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European identification: symbolic mediations of unity and diversity

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Abstract

This article discusses examples of mediated and mediating symbols used to build trust in Europe as a shared transnational project. It starts with a general discussion of globalisation and transnational mediation, and then briefly exemplifies how money, flags, anthems and other symbols work to suggest identifications. The five key European symbols ratified by the Council of Europe and the European Union are introduced, presented and analysed, indicating how the EU and other pan-European actors have chosen to express a sense of shared identity and meaning. Each of these key symbols is then scrutinised as multi-layered mediating tools in creating loyalty and reinforcing faith in collective societal institutions of markets and states, and in the corresponding imagined supra-national community. These dominant European symbols are shown to reflect a balance between homogenisation and fragmentation. The analysis locates a core identifying formula of "an ambivalent desire for communication with others". However, it also finds a major set of tensions around this thematic core, understanding European identification as a dynamic process of mediation rather than as a limited and limiting object.

Introduction

While there are many definitions of 'globalisation', a key aspect of the term is that it implies various kinds of transnational flows. A combination of physical mobility and mediated communication across borders is one aspect of this process that also has important repercussions for identity formations. In a spiral movement, globalising social worlds demand, and are at the same time produced by, at least a partial transformation of previously local or national communities into some kind of transnational identification. All such de- and re-identifications are eminently cultural processes, based on signifying practices whereby people interacting shape meanings by using signs, symbols and narratives to make social communities meaningful, so as to be able to inhabit and identify with them. Transnationalisation thus presupposes signifying tools: narratives embedding people in stories that connect them to dynamic forms of imagined communities. Simultaneously, we also see condensed symbols that, with a signalling function, distil the perceived (culturally, socially and historically constructed) essence of what binds them.

These kinds of renegotiations of loyalties and understandings happen all the time in all parts of the world, but today's European unification project – in persistent crisis – represents a particularly instructive example of the possibilities and risks involved. In this paper I discuss how different symbols are designed and used to strengthen identification of and with Europe in a number of ways: as a geographical territory, political institution, social community' or a cultural idea. This approach constructs Europe's diverse and often ambiguous or even contradictory cloud of meaning. While the EU's official symbols will be the starting point, I will also refer to 'other' symbols – from above or below, and from inside or outside – for the purposes of comparison and contextualisation.¹ The intention then, is to illustrate those mediated processes of transnational or cosmopolitan re-identification that belong to the basic repertoire of cultural globalisation in late modernity.

Crisis and Contradictions

Europe is in deep crisis from various perspectives as we see nationalist sentiments rising to undermine the legitimacy of the European unification process. Financial disorder is causing chain reactions from country to country, posing serious threats to the continuation and fulfillment of this unification. This chain of crises makes the deep inner contradiction of European unity visible, as it appears to tear apart any idea of a shared community across this multiply divided continent. It can be scrutinised using many different national discourses and narratives of 'Europeanness', uncovering the gaps and rifts that crisscross the continent. The method that I will be using here however, is to start with the main symbols that have in recent decades been devised by the central elites of the European Union (EU) to express the leading core values of Europe. By relating them to each other, and to other competing or alternative symbols of similar kinds that have different origins and intentions, a comparative and critical interpretation may deconstruct the intended homogeneity of identification and disclose some of the key

contradictions that characterise even these hegemonic discourses.

This deconstructive interpretation is mainly based on Ricoeur's (1969/1974) critical hermeneutics, which develops in a spiral movement between synthesising totality and analytical detail, understanding and explanation, appropriation and distanciation. By acknowledging the value of in-principle, open-ended conflicts of interpretation, this method enters a productive dialogue with many different exploratory and validating techniques: from symbolic interactionism and semiotics to poststructural deconstruction and discourse analysis (Fornäs, 1995; Lehtonen, 2000; Johnson *et al.*, 2004). In the analysis below, in addition to Ricoeur, I also draw on ideas from Étienne Balibar, Jürgen Habermas and Georg Simmel in making critical interpretations that aim to illustrate and follow the meanings created by the predominant uses of European symbols.

The different symbols I will discuss present the values and characteristics that link the concept of Europe and Europeanness. A first dimension relates to the *external positioning* of Europe in relation to other continents or regions, represented as one among equals, as inferior to its competitors or (more probably) as hierarchically elevated above others. Another aspect that is obviously relevant is the *spatial texture* of this identity: whether Europe is depicted as homogeneous or fragmented, unitary or diverse. A third important aspect concerns its *temporal dynamics*: for instance, whether Europe is understood as constant or changing, stable or mobile. In addition, different symbolic domains will be scanned: Is there a strong, hegemonic and unitary form of identification that completely dominates and makes it possible to draw rather strong conclusions on where Europe is currently heading? Or else, which are the main axes of inner contradiction that come to the fore when scrutinising the most prominent symbolic formations that have so far been devised to give meaning to the European project?

Mediating values

The heavy and shimmering precious metal of chinking coins and the fine-meshed security details woven into the paper of rustling banknotes guarantee a solid value without any need for conscious reflection. But, instead of the usual currencies that have become so ordinary that their designs are never really noticed the gaze suddenly has to get used to new denominations, and one has to carefully scrutinise the previously unknown currency. Its visual motifs reassuringly whisper who or what secures the value of this money. Each coin and banknote clearly shows a specific denomination and an issuing nation state where this value is guaranteed.

However, this time the money is not based in any singular nation state but in the more complexly structured geopolitical territory constituted by the EU. Since its launch in 2002, the euro has contributed to representing the presence of Europe in daily life. Its design, with stars and maps, doors, windows and bridges on the banknotes, and a series of nationally chosen motifs (German eagles, Irish harps, Greek ships) on the coin, have given Europeanness a new meaning: at once banal and pervasive. While the (re-)current currency crisis is a mortal threat to the continued use of the euro, the concrete symbolism of its design have been firmly established among Europeans and non-Europeans alike. Importantly, this visibility makes its possible demise much more symbolically disruptive to the heart of European identification than if the euro had just been an abstract and purely economic tool.

Money is much more than a technical means of payment connecting people and societies and serving as a means of circulation for the civilisations exchanging commodities. As a tool for measuring value, money is the common standard that makes it possible to abstract and measure values across different spheres of society and of life. In all its forms, money is at the same time necessarily a kind of medium for communicating meaning. The most recent forms of digital e-money have reduced this signifying side-effect to a minimum, with signs such as £, \$, ¥ and € (or abbreviations such as USD or EUR) in focus. But traditional coins and banknotes leave considerable amounts of space for communicating symbolisms aiming to reinforce trust on two mutually interlinked levels. On one hand, they call for trust in money as signs of economic value, where a series of details hard to counterfeit distinguish real money from copies. On the other hand, money designs strive to assure users that the issuer of the money has a trustworthy solidity capable of standing up against the toughest demands and crises. To that purpose, money design is used to symbolise the identity of the issuing institution, and thereby to contribute suggestions as to how citizens may identify with their nations – or, in this case, with Europe as transnational community (on European identity, see Delanty, 1995; Heffernan, 1998; Stråth, 2000/2010; Uricchio, 2008; Wintle 2009).

This second mechanism is also in play around a wide range of other kinds of symbol beyond currencies. For example, on number plates and in other strategic places in urban space, a circle of twelve stars on blue similarly identifies vehicles, buildings, sites, institutions or activities as European. An infrastructure resource boasts support from the EU, or a private shop has borrowed the symbol to flag its European profile. At European events, whether live or broadcast, the European anthem comes across, a wordless song that seems to convey some kind of message – but which message exactly? There are many different symbols of, and for, Europe. Some have been developed and ratified by pan-European authorities such as the Council of Europe or the EU itself. Others are made and used by media, institutions or organisations reaching out all over Europe, or movements or artists wishing to affirm or criticise the European unification project.

Whichever specific functions such symbols may fill, each of them contributes to constructing a meaningful identity for Europe. These identifying symbols are tools of signifying practices proposing what Europeanness may mean for those interpretive communities in which they circulate and are used.

These symbols are encountered and used by virtually everybody. Some, like money, are used on daily basis and integrated into everyday life; others, like anthems, only on special occasions outside the ordinary routines. Even though few study them in detail, at least some of them (in particular the flag and the currency), are familiar to most European citizens and visitors. However, this vernacular familiarity is mostly tacit, and few have ever given any deeper thought to them. Actually, most Europeans are unable to even tell which symbols have been officially recognised as such. Also, outside a limited number of experts on numismatics, vexillology (the study of flags) or musicology, media and cultural researchers have paid surprisingly

scarce attention to the interpretation of symbols like these. For instance, only a few articles in the almost 2,000 so far published articles in the journals *Cultural Studies* and *European Journal of Cultural Studies* focus explicitly on symbols of this kind, and the vast majority of books on European unification have virtually nothing to say about them. Rather, the focus is on other aspects of political discourses or social practices. To be sure, there are excellent exceptions, some of which will be mentioned below and others referenced in my book *Signifying Europe* (Fornäs, 2011), but there is certainly still room for much more critical interpretation of various kinds of identifying symbols.

Constituting Europe

The EU's European Agenda for Culture from 2007 specifies three strategic objectives: (a) focusing on cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; (b) promoting and illustrating the importance of cultural and creative industries for growth and jobs; and (c) promoting the role of culture in the Union's relations to countries outside the EU. In particular, the first and third of these objectives are related to the use of cultural media genres (such as the cultural capitals of Europe, quality cinema, Eurovision Song Contest, and Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League) as well as to the dedicated symbols analysed here. These are meant to forge and consolidate a shared identification among Europe's disparate partner nations and to brand this precariously constructed European identity on the competitive global market.

Based on previous decisions taken by the larger Council of Europe (CoE), encompassing virtually all of the territory traditionally identified as European, the EU has established a range of key official symbols. Several variants and symbolic genres have been discussed, but five main 'official' symbols have crystallised. In the 2003 draft treaty establishing a constitution for Europe, they were described thus:

The flag of the Union shall be a circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background;

The anthem of the Union shall be based on the Ode to Joy from the Ninth Symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven;

The motto of the Union shall be: United in diversity;

The currency of the Union shall be the euro; and

9 May shall be celebrated throughout the Union as Europe day. (European Convention, 2003: 222).

These symbols were among the first elements deleted in the revisions made after the defeats in the French and Dutch referenda, but remain in full use, and the final 2007 Lisbon Treaty includes as a supplement a solemn declaration of allegiance to these symbols from sixteen EU member states:

Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Hungary, Malta, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and the Slovak Republic declare that the flag with a circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background, the anthem based on the 'Ode to Joy' from the Ninth Symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven, the motto 'United in diversity', the euro as the currency of the European Union and Europe Day on 9 May will for them continue as symbols to express the sense of community of the people in the European Union and their allegiance to it (Final Act, 2007).

The flag, anthem, motto and day continue to be used to identify Europe, and this is also true for the euro, even though it is official currency only in the slightly more limited EMU area that excludes Denmark, Sweden, and the UK, among others. The CoE and several EU agencies have in the various phases of the ongoing integration process eloquently expressed why these symbols are so important. An often repeated discourse desires a set of officially acknowledged symbols that could strengthen the trust and identification of citizens in the uniting project of the European community by mediating an emotionally anchored and anchoring image of its basic values (Curti Gialdino, 2005). It is argued that tangible political symbols crystallise and maintain collective identities, codify citizens' shared values and engender loyalty to these values, thus having a uniting force. Such symbols are intended to make it easier for European citizens to feel at home not only in their own nations but also in Europe as a whole.

A complex set of identifying processes are set in motion when these European symbols are used, linking various objects or practices to Europe and its core values. Empirical research is required to understand how, for instance, the flag or the anthem are actually used and understood in shifting contexts. Europeans or non-Europeans, politicians or ordinary citizens, high and low, with shifting social and cultural identities (ethnicity, class, gender, age etc.) and in different settings may then understand the symbols in diverse ways, and link them and their implied meanings to shifting other objects and practices, thereby setting in motion intriguing transferences of meaning between symbols, communities and contexts.

Without specifying any particular such uses, they build upon a more basic triangle of identification between a symbol, Europe and a range of (other) meanings that the symbol links to Europe and thereby charges it with meaning. When some image, melody, sentence or other communicative artefact is presented and interpreted as a key symbol of Europe, it is made possible by conventions developed by interpretive communities that by tradition and repetition get used to linking that symbol to Europe, aided by cues such as the use of the word 'Europe'. This basic axis between a symbol and Europe (as its intended core meaning) is then expanded by a dialectic of two further, complementary axes of identification. One identifies various phenomena (things, practices, spaces and so on) as European, by letting the established European symbol stick to them: this particular house is European since it has a EU flag. The second identifying movement gives Europe itself meaning by linking it to various other dimensions of interpretation that the symbol invites. The two processes are in practice intertwined, in that the accumulated applications of an established key symbol in shifting contexts add new layers of meaning, both to the symbol and to what it primarily signifies: Europe. It is the latter aspect of how symbols give meaning to Europe (rather than how these

symbols are used to add meanings to their contexts of use) that will be the focus of the following.

Europe Day

It is common for nations and communal causes to have a particular day in the calendar to mark or remember certain events. These are intended annually to recall and cherish the entities, events or causes in question, and are therefore closely linked to ceremonial and ritual activities. These dates are charged with meaning by signifying practices that name and relate them to other, surrounding or contrasting dates within an organised calendric structure. In Ricoeur's (1983/1984: 16; see also 1985/1988: 104ff and 2000/2004: 131f) words, the practice of dating events belongs to the cultural tools that create a "third time", bridging between lived (subjective, experiential, concrete) and universal (objective, cosmological, abstract) time that thereby "cosmologises lived time and humanizes cosmic time." This mediating historical or cultural time is shaped by techniques, narratives and rituals that connect both lived and universal time. By constructing and ritually celebrating specific dates, people make the flow of time meaningful, both by constructing the particular node in their shared calendar and by enacting a set of collective rituals each year on that specific date.

Dating is a way of inhabiting time and giving it meaning. The celebration of a day signifies a geopolitical community in three main ways: (a) first, looking backwards, a celebratory day reminds of something that once happened, commemorating a unique *past* event of founding importance to a community or an institution; (b) second, looking forwards towards the *future*, such a date expresses how a social collective intends to direct its joint action along a set of cherished core values; (c) third, in the *present*, as the day returns every year, through the cyclical aspect of the calendar, it gives a community the occasion jointly to celebrate and display its unity and values. Such celebrations take the form of ceremonial rituals enacted on that specific day, offering annually ritualised time for communal activities that serve as a symbolic model for collective practices to unite people and integrate them into a shared social and cultural sphere of meaning.

Installing a Europe Day became a prime task for expanding pan-European institutions in a period that Johnston (1991: x, 21ff, 63) has described as characterised by a "cult of anniversaries", underpinned by a "commemoration industry." Europe Day is to be used for celebrations that aim to strengthen the feeling of community and collective identity. When selecting such identifying days, it is common to look back in history and find some event of significance for the foundation of the community in question. Since 1985, *Europe Day* takes place on 9 May, and celebrates the 1950 Schuman Declaration, when French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed the formation of a union of the old deadly rivals France and Germany on the basis of precisely those coal and steel industries that had been the source of their competition and had delivered the tools of mutual destruction.

This Promethean or Phoenix-like narrative of Europe seems clearly distinct from the corresponding myths and self-defining narratives of other continents. Africa, Asia or the Americas have other characteristic stories: of natural origins, eternal wisdom or expanding frontiers. But Europe has for centuries been described as in deep crisis, barely surviving total disasters (from plagues to wars), and always precariously balanced between barbarism and emancipation. The 1910s Great War, the depression of the 1920s and early 30s, followed by fascism and WWII, and then the Cold War continued to present an enormous challenge to any hope for European unification. The Balkan wars were then only one example of how the promises of 1989 also failed to open all doors to success.

The choice of May 9 for Europe Day belongs to a series of narratives whereby Europe is depicted as always in crisis, resolving to gather strength to return from past or ongoing catastrophes. My earlier references to the 'current' financial and political crisis of the EU may well in this respect *always* be valid. There is no time when Europe is *not* emerging from disastrous convulsions. There is a real basis for this experience in that there is certainly always a risk that new breakdowns will occur, but there is also a more positive aspect in that this experience of crisis-management may also have made Europeans rather well equipped to deal with such crises. However, Europe Day is little venerated or even known among most citizens. Other dates have been proposed as more worthy of celebration, and the May date also tends to collide and compete with other anniversaries, not least that of the end of World War II. Further confusion is added by the Council of Europe since 1964 naming May 5 Europe Day (celebrating its own founding in 1949). Such discord between leading European institutions certainly does not make it any easier to anchor any Europe Day among citizens. 'Googling' Europe Day leads to a strange mixture of institutional efforts to pump it up as a true event and a highly disenchanting chain of sceptical reports complaining of its lack of success, or even maliciously welcoming it as a telling sign of the failure of the whole EU project.

An anniversary needs celebrations to be filled with living meaning, and when attention to such celebrations remains minimal, it is a half-empty sign.

European Anthem

An anthem is a song of praise made for communal singing, aiming to reinforce collective identifications by its lyrics, melody and sheer act of coordinated activity. Martin (1995: 275) sees the unprecedented demand of popular music today in the light of its capacity of forming communities, stating that, "close-knit communities of Romantic mythology have given way to the quest for a sense of belonging, where individuals 'seek to identify themselves with symbolic entities.'" Here, "popular music becomes a useful commodity", offering "a sense of who you are and where you belong." Popular songs help construct a wide range of different collective identifications, while anthems are made to underpin those that have a more official character, supported by formalised institutions such as nation states. Among other means of expression, music has a particularly strong potential to combine collective identity with emotional charge. Anthems have capacities for emotionally embodied community building, but these capacities are typically confined to ceremonial events rather than integrated into everyday life.

With the words, 'O friends, not these tones!', Beethoven's bass voice had, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars and the Congress of Vienna (1824), called for peace. These sentiments were combined with Friedrich Schiller's dreams of both

communal joy ("Joy, beautiful spark of divinity") and universal brotherhood ("All men will become brothers"). Incorporated into the final fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, this "Ode to Joy" was sung to a melody in popular style, inspired by French revolutionary hymns and marches, which 150 years later seemed well suited to a *European Anthem* that was ratified by the CoE in 1972 and the EU in 1985.

However, the lyrics were finally silenced in order to avoid the problem of choosing a language (with German particularly controversial for historical reasons), but also because it was oddly enough considered too universal to identify anything specifically European. It was deemed problematic that a European Anthem spoke of universal brotherhood without ever specifying Europe as the core addressee. This move to omit the lyrics has problematic repercussions for the intended usefulness of the anthem for communal singing, since it is hard to sing a song with no words. The Berlin Philharmonic's famous conductor Herbert von Karajan was commissioned to create an arrangement of an instrumental hymn version built on the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (Council of Europe 1972). He had been a Nazi during the World War II and, therefore, a controversial figure. His hymn version carefully deletes any revolutionary, popular and ethnically diverse elements in Beethoven's composition, reducing it to a pompous, solemn and almost sacral background to official ceremonies. Various musicians have recorded and presented a wide range of variations of the anthem, including heavy metal, hip hop, and Romani singing style in attempting to make it more relevant to different groups of citizens who find the official version simply irrelevant. The European Anthem has thus been made to express with identification of Europe elevated to a higher sphere, as present in Schiller's and Beethoven's Promethean works where men danced with gods. But without their traces of ambiguity and hybrid mixing of high and low, the effect was much more traditional, reducing the hybrid mobility of the original to a unitary and static expression close to the idea of Europe as a closed and self-sufficient fortress.

European Flag

Flags have a long history as visual markers of collective identities. A modern flag of an institution or organisation works like a kind of logo: a graphical emblem or icon used to brand its signified unit and express some core aspect of its identity. Eriksen (2007: 4f) has argued that the most influential flags fulfill three demands: they symbolise a shared identity that is based on more than just the flag; are empty vessels that allow people to fill them with many different meanings; and this ambiguity vanishes at the boundaries of a nation, where their contrasts with surrounding others must be clear. As will be discussed, the European flag easily meets the third criterion of uniqueness. It seems hard pressed however, to meet the first two criteria as it is still most actively waved from above by central institutions, rather than by committed citizens. The existence of a shared European identity to support it remains uncertain, and many seem to feel that its signifying power is too fixed.

A European Flag was designed and approved by the CoE in 1955 and the EU in 1986. It has an original and rather unique shape, differing from the two otherwise dominant models of national flags: the Christian-royal cross deriving from the crusades, and the republican tricolour rooted in the French revolution. The symmetrical circle of twelve stars was thought to signify perfect harmony, but could also in Schiller's and Beethoven's spirit, express a Promethean idea that Europe's states, cultures and citizens stretch up into the heavens to become peers of the Gods (with an elevating effect similar to that of the halo of a saint). The flag design may actually have been inspired by both a late 18th century version of the US flag (the so-called Betsy Ross flag, where the stars formed a circle) and numerous images of Christian saints with a halo of stars above their heads. Both of these (interconnected) influences, however, are carefully silenced in official explanations, since both American and Christian impacts would be detrimental to Europe's wish to present an autonomous and secular self-image. The empty circle can be interpreted as expressing a void, a lack of core in the centre of European identity, but on the other hand also a kind of open agora for diverse actors to enter, like a public space where all are in principle equals. When the flag symbol is used in various contexts, people are often tempted to add some other sign in the empty area between the stars – for instance, the symbol of another organisation with which the EU happens to collaborate. It is thus an open question whether the heart and soul of Europe is to be seen as empty or open.

The uniformity of the star circle has sometimes inspired the design of alternative images. For instance, gay activists have created a variant where the stars shift in rainbow colours, while the EU itself has commissioned Rem Kohlhaas' firm to design an alternative EU logo in the form of a 'barcode' with colours taken from the growing series of nation flags of member states. Whereas the main EU flag combines an almost sacralising elevation with a strict equality and thus uniformity among the stars, these other designs utilise a kind of horizontal but non-hierarchical diversity. The flag also seems to lift up Europe to an almost divine superiority, while carefully avoiding any internal hierarchy or even diversity. The central void opens up like a public sphere for interaction, but also encircles and closes in those who enter in a symmetric and uniform space that is not unproblematic in relation to the EU expansion process. Its own multiple interpretive potentials are explored and further widened by the many alternative designs that have been proposed.

European Motto

Inserting some form of diversity into European unity became a key goal and necessity after the 1989 collapse of the Iron Curtain. In 2000, the *European motto* "united in diversity" was added to the repertoire, emphasising the subsidiarily principle and its fundamental respect for differences. The inner regional fragmentation of the continent – in languages, cultures and nations – was to be reinterpreted from an impediment to integration into its most valuable resource, in line with the enhancement of plurality and multiculturalism that developed in Central and East Europe after the post-communist turn. A motto is a short phrase meant formally to encapsulate the beliefs, ideals, motivations or intentions of a social group or organisation. It is a verbal key symbol that conveys an active will of future-oriented intentions of an agency.

Both Indonesia and South Africa use a similar national motto to the EU's – "unity in diversity" – where the word 'unity' stresses the goal more strongly than the more processual European term 'united'. As these states are not federations of formally separate states, 'diversity' refers not so much to different nationalities as to the sub-national plurality of ethnic groups. In the

EU case, the latter term is intended to include not only cultural and ethnic but also political and national diversity.

An older US motto, "*e pluribus unum*" ("out of many, one") used on coins since 1786 conforms to the melting-pot image of the US federation, where plurality disappears for the benefit of unity. The EU motto instead makes a key point that it is precisely diversity that is the main resource for the ongoing process of unifying European nations, more in line with a multicultural "salad-bowl" interpretation of diversity, although transposed from ethnic to national relations. The many linguistic and cultural differences within Europe that have been seen as an obstacle to unification are in the motto presented instead as a positive source of strength. As Toggenburg (2004: 6) argues, while "the US motto aims at an unity created from a diversity of states, the EU puts any further unity under the condition of a maintained diversity amongst the states". The European Motto thus strives to balance the uniformity of the flag and reactivates traces of the celebration of diversity found in Beethoven's "Ode to Joy", putting decisive emphasis on diversity as a resource rather than an obstacle to unification. Instead of substituting diversity with unity, it is diversity itself that forms the basis of Europe: in Balibar's (2004: 235) words, Europe's dense history of superimposed differences has lent it a particular capacity to act "as the *interpreter of the world*, translating languages and cultures in all directions."

Euro Money

The introduction of the euro in 2002 supplied the finishing touch to the inventory of key symbols for Europe: a materially effective mechanism that could simultaneously be designed to strengthen identification of and with Europeanness. In general, this is not intended to substitute for national identifications, but to add a new, transnational level. For all the other key symbols mentioned, it is important that they are never intended to replace the corresponding national days, anthems, flags or mottos, but to be added as yet another facet of citizens' complex identifications. However, the euro actually must replace the previous national currencies, making it more controversial and so one factor limiting its use to the EMU area that is only a part of the whole EU, thereby lending the euro an exceptional status among these symbols.

Simmel (1900/1989: 708 and 714ff) argued that the mobility of money symbolised by the round shape of coins, at the same time demands a reliable solidity in terms of value. The liquidity of this the most transient artefact presupposes a fixed value content, guaranteed by the banking and governmental institutions where markets and states fuse. Money is the hub of a complex dialectics with at least three dimensions, balancing mobility with stability of values, but also abstract currency systems with the concretion of specific value signs, as well as collective social networks with the self-interests of individual owners. Shanahan has here pointed to parallels between identities and currencies, making the latter particularly efficient for consolidating the former:

Currencies are the daily, ritualistic expression of popular trust in the political regime. To use money is to pay homage to community (2003: 166f).

Money can socially support the same collective identities, both through uses and designs. Used on a daily basis by almost all citizens, currency is rarely paid attention to as an object in itself, thus serving as an eminent example of what Billig (1995) has called "banal nationalism". Jensen (2002: 5) has distinguished between media and cultural phenomena that are "time-out" and "time-in": either lifted out of the flows of everyday life to constitute liminal rituals or, on the contrary, deeply integrated into the same vernacular routines. Days and anthems mostly function as time-out culture, flags and mottos can serve in both respects, but money is generally the best example of time-in culture in this sense.

The currency name 'euro' was introduced in 1995, replacing the 'ecu' ('European currency unit'), which Germans found sounding too much like 'a cow' ('ein Kuh'). It is as distinct as 'pound' or 'dollar', and has the advantage of clearly indicating its link to Europe. The € symbol was based on the Greek epsilon letter (ε) and is meant to signify 'Europe' as well as ancient Greece as the cradle of its civilisation, with the two horizontal lines hinting at the stability of the currency (Brion & Moreau, 2001: 117 and 120). The banknote fronts show windows and doorways from different epochs of European cultural history: Classical, Roman-esque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo, Iron and Glass style, and Modern 20th Century architecture. They are intended to symbolise "the European spirit of openness and co-operation", while the twelve stars represent "the dynamism and harmony between European nations". The reverses feature bridges, symbolising "the close co-operation and communication between Europe and the rest of the world."² In order to avoid gender, ethnic or regional imbalance, it was decided not to depict people or actually existing buildings, but instead using a more abstract style, which for some critics (such as Delanty, 1995) typifies, like the European Flag, the problematic abstractness (or even void) of the EU project itself.

Even so, there is slightly more to the banknote designs than first appears, with the architectural motifs revealing more levels of significance. Reading them from low to high values results in a "money story" (Zei, 1995: 337f) whose steadily progressing continuity anchors the EU in a solid historical line of tradition. By skipping centuries of allegedly decadent chaos, Europe is described as always progressing but also nourishing its heritage and delivering it towards the future. This is a typically modern and linear progressive narrative, understanding historical development in terms of accumulated wealth. Kaelberer (2004: 170) has described the ideological force of such a narration:

The imagery on the euro banknotes attempts to establish links to a common European tradition. It refers back to the classical ancestry of Europe and deliberately constructs a common European historical memory. [...] The chronological ascent in artistic styles also reads history in conventional European teleological fashion as the story of progress. While German banknotes visibly emphasised historical discontinuities, the euro can conveniently 'forget' uncomfortable aspects of European history – such as war and imperialism – in the name of an optimistic and progressive vision of Europe. It 'romanticises' history as easily as national currencies do.

The structuring of the historical narrative is also "typically European", making the starting point Roman rather than Greek Antiquity places the beginning geographically more centrally on the continent's landmass, so counteracting the potentially decentering effect of Athens, with its strong Oriental links.

The Greek roots of the € sign places this Middle East origin 'outside' the flow of European history depicted by the banknote motifs. It is connected to the idea of European culture as 'ex-centric', having its imagined origin and centre outside itself, most commonly in Jerusalem and the Middle East, and reminiscent of its own inherent insufficiency and project character (Brague, 1992/2002; see also Bauman, 2004). This meaning is already visible in its founding Greek myth where the nymph Europa is taken across the waters from the Middle East to Crete by the god Zeus disguised as a bull. The Minoan dynasty resulting from their intercourse thus identified Europe as an exiled community, and this insistent search for its imagined centre outside itself has continued through crusades to Jerusalem, as well as colonisation and exploration around the globe.

Today's EU is also more similar to the land-based Roman Empire than to the classical Greek archipelago. But there is also a temporal aspect involved, in that Rome places the historical beginning closer to year 0, secretly allowing a tacit identification of Europe with Christianity which pagan Athens would have undermined. Roman culture also suits better the mixture of engineering and empire building that is central to modern Europe. The banknote motifs also celebrate technological infrastructures rather than human beings or natural phenomena, lending itself to dominant ideas of 'building' the union in terms of a planned construction rather than organic growth or revolutionary leaps (Shore, 2000: 112). The stability of these buildings helps fuel trust in the EU and its euro, in a "desire to construct a solid and lasting whole of stone and iron, which is not dependent on economic and political contingencies but which mirrors the eternity linked to the motifs of classical culture" (CVCE 2011).

These are not just any buildings, but doors, windows and bridges: representative infrastructures of communication, aiming at expressing a wish for internal and external dialogue. It evokes the mobile history of Europe's cultures compared, for instance, to the more fixed river-bound cultures around the Nile or the Yellow River. The wish to mediate, link and communicate here becomes a cornerstone of European identity based on its dynamic genealogy but also suitable for late modern ideals. The motifs are thus compatible with the motto's talk of unification in diversity. Doors and bridges are classical symbols of the dialectics between similarity and difference, closed and open, border and transgression. In his analysis of "Bridge and Door", Simmel (1909/1994: 10, see also 5) describes humanity as "the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating" and "the bordering creature who has no border". This global or universal trait has been developed to perfection in Europe, for better or worse. It may on one hand be regarded as openness to communicative action stretching out to others, but also as a compulsion to interact, sometimes with highly egoistical purposes. European history is full of ambivalent communicative efforts: the crusades and the colonial explorations combined a wish to dominate the world with a less coercive curiosity for otherness, mirroring again the ex-centricity mentioned above (Todorov, 1982/1992). The euro banknotes thus seem to tell a "money story" of a continent that, through two millennia of steady progress, has combined aesthetics and technology to draw and transgress borders. Its community presupposes plurality and is based on an interest in the different: a desire for communicating with others.

The fronts of the coins tell a similar story in more condensed form, but their backs add another dimension. There, each member state is allowed to present its own images of itself in relation to the shared Europe. Different member states have made highly divergent choices. Some just focus on national specificities, but many have selected motifs that express a will to interact trans-nationally, while monarchies tend to present their kings and queens, even though it should be remembered that royal families are also to a high degree trans-nationally interwoven by marriage. State weapons or heraldics also tend to emphasise how a nation differs from its neighbours. But several nations seem to have selected emphatically communicative and border-transgressing image, such as the Greek trading ships, Finland's migratory birds, Austria's pacifist Bertha von Suttner and composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, as well as Italy's many artistic works. Germany's Brandenburg Gate was built in 1791 as a portal of peace by Frederick the Great, and has through history been used to celebrate several victories over France. In the Cold War era it became a symbol of the Iron Curtain firmly dividing East from West. However, since reunification, it has again been redefined as a symbol of connection and openness. When appearing on the euro coins, it thus links to the door motifs and expresses Germany's willingness to take a lead in opening up Europe's previously competing and closed parts.

The highest Greek coin values have mythical motifs, presenting Athena's wise owl, Europa and the bull. Europe is the only continent whose undisputed name is connected to a specific classical myth narrative where the main god Zeus, attracted to the Phoenician princess Europa, transformed himself into a virile white bull and then seduced and took her on his back over the waters from Lebanon to Crete where she bore him three sons, including Minos, who founded a new dynasty. This myth has many fascinating elements that support the interpretation of Europe as a selected continent, elevated by its contact with the divine. Originating in a mutual desire between male god-animal and female human being, and a dislocation in a movement from east and south to west and north corresponding to the migrations that once populated and developed the European continent, it reconfirms the idea of Europe as excentric via the communicative desire expressed by the banknotes. Thus united and uniting in diversity, the euro contributes to balancing the opposite risks of federalism and fragmentation: to avoid uniformity within a "Fortress Europe" that would alienate its most dynamic citizens but also tear it apart in mutually incompatible national entities. The coins strive to engender trust by linking the transnational pan-European fronts to the familiar national markers of their backs, thereby re-identifying the latter as (part of the) European.

At the time of writing (May 2012), this euro is in such deep crisis it may have vanished by the time that this text is published. At least, its continued existence is seriously threatened by the financial recession that may well cause some Euro-zone economies to collapse. From a more pragmatic and purely economic standpoint, it would be disastrous if one or two countries left the Euro-zone and reverted to their old, national currencies. This move could well serve as a healthy cure to revitalise the market and counteract some of the problems inherent in combining excessively disparate national economies under one single

currency. The terrified reactions to this prospect indicate that this is no simple functional matter but has a very strong symbolic dimension. The unification of Europe tends to be narrated as a linear progress story of both geopolitical and economic growth, according to which more and more countries are to be integrated into the EU and Euro-zone. Interruption of this progress would threaten the self-esteem of both the markets and the states involved in this process.

That Greece turned out to be the most vulnerable country also added a further symbolic dimension to the agony. As noted, both the 'euro' name and € sign are based on Greek language, expressing the idea of Classical Athens as the cradle of European democracy and intellectual life. Portugal or Ireland could perhaps be temporarily dispensed with, but if Greece should be thrown out or allowed to depart from pan-European cooperation, this development would cast a particularly dark shadow on how the European story could be told. In any case, it should be noted that, even though there has been some criticism of the abstractness of the euro banknote designs, the current euro crisis has very little to do with the designs themselves. It is the economic rather than the symbolic function of the currency that is now under pressure.

Identifying Values

The symbols discussed have had shifting success. Europe Day seems more popular in East Europe, possibly as a way of marking independence from the former Soviet Union. But in many North and West European member states, attention is minimal, partly through its collision with other dates, partly through the difficulty of inventing legitimate rituals and events. The European Anthem has certain qualifications and is quite well known, but tends to be experienced as stiff and elitist, especially in Karajan's slow and officious version with missing lyrics that make it unusable for joint singing. The European Flag is well recognised, although with a perceived need to be supplemented with additional images that better suit the intended identity of a unifying Europe – in particular the values of diversity. Few actually know the European Motto, but it echoes in the background of many political documents and serves as a backbone to understanding the EU project. Finally, in spite of a series of financial crises, the euro seems here to stay, and at least its design has gained wide acceptance.

A multitude of other symbols may be investigated so as to contextualise these official EU ones (Fornäs, 2011), including older and parallel symbols used by the Coal and Steel Union, with a flag of horizontal lines of stars and the blue colour signifying steel combined with black for coal. A smaller star circle was actually used already from the early 19th century by the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine. Pan-European Non-Government Organisations (NGO's) have promoted other symbolisms, such as the Pan-European Union's red cross in a yellow sun on blue bottom, with its clear Christian bias, or the European Movement's big green 'E' on white, with a totally different mood. Other contemporary European agencies such as the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) or UEFA also sometimes lean on visual elements from the EU flag. Their anthems lack the republican aura of "Ode to Joy" and are instead selected from the stock of European aristocratic-royal heritage (building on compositions by Charpentier and Handel, respectively).

Another set of comparable examples consists of symbols of nations or other continents, including the US, Russian or Chinese flags or money, or the symbols of the young African Union. Oppositional movements or artists also contribute counter-interpretations in works that symbolically de- and reconstruct Europeanness, including political artworks that play with substitutions supposed to highlight repressed problems of European unification. Finally, one might also consider totally different symbolic realms outside the scope of the official EU ones, including, for instance, saints, buildings or natural phenomena. Having explored this multifaceted territory, it has become clear that some of the same main patterns and tropes of identification seem to turn up in most of these cases, pointing at some central dimensions of how Europe is generally identified today.

In this way, symbols turn out to form a kind of battlefield of identifications, a stage of conflicting interpretations (Ricoeur, 1969/1974). Europe's identity is far from given, fixed or unitary, and in the contemporary era is under intense negotiation, challenged from various corners and explored by others. Some of the most interesting symbols of Europe introduce elements that combine polarities such as *equality and elevation, unity and difference, stability and mobility*. Ricoeur has argued for Europe's need to develop new models for a "post-national state", including a 'translation ethos' of hospitality capable of mediating between different cultures. It also demands an "exchange of memories" whereby people take responsibility for "the story of the other" in mobile identifications through "plural readings" that constitute narrative identities, rather than stuck in fixed "founding events" that freeze cultural groups into immutable and incommunicable identities (Ricoeur 1992/1995: 3 and 7ff; see also Ricoeur, 2000/2004). This "narrative hospitality" opening up multiple traditions to innovation is, thirdly, to be supplemented by 'forgiveness' (not 'forgetting!') as a form of mutual revision of entangled life stories resulting from the exchange of memories made necessary by Europe's violent history (Ricoeur, 1992/1995: 9ff). Europe's Day, Motto and Anthem, as well as some euro designs, offer at least faint glimpses of such a communicative ethics of translation and mediation.

The future seems to remain open. Europe must prove its trustworthiness by balancing the need to form a recognisable entity with the respect for particular interests. This circle need not be vicious, but could – just like the hermeneutical circle – grow into an opening spiral movement where the symbols of Europe are steps in a movement where local, regional and national identifications are mutually entwined into a web of shared responsibilities. The symbols studied here point in various and at times divergent directions, but a strong current runs through many of them. This is the theme of communication and mediation, with symbols inserted in complex ways into many different media flows: visual symbols used as signals in printed and broadcast media texts, anthems turning up as background sounds to narrations about European matters, and mottos reworked into a wide range of written or spoken expressions.

It is therefore, a reflexive twist that many of the European symbols make explicit references to mediation and communication, from the myth of Europa and the bull to the stable infrastructures of flexible communication on the euro banknotes. This interest in crossing borders has historically developed into almost an obsession, and it is far from 'innocent'. Controversial

aspects can easily be found, from colonial history to contemporary forms of Eurocentricism in globalised media networks. But the alternative of closing oneself off from interaction with others is even worse, and the mediating impulse combines curiosity, control and care in truly ambiguous ways, opening up both authoritarian and emancipatory interpretations (Habermas, 1981/1987: 391ff). This analysis has thus found a central aspect of identification that runs through many different symbolic domains. However, it has also found a major set of tensions around this thematic core, where for instance, some examples focus on equality, others on elevation; some on unity, others on diversity; some on stability, others on mobility. Therefore, European identification today must be understood as an ongoing, dynamic process of mediation rather than as a limited and limiting object.

The almost constant crisis of Europe does not only point to tensions between different regional and national interpretations of European identity. It also expresses the equally deep inner contradictions that are found in the very core of central and, to some extent, shared pan-European self-identifications. Mediated by a wide range of communication technologies and integrated in many genres and kinds of media text, symbols of Europe are used in signifying practices that make meaning by identification. They do so by providing identifying tools that establish and develop European communities on various levels of society, but also by symbolically representing Europe as something elevated, equal but internally diverse. These practices open doors and stretch out towards the whole world, fuelled by an ambivalent desire to communicate with others.

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- 1 This article builds on a comprehensive interpretation of a wide range of symbols of Europe (Fornäs 2011), summarising its main arguments and adding thoughts related to trust and transnationalisation of mediated identifications.
- 2 These are standard formulations found on various EU websites and quoted in sources on the euro banknotes.

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