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Ethnos or Demos?

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Ideological implications within the discourse on "European culture"

The fact that, by agreeing on the "Culture 2000" program, the European Union introduced for the first time a catalogue of measures regarding a common cultural policy can only astonish those who may have imagined the possibility of a European integration at the level of economic, foreign and security policies apart from the establishment of a new – "European" – cultural hegemony. "Culture", in the specific sense of the object of culture-political regulations on the one hand and of discourses on "European identity" on the other hand, plays without any doubt an important role in this process. To what extent the concern about "culture" thus conceived has moved, at the latest since 1989, into the limelight of European politics is shown, for instance, by the increase of a *culture-historical* literature on the question of Europe: From the medievist Jacques Le Goff to Rémi Brague, professor for Arabic philosophy, from the "postmodern" conservative Peter Koslowski to the left-wing liberal Massimo Cacciari[1], this literature shares a specific interest in a historiologically decipherable "identity" as well as in culture-historical prototypes of Europe which are supposed to allow conclusions – or rather preconceived judgements – on the future shape of the EU in terms of political realism.

The step from a non-committal debate to a predominant discourse, however, requires not only to scrutinize the talking about a "European culture" in terms of content, but above all a thorough analysis of the *function* of this discourse within the context of the European integration project. In the following, I will therefore limit myself to a few remarks on the imbedding of this discourse on a "Europe of culture" within the entirety of European policies (neglecting, though, a detailed discussion of concrete culture-political EU-measures, and without misjudging of course the basically welcome orientation of transnational cultural programs). As a leading thread, I will herein follow Etienne Balibar's thesis[2] that the process of forming a "European identity" touches on the confrontation and interpenetration of two different concepts of what we are used to call a "people": the *ethnos*, i. e. an imaginary community of descent and affiliation, and the *demos*, i. e. a politically defined community of public negociation and the balancing of interests and conflicts.

To begin with, the appeal to the "common cultural values and roots" of the European citizens "as a key element of their identity and their membership of a society founded on freedom, democracy, tolerance and solidarity"[3] certainly serves as an ideational support of the European unification project. However, the concrete ideas about the recently much talked-about "European community of values" – the "better", for supposedly culture-historically and ideationally founded version of the intended economic and political world power Europe – have so far not really stretched beyond truisms, thus proving that the mere superimposition of an orientation towards economic and power-political ends, on the one hand, and a pretended foundation in common values, on the other, does not yet produce a basic societal consensus. Moreover, the objective formulated subsequently to the quoted passage shows to

what little degree one is willing to expect fundamental conflicts between economic and "cultural" interests: "... a better balance should be achieved between the economic and cultural aspects of the Community, so that these aspects can complement and sustain each other." Such an objective appears to be quite a heavy burden to load on the scrawny legs of "identity" and "membership".

However banal these first findings may appear: it is still necessary to be aware of the ideological implications inherent in such emphatic ideas of Europe in the name of culture. All the more, since the focus of such ideational visions of Europe has obviously changed since the early post-World War II period: whereas during the initial years of the European integration process the real correlate of these visions (mainly pursued through the intertwining of national economies) was the reconciliation of the nation states of Western Europe, the predominant questions after the end of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, in 1989, are concerning the positioning of Europe in a global context and, especially, a possible "final" shape of this Europe.

Moreover, the "post-ideological" situation proclaimed in a reductionist manner after the disappearance of the opposition between the "East" and the "West" veils the ideological consequences of an identitary and affiliatory concept of culture. Such a concept does not only run the risk of provoking imagined communities of a nationalistic or regionalistic type which are structurally homologuous to their „European" equivalent and therefore hard to invalidate; it also undertakes a flagrant re-interpretation of the very ideals appealed to in the name of European culture: "Democracy", to give an example, changes in such an understanding from a model for balancing conflictual political and social interests, which has to be permanently re-established and developed in terms of constitution as well as in

terms of the concrete social interrelations, to a "cultural heritage" – a property so to speak – of a fictitious European ethnicity.

Nonetheless, one should not overestimate the predominantly ideational level. Or, as the political scientist Sonja Puntscher-Riekmann put it: "Europe as a political community has other prerequisites than an idea of her unity: She requires concrete political and economic interests as well as functioning dispositives of power, which then, however, indeed take advantage of such an idea."[4] In order to be more precise in describing the *functional* interrelation between rhetorics which aim at ideational definitions of Europe and the real political project, I shall therefore stress two crucial topics in what follows: the question of Europe's territorial borders and the question of a definition of what it means to be "European". Basically, they are just two facets of one single question, if we keep in mind that political communities are not only limited by territorial demarcations, but also by the assignment of individuals as members of these communities.

It is well-known that the geographical borders of Europe are precarious, especially in the East of the continent. Nevertheless, article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (version of Amsterdam) seems to take a quasi-natural limitation of the European space for granted: "Any European State which respects the principles set out in Article 6(1) may apply to become a member of the Union."[5] (The above-mentioned principles are those of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. As *political-universal* principles, they maintain a constant tension with any limitation of their validity; the "Conclusions" of the European Council in Tampere in october 1999, for instance, take this into account by crudely phrasing that freedom should not be viewed at "as an exclusive prerogative of the citizens of the Union"[6].)

Thus, what is a "European State"? More precisely: By which criteria can a state – like, say, Turkey, Ukraine or Morocco – be deemed to be "European"? In the culture-historical literature on Europe, these questions are sometimes answered in an apodictic manner. "The borders of Europe are cultural borders"[7], states Rémi Brague, for example. And he continues by explaining that the historical fractures with the Islamic and the Orthodox World define *outer* demarcation lines of Europe, whereas the borders between the Catholic Church and the Reformed Churches run *inside* Europe – which leads him to the conclusion that both are "definitely European". Such fixings, which by the way also characterize the jargon of politicians in charge, do not only suppress the constitutive significance of secularization for modernity, they also re-affirm historical conflict lines while at the same time re-interpreting without much fuss denominational wars as "European civil wars". (Similar re-interpretations are sometimes being suggested in the case of the Cold War and the two World Wars.)

The essentialism which is virulent in such culturalistic definitions of borders – the one-sided blurring of the historic contingency of pretentions of power that have been accomplished by political, military or economic means, in favour of a homogenuous and clearly limited space – this essentialism serves to design a teleology of the political project "Europe". In terms of political realism, the fortication of the borders defined by the Schengen Agreement can be considered as the prototype of the implementation of this teleology. Its possible symbolical-political instrumentalization can be guessed by taking a look, for example, at the warnings about subversive "non-European Muslims" that have been spread by the right-wing extremist Freedom Party in Austria.

Finally, the interest in a certain homogenization of the European populations by means of the construction of a "cultural" concept of "Europeanness" is openly pronounced in the quoted Decision of the EU about the "Culture 2000" programme: "Culture", it says, is "a factor in social integration and citizenship". The necessity of a "greater emphasis" on "common cultural values and roots as a key element of (...) identity and (...) membership" is explicitely linked with the "full support" and full participation of citizens in "European integration". The ambivalence between an ethnic and a demotic definition of what is more or less heralded here as a "European people" becomes obvious in this passage: the striving for democratic support and participation of European citizens is bent back
to a culturally determined membership and collective identity, *for the sake of which* "values" and "roots" should be emphasized. In fact, the quoted passage does not really give the impression of a serious ideology of descent, but rather of some sort of instructive guideline concerning culturalistic ideologization. Nonetheless, the latter remains compatible with the former and moreover presupposes the very existence of consistent "values" and "roots" conceived in an essentialistic manner.

Thus, the unambiguous orientation towards a specific European "cultural heritage" as well as towards the preservation of this heritage is opposed to a certain extent to the possible significance of European cultural policies in terms of democratic policies, which could possibly accompany a future constitutional foundation of the EU as a political community. The ambition of such democratic policies could be to provide the conditions for a transnational republican *demos* which might be capable of defending the "universality" of the democratic in the objects of marginalization instead of claiming this universality as an inherited property. This

is also meant to say: to provide the conditions for a public and differentiated sphere of the political, which would certainly have to be transnational but whose totalization as a "European" sphere is neither necessary nor desirable – by promoting, for instance, marginalized partial publics or by restricting the monopolization of media.

Even if the realization of a hegemonial identification of the citizens of the (future) EU as "Europeans" may presently seem rather remote: The danger of the discourse on a "Europe of culture", from my point of view, lies in the construction of a fictitious European ethnicity, i. e. in the ethnicization of the "Europeans" themselves. Moreover, this process of ethnicization is accompanied, on the one hand, by the ethnic classification and the political-economical declassing specifically of certain migrant minorities (which in French or in Italian language, e. g., are already classified by the significant terms "extracommunitaires" resp. "extracommunitari"). On the other hand, it is mirrored by neo-nationalistic and regionalistic "inland" ethnicizations, which the much talked-about "European thought" so far seems quite unable to confront.

It is not only the taming of thus evoked "ethnic" conflicts that is at stake in this process, but also the political project of the European Union as such, which tries to meet the deterritorializing dynamics of the nomadic forces of global capitalism with its reterritorialization in the name of culture, and supposedly in the interest of its *political* sovereignty. The appeal to an imaginary pole of identity may serve a sort of Western European self-colonization as well as, concerning the process of enlargement, the extension of this "colonization" onto the applicant countries in the East. However, it will hardly be sufficient to permanently legitimize the transfer of sovereignty that, at the end of the day, does not solely

affect the nation states, but above all the political, social and economic participation of the individuals, the forces that constitute a society by means of material and symbolic exchange, and the structures of a public sphere required by this exchange.

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[1] Cf.. J. Le Goff: Das alte Europa und die Welt der Moderne, München 1996 (Beck); R. Brague: Europa – eine exzentrische Identität, Frankfurt/M. u. New York 1993 (Campus); P. Koslowski, R. Brague: Vaterland Europa – Europäische und nationale Identität im Konflikt, Wien 1997 (Passagen); M. Cacciari: Gewalt und Harmonie – Geo-Philosophie Europas, München u. Wien 1995 (Hanser); M. Cacciari: Der Archipel Europa, Köln 1998 (DuMont).

[2] Cf. E. Balibar: An Europas Grenzen – Möglichkeit und Unmöglichkeit einer Gestaltwerdung, in: Lettre International 49 (II. Vj. / 2000).

[3] Decision No 508/2000/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 February 2000 establishing the "Culture 2000" programme, L 63/1 (http://europa.eu.int/comm/culture/culture2000_en.html).

[4] S. Puntscher-Riekmann, Die kommissarische Neuordnung Europas, Wien / New York 1998 (Springer), p. 21.

[5] http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/de/treaties/index.html.

[6] http://europa.eu.int/council/off/conclu/index.htm.

[7] R. Brague, Europa – eine exzentrische Identität, 10.