues, which under the heading "national character" seemed to have gone away forever. In the early 80s, notions of national character only could be referred to with great care and a lot of irony and quotation marks. From that time onwards, however, national identity has become a major, if not the main concern not only among critics, journalists and politicians, but, to an even more striking extent, also among historians and anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists, and all other sorts of otherwise serious scholars. Since then, academic journals, publishing houses, funding agencies, research programmes and endless numbers of local and international seminars, symposia and conferences apparently have had few other purposes than to promote further research and discussion on the questions of national identity. The events of 1989 and the end of the bipolar world order seem only to have added further energy to what already had started almost a decade before.

All this of course is nothing new. One aspect, however, which I think is extremely important for any discussion of "Europe as cultural construction" and thus our conference, seems to have escaped the attention of most of those who as participants and/or observers have taken part in the process. It has been brought to my attention by Perry Anderson, who, in an extended review of Fernand Braudel's bestselling *L'identité française* from 1986 originally published in The London Review of Books in May 1991, has underlined the significance of the shift from the concerns with character on the one hand to the more recent discussions of identity on the other (Anderson 1992).

According to Perry Anderson, the character of a nation or an individual can be distinguished from what we mean by talking about the identity of a group or an individual in several respects. Referring to character, one talks about a whole range of traits and qualities, where identity much more selectively only refers to properties considered as basic and essential for the group or individual in question. Secondly, a group's or individual's character is self-sufficient in the sense of needing no external reference for its definition, whereas identity is "fundamentally relational, implying some element of alterity for its definition". Thirdly, character is mutable and can change through time whereas identity by definition is perpetual, indicating what is continually the same. Character finally may be purely objective in the sense that it does not depend on any conscious self-awareness, where identity always "implies some sort of self-awareness" and "always possesses a reflexive or subjective dimension" (Anderson 1992: 268).

Judging on the basis of the key-concepts underlying the discourse about national differences and similarities one thus might conclude, that the descriptions and analyses of national character from the late 18th through to the early 20th century were aiming at various settled dispositions peculiar to a nation and then given various explanations such as climate and environment, language and history or any set of other less easily explicable peculiarities in manners and customs. Talking about identities rather than characters, more recent discussions of nationalism have meant a fundamental shift of attention by focussing on self-conscious projections rather than settled dispositions.

Studies of national character aimed at realistic descriptions of the totality of traits and properties defining a nation, whereas discussions of national identity aim at defining the centre or the essence of what constitutes a nation; analysing national character meant looking at the historical changes and developments assumed to have shaped and created the nation; the more recent discourse about national

identity on the contrary asks for the perpetual signs, symbols, and structures which, at any given point of time, provide coherence through time. Studies of national character have mainly been attempts to describe nations objectively, from a variously understood neutral or scientific point of view, whereas discussions of national identity tend to focus on the self-awareness and self-understanding of those involved in the building and perpetuation of nations: the signs, symbols and structures once again, rather than actual conduct and behaviour. And finally and most importantly, it has been the concept of national identity which has made difference and alterity, the fundamentally relational nature of nations as ways of being the other of other nations a much more central concern than it has been before. Trying to summarise these changes one could say that we have moved from national histories to what in Danish (but to the best of my knowledge unfortunately not yet in neither English, German, French or Italian) is called *Identitetshistorie*.

Perry Anderson's diagnosis of the particularities of the discourse about nationalism of the last two decades might appear rather schematic. To my mind, however, it points at some of the most crucial issues, which not only are involved in discussions of nationalism and national identity, but which also need to be clarified in order to understand what we possibly can mean by expressions such as "Europe as cultural construction and reality" or "European identity".

The most crucial issue in understanding the difference between character and identity seems to have to do with the fundamentally relational nature of the latter. Benedict Anderson has improved our understanding of nationalism and national identities considerably by urging us to look more closely at the styles, in which nations are imagined as communities rather than, as Ernest Gellner and others, asking for the functions of such imaginations or, as for example Anthony D. Smith and a lot of other more conservative historians, looking for their "ethnic" and "historical" substance and contents. To my mind, Benedict Anderson should have listened more attentively to his brother Perry in order to understand, that it is precisely the style of imagining nations as being "other"

to other entities of the same order which distinguishes national from other kinds of imagined communities like religions or empires, which by their very universal nature not only do not share, but exclude this principle of mutual recognition of otherness.

Europe as Imaginary Community

Turning to the "construction of Europe" against this background immediately raises two questions: firstly, whether and in what sense "Europe" can be understood and has been understood as some sort of imagined community, and secondly whether this community through the second half of our century has gone through a similar development from character to identity as the discourse about national differences and similarities.

From the 18th century onwards, there has been no end to the attempts at identifying a particularly European culture or civilisation, particularly European values or perhaps even a particularly European spirit, particularly European forms of economic, social and political organisation or cultural orientation, or particularly European patterns of thinking and behaviour. Even though some of these attempts have been more convincing than others, none of them has been agreed upon by more than a few for more than a short period of time. Having been proposed in only one of the many European languages and in some cases also translated to a few others, all the essays and books, calls and manifestos, studies and analyses of the poets and intellectuals, philosophers and historians, writers and politicians, who in the tradition of Novalis and his "Die Christenheit oder Europa" from 1799 (Hardenberg 1799) in one way or the other conjured up and called for European unity and community, only reached a tiny audience. When appealing to those in power, they rarely had any effect on political decisions. When addressing a broader audience, they almost invariably were considered as paying far too little attention to the workings of the real, national and imperial authorities in pursuing their utopian and idealist goals.

To a large extent, much the same of course could be said of many of the much more numer-

ous contemporary manifestations of nationalist aspirations. As we already have seen, the particular character or identity of nations and national states also have been the object of endless debates and discussions, whose results and conclusions as a rule also failed to last for more than a moment. Inspite of the similarities, however, nationalism and national movements had one decisive advantage: they could point at the already established and functioning national states as a model to be followed or criticised, to be fighted or to be imitated. For Europe, such models had to be looked for much further away like for example – and this actually was the model most often referred to – the United States of America or, in a more romantic mood, medieval Christendom.

To imagine Europe as a community thus has been far more difficult than to create and perpetuate the various national communities, whose mutual conflicts and wars perpetuated the utopian outlook of all the conjurations of Europe, European civilisation, European values and European traditions as a source for some higher unity and authority.

It is no coincidence, that realist visions of Europe prior to World War II either emanated from shameless imperial ambitions of one or the other, most often French or German, Great Powers, or else contented themselves with images of a brotherhood and metaphors about the harmonies of concert and orchestra to evoke at least a balance of the only real, the national and imperial powers, which continued to dominate and at the same time to divide the continent.

It is no coincidence either, that one of the few themes to be repeated again and again in almost all evocations of Europe and European unity from the times of Novalis down to today and presumably also tomorrow has been the variety and divergence, multiplicity and diversity, incompatibility and conflictuality of traditions and institutions, principles and norms, ideas and ideals allegedly characterising Europe in contrast to the rest of the world. To imagine national communities mostly has meant trying to forget and overlook the conflicts and tensions, divergences and incompatibilities having divided and threatening to continue to divide the desired unity and community. Imag-

ining Europe invariably has on the contrary constantly led to invocations of the very same divergences and incompatibilities as well as in addition the regional and national conflicts and tensions, which on the one hand effectively prevent Europe from forming a community, but on the other hand very often are made the very essence of European identity. On the basis of this fundamentally contradictory and paradoxical nature of the invocations of Europe one should perhaps look at Europe not as an imagined, but as an imaginary community.

Which brings us to the second of my two questions, namely whether, in the decades after 1945, the talk (or should I rather say discourse?) about Europe has gone through a similar development from character to identity as seems to have taken place with respect to various nations. My answer is to suggest that, contrary to what one might have expected, the opposite in fact seems to have happened. Trying to substantiate this claim I will make use of a kind of evidence, the broadly defined professionally historical literature about Europe, which will allow for no more than a hypothesis, admittedly in need of being tested against other kinds of evidence before arriving at any conclusions.

Through the 1940s, 50s and 60s, a large number of historians in both Italy, France, Germany and England appears to have come upon one and the same idea: to write not yet another history of Europe, of which there have been many not least since François Guizot's extremely influential *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* from 1827, but to focus instead on the history of the concept of Europe, the history of the discourse about Europe, the history of the visions and plans for a united Europe and the history of the studies and descriptions of what inspite of all the conflicts and wars has bound Europe together.

Under headings such as *Christenheit und Europa. Zur Geschichte des europäischen Gemeinschaftsgefühls von Dante bis Leibniz* (Fritzemeyer 1931); "Das Wesen Europas und des Europäers nach Äußerungen Nietzsches" (Emge 1951/52); *Oriens, Occidens, Europa. Begriff und Gedanke "Europa" in der späten Antike und im frühen Mittelalter* (Fischer 1957); *Die Idee Europa 1300–1946. Quellen zur Ge-*

schichte der politischen Einigung (Foerster 1963); *Geschichte einer politischen Idee. Mit einer Bibliographie von 182 Einigungsplänen aus den Jahren 1306 bis 1945* (Foerster 1967); "Zur Wortgeschichte und Sinndeutung von 'Europa'" (Gollwitzer 1951a); *Europabild und Europagedanke. Beiträge zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Gollwitzer 1951); *Europa. Analysen und Visionen der Romantiker* (Lützeler 1982); or *L'idea dell'unitá politica d'Europa* (Morandi 1945); *Storia dell'idea d'Europa* (Chabod 1964); *Europa. Storia di un'idea* (Curcio 1958); *L'idea di Europa* (Morghen 1960); *L'Idea d'Europa: storia, evoluzione, attualita* (Mistrorigo 1981); or *L'idée de fédération européenne dans la pensée politique du XIXe siècle* (Renouvin 1949); *Histoire de l'idée européenne* (Voyenne 1964); *L'idée d'Europe dans l'histoire* (Duroselle 1965); or *Europe: the emergence of an idea* (Hay 1957); *European unity in thought and action* (Barraclough 1963), or "Did Europe exist before 1700?" (Burke 1980), an impressive number of in some cases prominent historians has contributed, in some cases independently from one another, to a way of thinking about Europe, which definitely is more about identity than about character, which definitely is more about self-conscious projections than about settled dispositions, which definitely is more about reflexive self-awareness and subjectivity than about a whole range of properties and traits deemed objectively to be common to all Europeans.

The early beginnings of what later was to become the Common Market and the European Union thus have been continuously attended by a whole series of attempts at rethinking and redefining European identity long before the national characters, which during these decades were largely marginalised, repressed and forgotten, did embark on their remarkable metamorphosis into the national identities, which have been such a glaring and dominating theme of public and academic discourse from around the middle of the 1980s onwards. Beginning from before the Cold War already, the playing down of national characters as prejudices to be overcome rather than impressions to be validated thus went hand in hand with a whole series of attempts at building up a historically informed self-reflexive awareness of Europe not as a denominator of some objectively existing common heritage, tradition, culture or civilisation, but, to use a phrase coined by Jürgen Habermas with reference to Germany, as a basically post-conventional form of possible identity. During the Cold War, post-conventional Europe was constructed as a kind of compensation for the loss of reassurances previously provided through the, not pre-, but conventional, national belongings increasingly made responsible for the Wars that had reduced Europe from being the centre to becoming a, moreover tragically divided, backstage of history.

With the advent of national identity, the dramatic metamorphosis and revival of conventional national characters into post-conventional, but politically nonetheless threateningly explosive national and cultural identities, the conditions for constructing Europe as imaginary or imagined community once again seem to have undergone a radical change. The long tradition, by now almost consolidated into what easily could have developed into a discipline, of studying Europe in terms of the history of the concept and the projects and ambitions invested in it, has not been discontinued.[1] On the other hand, however, publishing houses and universities, funding agencies and research programmes since the late 1980s have engaged in what appears as a strikingly new venture: a "Europeanisation" of memory and historical consciousness aiming at a kind of substitution of the many imagined national communities by some sort of reconstructed common European memory.

As a genre, the history of Europe, European culture and European civilisation goes back to, as already mentioned, François Guizot and even before. During the first post-war decades, histories of Europe were mainly (i.e. with a few curious exceptions proving the rule) either reprints or reeditions of earlier works such as Herbert Albert Laurens Fisher's *A History of Europe* from 1935–38 (republished in English in 1952 and 1957 and translated into German in 1951) on the one hand, or larger collective enterprises such as *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe* (1965–89), the *Handbuch der europäischen Geschichte* from 1968 onwards or the *Propyläen Geschichte Europas* published in

six volumes from 1975–78 on. From around 1990 onwards, however, there has come out a whole flood of both single-author one-volume and many volumes, many authors' histories of Europe, which, with or without financial or other support from Brussels and other interested European agencies appropriately confirm the pattern I think I can identify in post-war constructions of Europe and European identity[2]: the first three or four post-war decades have been characterised by a defamiliarisation of national character combined with attempts at establishing a – post-conventional – European identity, whereas the period from the late 80s onwards shows a number of symptoms of the reverse: an increasing amount of attempts at creating a more objective and uncontested, more fundamental and basic European past in the "character-mode" while at the same time adding further energy to the post-conventional defamiliarisation of national identities.

Europe Seen from Outside

I am not sure whether I have been able to convince you of the plausibility of Perry Anderson's character/identity distinction for describing and analysing processes of change and reconfiguration in the ongoing negotiations of national and European post-conventional identifications and conventional differentiation. Basing my hypothesis on the evidence provided by historians writing in one way or the other about Europe, the history of the concept as well as the history of the continent, the construction as well as the – assumed – reality called Europe, I find it helpful to distinguish between the ascribed characters and the achieved identities as competitors in the ongoing struggles about what scholars in history and related disciplines such as ethnology tend to see as the more deeply seated forces giving shape and some sort of meaning to both Europe and the national loyalties with which Europe is bound to interact and compete.

One crucial aspect of the transition from character to identity, however, has so far escaped our attention. According once again to Perry Anderson, the character of a group or an individual is self-sufficient in the sense of needing no external reference for its definition, whereas identity is "fundamentally relational, implying some element of alterity for its definition". As I have tried to argue, this relational aspect is a central issue in the case of national imagined communities. With respect to the European imaginary community, however, it seems as if the element of alterity and otherness almost only comes into play in terms of the difference and diversity of Europe as against the various nations and national states forming its members and parts. National imagined communities spontaneously keep comparing themselves to other entities of the same order. The imaginary community of Europe appears on the contrary only to refer to the otherness of its own constituent parts. The ubiquitous rhetorics of diversity and multiplicity as defining the essence of Europe actually owes most of its seemingly inexhaustible plausibility to exactly this: to the continuous emphasis on internal multiplicity at the expense of making explicit the diversities defining Europe relationally in contrast to other entities of the same order.

There is of course more than one explanation for this striking peculiarity of the European imaginary community. Firstly, nations and national states tend to be imagined as sovereign bodies, whose power only ends at the borders to other national states, whereas the limits of Europe as a locus of exercising political power in principle are defined by the relative power of its internal, nationally constituted members and parts. Secondly, it is sometimes explicitly claimed and very often tacitly assumed that there is no need for comparing Europe to any other continent or subcontinent, empire or regional conglomeration of states because the result of such comparison is given in advance already: no other continent or subcontinent, region or empire, not even the United States of America, so it is claimed, could possibly match the unique divergence and multiplicity of Europe.

European identity, in other words, on the one side aspires to a status similar to that of other imagined communities while on the other having great difficulties in acknowledging the fundamental relational nature of such identities. There is, as we have seen, a split in the historical literature concerning Europe: the numer-

ous studies of the history of the concepts, ideas, visions, plans and projections concerning Europe appear to be fundamentally incompatible with the efforts of writing the history of Europe as if it actually already had been a community from the beginnings rather than merely becoming a common market with a number of more or less fragile institutional superstructures and rather ill-defined external boundaries.

From one perspective, this split, which I would suggest to call a split between character and identity, of course could be explained as a reflection of the present state of the process of European integration, which in itself is rapidly becoming the subject matter of yet a third kind of historical writing about Europe.

From a cultural perspective, however, the same split and hesitation also can be interpreted as an invitation further to explore the potential and possibilities of looking at Europe neither as a reality already established from times immemorial nor as a series of more or less successful realisations of the ambitions and aspirations embedded in the idea and concept of Europe, but as series of encounters, dialogues and negotiations of a relational European identity. Or to put in the words of the title of our conference: to treat Europe neither as a reality, a real character, nor merely as a construction, a self-sufficient identity, but to look more closely at the many processes through which Europe and Europeans have identified themselves in contrast to others while at the same time themselves being identified by these others as others (for this perspective see also Pocock 1991).

With these programmatic statements I have come to the end of this presentation. As I said to begin with, I had originally planned to present the ethnographic material, which I have been working on for some time: the long series of travel accounts written by non-European visitors about their experiences of Europe and Europeans during the 19th century. Following some of the Chinese and Japanese, Hindu and Persian, Moroccan and Egyptian, African and Inuit, Thai and North American Indian ambassadors, students, and attending servants, rulers, princes, and poets on their way through the museums and exhibitions, zoos and panopticons, opera houses and theatres, cafes and restaurants, factories and printing presses, barracks and drill grounds, receptions and dinners through Paris, London and also Berlin could have given a much more concrete idea about what it has meant to look at and observe Europe and Europeans from somewhere outside. Unfortunately, there is no time for this now, but I hope to have demonstrated that such sources are no mere curiosities, no mere repositories of assorted ethnographic observations about European manners and customs, but actually can be made to speak to some of the most central contemporary concerns about Europe as both reality and cultural construction. The seemingly post-modern dialectics of character and identity has a history much older than commonly assumed.

Notes

1. On the contrary it sometimes appears to go through a kind of revival: Morin 1987; Harbsmeier 1988; Hecker 1991: Lützeler 1992; Buck 1992; Nelson, Roberts & Veit 1992; Faye 1992; Heater 1992; Sörlin 1993; Boer 1993; Delanty 1995; Hudemann, Kaelble & Schwabe 1995; Interestingly however more recent reconstructions of the uses of "Europe" in various contexts and traditions seems rarely to be aware of their many predecessors.
2. E.g. Duroselle 1990; Pomian 1990; Mørch 1991: Montaville 1992; Anderson et al. 1993 ff.; Le Goff 1993 ff.; Fontana 1995; Davies 1995; Fernandez-Armesto 1995;Benz et al. 1996; and for children: Le Goff 1996. So far only very few historiographical studies have appeared. See however Hudemann, Kaelble & Schwabe 1995; Christin 1996; Durchhardt & Kuntz 1997.

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