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Cathleen Kantner

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Collective Identity as Shared Ethical Self-Understanding

The Case of the Emerging European Identity

Cathleen Kantner

FREE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN, GERMANY

Abstract

Against the common view that a European identity is a functional precondition for legitimate EU governance, this article argues that conceptual weaknesses of the term 'collective identity' have led to a confusion of several analytic dimensions of 'identity' and to an overestimation of strong forms of collective identity. Insights provided by analytic philosophy will be introduced in order to redefine and differentiate 'collective identity'. The ways in which people refer to themselves as members of we-groups will be outlined and illustrated in order to contribute to an innovative model of the problem and therefore the policy-related formation of collective identities. The article concludes that a strong European identity is not a functional precondition for legitimate everyday democratic governance in the EU. Only in extraordinary situations and in order to institutionalize integration in ethically sensitive policy fields is it necessary that EU citizens discursively agree on an ethical self-understanding of their way of life.

Key words

■ collective identity ■ democracy ■ European Union ■ European values ■ public sphere

The end of the Cold War opened new perspectives for the intensification, acceleration and even democratization of the European integration process. Since then the European Union (EU) has become active in even more policy fields, including former core competencies of the respective nation states. Meanwhile, EU governance touches fields that have hitherto been considered to be at the core of national sovereignty, as they are deeply rooted in particular national traditions – like constitutional policy, social policy, security and defence, immigration, internal security and biotechnology. Despite occasional setbacks, this amazing development from a relatively small foreign trade zone for the goods of one

branch of industry in the 1950s to a multinational political system at the turn of the century represents an impressive success story.

Nevertheless, many observers doubt that the EU is ready for democratization and grand future projects like common social policies or a common security and defence policy. Drawing more or less explicitly on communitarian views¹ of the political process, many argue that the EU citizens, apparently, first need a common identity in order to accept common rules and institutions and especially in order to be able to decide in common upon ethically sensitive conflict issues (among others see Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970; most recently see Herrmann and Brewer, 2004: 2f; Risse, 2004: 250; Eriksen, 2005: 342f). In tension with his procedural theory of democracy, even Habermas agreed on the deficit description of a missing European identity and later spoke of the need for a shared material understanding of a European (social democratic) life form as well as a common interpretation of European history (Habermas, 1995; 2001).

The article will help to provide some answers to these issues by arguing that conceptual weaknesses of the term 'collective identity' inherited from social, philosophical, and sociological traditions led to a confusion of several analytic dimensions of 'identity' and to an overestimation of the role of one especially strong form of collective identity as a functional prerequisite of democracy. In order to demonstrate this point the article proceeds as follows.

The first part will provide a short overview of the debate on the perceived functional need for a European identity for legitimate EU governance. This will be briefly illustrated with three policy examples: constitutional, welfare, and foreign and defence policy. The second and third parts will introduce theoretical insights of analytic philosophy into the social science discourse on collective identity in order to redefine and differentiate the concept of 'collective identity'. The ways in which people refer to themselves as members of we-groups will be clarified in order to contribute to an innovative model of the problem and therefore the policy-related formation of collective identities. In each section the relevance of these conceptual considerations for evaluating whether or not 'the Europeans' see themselves as members of a community will be briefly outlined. The article concludes that a strong European identity is not a functional precondition for legitimate democratic governance in the EU as far as everyday politics is concerned. Only in extraordinary situations and in order to institutionalize integration in ethically sensitive policy fields is it necessary that EU citizens discursively agree on an ethical self-understanding of their way of life.

Beyond Identity?

The Perceived Functional Need for a European Identity

With accelerating speed, European Union governance became active in new policy fields formerly at the core of national sovereignty. This increasingly includes policy areas that are highly value laden. Some of them have been constitutive for

a nation's path to modernity and the evolution of national democratic institutions. National policies in ethically sensitive fields have their specific history – a history of 'hot' conflicts in which 'national identity' and the national political system coevolved. It is out of different democratic experiences and not simply out of stubbornness that Europeans have different views on ethically sensitive policy fields.

If areas such as constitutional policy, social policy, security and defence, immigration, internal security, or biotechnology come under EU-induced reform pressure, integration may become highly controversial. Many analysts, therefore, assume that national diversity clashes with European ambitions and that shared values are the necessary common ground for consensus and solidarity. Without shared values, European governance in these ethically sensitive policy fields would be condemned to fail. This reasoning can be illustrated by some examples: *constitutional, welfare, and foreign and defence policy*.

Example 1: Constitutional Policy National democratic constitutions can be understood as culturally specific interpretations of universal principles. These interpretations are specific because the content of universal principles was 'discovered' and institutionalized in very particular contexts and conflict situations. Constitutions can – under normative and historical aspects – be viewed as the outcome of generations upon generations of conflict over the general procedures of decision making and the definition of a democratic nation's collective projects (Habermas, 1998: Chapter 5). They define the rules under which the members of the national political community came to solve their conflicts in all other policy fields. From a social-historical point of view they also mirror historical fights, the achievements and compromises that emerged. In that way they reflect the historical defeats or victories of certain societal groups.² But even those groups who at one time did not agree with those institutional choices have since been fighting for reforms within the established frameworks and are – even with a critical attitude – integrated into the historically evolved system. Our ancestors' decisions and compromises shaped later political conflicts as well as the political opportunity structures for a broad variety of established and newly emerging collective actors. They had good reasons for institutionalizing certain policies in a certain way. The memorized history of policy settings is one important reason why the members of the national political communities usually find much value in their status quo policy practices. Even oppositional actors are therefore often very sceptical when a significantly different policy setting becomes available. They know 'the game' within the status quo and how to gradually achieve improvements. Once everything is open to change, as seems to be the case in the European context, they might – paradoxically – become aware of how much they are normatively and practically integrated.³ European constitutional policy therefore appears especially difficult. Beyond the underlying liberal principles which are shared across Europe, how should the resulting diversity of ways to spell out those principles be integrated into a common European constitution? In view of that situation, a European identity becomes essential for legitimizing European governance.

Example 2: Welfare Policies National welfare policies are very important for many European nations' collective self-understanding. Citizens are proud of their country's social achievements and the resulting specific balance between liberty and welfare. National social policies were institutionalized under specific historical circumstances based on a specific rationale and were fought for by certain coalitions of actors against others.⁴ Historical compromises shaped the outline of the initial institutional settings in a policy field. The specific collective understandings of certain social rights and entitlements, what constitutes a claim, who deserves what, and who owes what mirror the specific conflict histories of coping with the social question. Although welfare issues are now addressed at the European level, those questions are not answered everywhere in the same way. It would mean downplaying the possible range of dissent if one were to assume from the existence of advanced welfare policy regimes in (most) EU member states that these nations follow a common European welfare state tradition.⁵ It might be that under changing conditions the national welfare state fails to find enough engaged supporters and that there may be a lack of public support and political will to allow for the institutionalization of redistributive social policies at the European level.⁶ The acceptance of burdens within a European solidarity regime is in the communitarian view thought to be dependent on the existence of a strong common European identity (Offe, 1998: 120; Vobruba, 1999; 2001: 126). While the degree of homogeneity within the nation state is sometimes overestimated,⁷ it is widely accepted that the legitimacy of European welfare provisions depends on social identities which foster the acceptance of moral duties and compliance with the common good.

Example 3: Foreign and Defence Policy Foreign and defence policy is another highly sensitive policy field. On the occasion of the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003 it became clear how differently the EU member states perceived the issue. There has been heavy criticism that Europe once again failed to speak with one voice. A deep – identity-related – split between (most of the) old and (some of the) new members seemed to emerge. Huge anti-war demonstrations occurred in most member states as well as in the soon-to-be member states, and – with regard to the justification for the war – public opinion across Europe was clearly against the war.⁸ Nonetheless, in countries like Poland strong moral arguments in favour of the intervention were put forward by politicians and even civil society actors. In Germany such a position was almost unthinkable. This illustrates that national views on foreign policy, especially questions of war and peace, are deeply shaped by collective experiences. It makes a difference whether a political community has been the target of aggressions or the aggressor in the past. It matters whether our ancestors were colonialists who exploited other countries, but at the same time perhaps learned to pay more attention to very distant parts of the world and the 'ways of life' of the local populations.⁹ For today's view on the role of the United Nations it makes a difference under which historical circumstances the members of a political community learned to value international organizations (Lenz et al., 2002; Levy and Sznaider, 2002; Alexander,

2002; Alweiss, 2003; Giesen, 2004). Nonetheless, based on 'a common European identity' – many believe – Europe could have played a much more decisive role in international politics over the past decade. Moreover, it could have contributed to the further development of a just, multilateral, and legally bounded world order (see among others Habermas and Derrida, 2003; Habermas, 2004; Fischer, 2000; 2005).

On issues like European immigration, internal security, and biotechnology policy, quite similar stories could be told. The more European integration touches policy action beyond pure market regulation, the more it exposes concerned policy makers, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens to tremendous political uncertainty – in normative as well as in practical terms. However exaggerated are some of the assumptions about the presumed strength of national identity or the assumed value consensus within the national publics, it seems plausible that some sort of broadly shared convictions is the precondition for the institutionalization of the grand collective policy projects the EU has already put on its agenda.

Yet, when an issue is recognized as an important problem with significant normative implications, the more fundamental part of the dispute starts: what are normatively justifiable responses to the problem? How do we want to live together? Who do we want to be in the future? Deep disagreements may occur and – at first – block institutional reforms and the implementation of normatively sensitive policy projects. It might even be that the more the process is opened to public participation, the more intense the obstruction might be – as recently when the constitutional referenda in the Netherlands and France in 2005 failed.

Strong collective identities are a rare thing in any modern society. In a transnational framework, moreover, any aspirations for a significant reduction in the complexity and heterogeneity of values would run into disappointment, especially when 'hot' political issues are discussed on a European scale. How can we accommodate 25 different national experiences with regard to normative issues like constitutional policy, redistributive social policies, external security and defence, immigration, internal security, or biotechnology, historical traumas and related fears, as well as the sometimes heavy burdens of historical guilt that normatively constrain the range of acceptable policy choices?¹⁰ Given their overwhelming heterogeneity, how could EU citizens ever arrive at common normative standards for the evaluation of European policy action with regard to these delicate issues? Admittedly, diversity has to be part of European unity (among others see Wallace, 1985; Reif, 1993; Delanty, 1995; Delanty and Rumford, 2005; Eriksen and Fossum, 2004; Fossum, 2004).

If these contradicting concerns are valid – (1) identity is a functional precondition of democracy and (2) there will be no stable substrate of common European values to draw on – the question of how it will be possible to find common solutions for complicated and ethically sensitive affairs is becoming increasingly urgent as the integration process further penetrates the former core functions of national sovereignty.

What Is a 'Collective Identity'?

In order to realize grand collective projects in ethically sensitive policy fields, a political community needs not only rational agreement, but also some enthusiasm among its members. Indeed, it needs strong public support, at least in the initiation phase of a new collective project. Without a 'collective identity' beyond the borders of the national communities as common ground for common future projects, European efforts to institutionalize common political solutions, procedures, and sometimes very expensive commitments might fail. Obviously, there is much public, political, and scientific interest in questions of European identity formation. Yet, what is this presumably missing 'collective identity' about?

The concept is often used imprecisely. It is clear only that it refers to actors' deep convictions and that it includes all the features that other, 'harder' types of theories do not catch: properties like values, traditions, culture, morality, religious beliefs, and so on. 'Identity' tends to be a catch-all phrase for the presumably needed 'thick' moral underpinnings of social and political order. It is considered to be something that 'makes things easier' because everybody who belongs to the community believes in the same set of values. A common identity is considered to provide a communitarian fundament for bridging deep conflict and for the acceptance of sacrifices in pursuit of the common good. Shared values are considered to provide a common evaluative ground; some conflicts then do not occur. But this 'resource' gets eaten up in everyday political conflicts and unfortunately it cannot be arbitrarily reproduced (Böckenförde, 1991: 112).¹¹ Furthermore, these strong common beliefs are often thought to be derived from certain substantial commonalities of the group members (e.g. ethnic, cultural, traditional, religious uniformity, and so forth) and to translate into feelings of commonness.

After decades of intense discussions about national, ethnic, and European identities, the concept of 'collective identity' seems to have lost all clear-cut analytical contours (Niethammer, 2000). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) even proposed to completely abandon this immoderately used term, replacing it with other more precise categories. Nevertheless, 'collective identity' is an indispensable concept of cultural and political sociology needed in order to theorize and to conduct empirical research about value-oriented collective action (Giesen, 2002; 2004; Eder, 2003). One can hardly deny that there are collectives which are involved in internal or external conflicts not simply because of material interests, but because of matters like mutual acknowledgement and ethics – questions along the lines of 'What is good or better for us to do?'

In this perspective, the terms with which Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 19–21) recommend that 'identity' should be replaced do not solve any conceptual problems, since neither purely descriptive terms¹² nor somewhat 'emotional' terms like 'feeling connectedness' provide the theoretical means to cope with the strong normative convictions shared by the members of a community.

We need some conceptual tools in order to handle those 'thick' ethical convictions (Walzer, 1994) for which the members of a community sometimes do fight passionately and for which they might be willing to make sacrifices. Obviously, in those cases we are observing not merely an accumulation of individuals who

contingently share such-and-such characteristics or who 'feel' something. In those cases we are encountering a very special quality of social relations (see Tietz, 2002: 64–72).

The Categorization Trap: Numerical Identification

In the effort to raise 'objective' criteria for the study of collective identities one could be tempted to classify people according to certain criteria they do meet. The descriptive terms that Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 14ff) suggested are examples of different ways of categorizing objects – humans or anything else¹³ – by certain characteristics. Living in a certain territory, ethnic origin, culture, religion, language, history, lifestyle, and the like are indicators often used to identify groups that are then assumed to have a strong collective identity.

What we can grasp from the standpoint of a neutral observer is, however, only *numerical identification* (Tietz, 2002: 215ff). Yet, even if a number of individuals share certain identifiable characteristics this does not imply that these characteristics are meaningful for their individual or collective life. In fact, it does not predetermine whether these individuals perceive themselves as members of a group. Identifying individuals numerically is treating them like objects: we do not yet know whether the chosen characteristics are relevant to the individuals concerned.

Following Tietz, and Brubaker and Cooper, I therefore propose to distinguish between *numerical identification* (or categorization) and *qualitative identity* (Figure 1). Only the latter may include value judgements and the ethical self-understanding of the individuals concerned (Tietz, 2002: 215ff; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 14ff).

The distinction between numerical and qualitative identity is not a matter of splitting hairs. It is due to the fundamental insight that a 'social fact' (Durkheim, 1950) does not follow automatically from empirical facts. Already the claim for existence of such a group as a social group could be contested as well as the membership of each single individual. From the perspective of a neutral observer, nothing at all can be said about the self-understanding of the individuals concerned.

Nevertheless, numerical identification is not a trivial thing. If we can identify some objects in space and time by certain criteria it is logically implied that the pure existence of those objects is already beyond question: 'No identity without entity' (Quine, 1981: 102). That is not unimportant in social life. Numerical identification – leaving open how the individuals concerned think of themselves – might be useful: for example, for the purposes of social statistics, bureaucracies, or legal practice these criteria are sufficient.¹⁴ We operate with them. But for the sociological question about deliberate and active membership in a political community, they are inadequate.

Substantialist conceptions of collective identity typically get trapped at this point: they suggest that primordial, cultural or linguistic similarities *per se* constitute social community.¹⁵ They confuse the ontological dimension (*numerical*

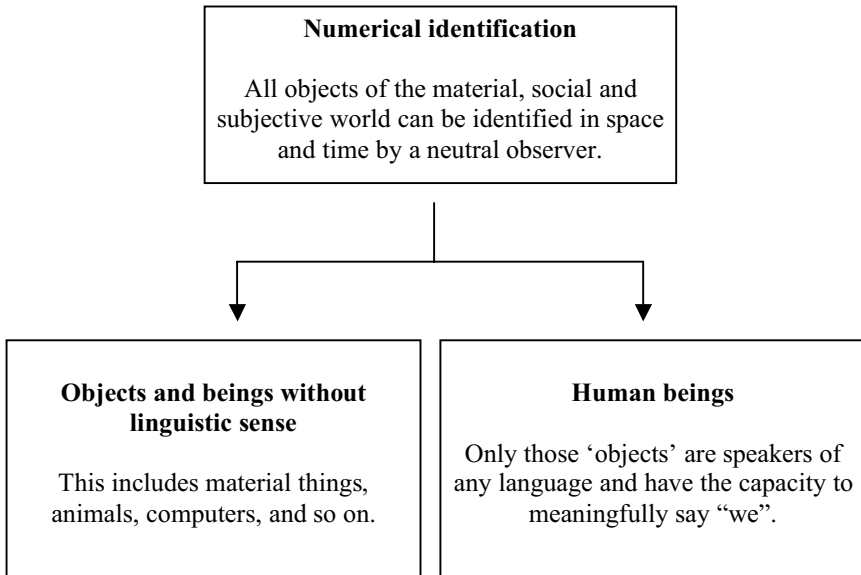


Figure 1 Numerical and qualitative identification (based on Tietz, 2002: 215ff)

identification) with the hermeneutic dimension of the ethical self-understanding of the members of a community.

Different numerical identification strategies have been used to distinguish ‘the Europeans’ from the rest of mankind by cultural heritage, by reference to them having been part of ancient, medieval, or modern European empires, by ethnicity, religion, traditions, and so forth. These strategies, however, have often paid little attention to the question of to what degree (some of) these ‘objective’ features are considered to be relevant at all by the individuals concerned (for an overview of strategies to distinguish between Europe and the outside see among others Münkler, 1996; Malmberg and Stråth, 2002).

Such attempts categorize people along observable characteristics taken from either the present or the past. Some of those typical identification strategies are more plausible than others: however, pure categorization of people according to some criteria does not yet constitute group membership or establish mutual obligations of any kind. None of the many trials to define the limits of Europe by apparently pre-given criteria could give an answer to the question of European identity. Likewise, none could convincingly encompass all the small and large exemptions in history, the cross-connections, the flows of migrants and goods, and the cultural, economic, religious, and political influences between the core of ‘Europe’, its peripheries, its neighbouring regions, and the more distant parts of the world. None of these attempts could quieten the intense debates about who belongs to Europe and who does not. The question remains contested.

There is, however, one formal criterion that has strong practical implications. This single, most relevant common political characteristic of the Europeans is

European citizenship status. On the basis of this criterion, EU citizens are clearly numerically identifiable from the perspective of a neutral observer: everybody who holds citizenship status in any member state is a member. This 'group' has no essential features: its size changes with the borders of the Union; every enlargement broadens it; a withdrawal of one member state would reduce it. Like any other numerical identification, it is ascribed regardless of the self-understanding of the individuals. Yet, there is no ontological doubt: the described individuals exist and they are the ones who have certain real rights and duties.¹⁶ This situation certainly creates real-world experiences which can become the starting point for developments of qualitative identities, as will become clear in the following sections.

To sum up, generally and in the case of the European Union the problem of collective identities is not to be solved from the perspective of the neutral observer. We need to take the perspective of the participants and ask for the self-understanding of the individuals concerned. When then do individuals refer to themselves as members of a community? How do they use the pronoun 'we'? What sorts of convictions do the members of a 'we-community' share with one another?

Qualitative Identities: Universal and Particularistic Identities

In the footsteps of new accounts of analytic philosophy, I will in this part of the article distinguish between three types of *qualitative identities*. This is not intended to simply add another typology to the discourse. It aims instead at showing a quite simple way to overcome some of the typical aporias of sociological thinking on collective identities.

Analytic philosophers used to clarify and logically analyse conceptual problems by scrutinizing the use of natural language. The question of how we can meaningfully speak about a certain concept proved to be especially fruitful because it released philosophical thought from several classical dichotomies. Recent accounts of analytic philosophy applied this methodology to the use of the personal pronoun 'we' which we use to refer to groups we are part of. As a result, three ideal-typical kinds of qualitative identity from the perspective of the speaking participant could be distinguished and marked by indexes (Tietz, 2002: 54–72). The first is the community of all beings that have the capacity for language and action (we_1). Then there are two kinds of groups smaller than the entirety of mankind: these can be referred to as particularistic we-communities. The members of groups who interact and cooperate for the purpose of different aims will be called $we_{2/commercium}$. And those particularistic we-communities who pursue together some 'social goods' (Walzer, 1983: 6–10) and develop a collective identity in the sense of a shared ethical self-understanding will be called $we_{2/communio}$ (see Figure 2).

Philosophers used to describe communities as groups of individuals who share certain beliefs (Rorty, 1986). For the sake of systematic discussion, we shall have

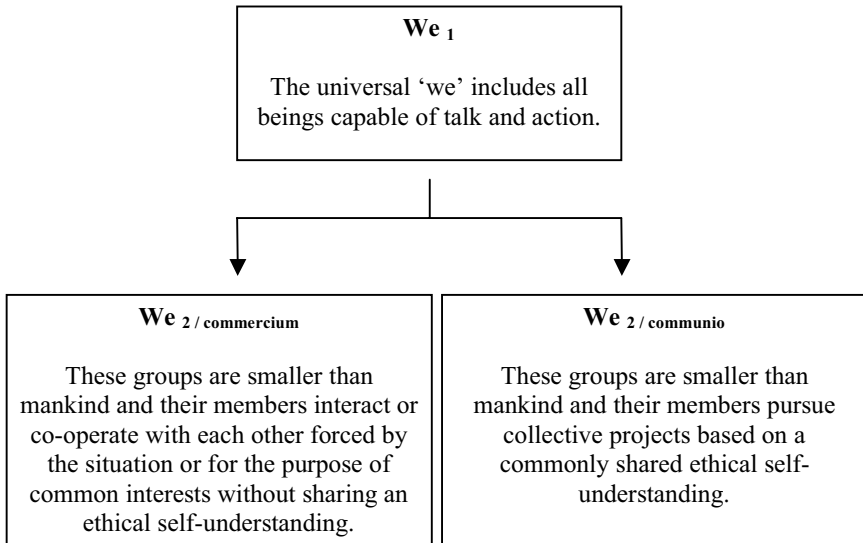


Figure 2 Uses of the personal pronoun 'we' (based on Tietz, 2002: 54–72)

a look at what can be said about the convictions that the members of the three ideal-typical we-communities share with one another. While analytic philosophy proceeds by formal logical analysis or common-sense reasoning about the meaningful use of certain terms, the social sciences after the constructivist turn are well equipped to empirically study the different uses of the personal pronoun 'we' and which convictions individuals share. That way it is possible to transform these philosophical concepts into operational concepts for the social sciences (Héran, 1987; Herrmann, 2002). In the following sections I will therefore on the one hand further explain the different ways speakers express their conviction of being part of a community, and on the other hand sketch in each instance what might follow from an analytic approach to collective identity for the study of European identity.

Humankind: The Universal We₁

Sometimes people use the personal pronoun of the first-person plural by referring to mankind in general – in comparison to animals, the dead material world, computers, and so forth. This use is far from meaningless: it is indeed the expression of the fact that the members of this community are competent speakers of one or another natural language. By learning their first language, humans develop a linguistic sense, and they develop it together with the consciousness of sharing this sense with all humans and only with humans (Tietz, 2002: 54–64). This already includes a plenitude of true convictions about the objective, social and subjective world: e.g. that the sun rises in the morning, that children need protection, or that people need to eat when they are hungry.¹⁷

Countless such convictions are valid across all boundaries of language and culture. The *universal* we_1 -community includes all beings capable of speech and action.¹⁸ 'Membership' in this community is the logical precondition of being at all a candidate for membership in any *particularistic* we_2 -community.

What can be said about the identity of Europeans in this sense? First of all, it is evident that EU citizens are 'members' of the universal we_1 . As such they can become members of particularistic we_2 groups: they know what it means to become and to be a member of a group. Because they share a linguistic sense, they are moreover potentially able to overcome language barriers, cultural differences, and the like by walking through the 'hermeneutic circle' (for the case of transnational political communication see Kantner, 2003; 2004: 111–30). The language games of the Europeans are not incommensurable. They can start to communicate with each other if they want to. Like all humans, EU citizens are potentially able to cooperate with each other in order to accomplish their individual purposes and to make agreements or contracts with each other. Moreover, they are potentially able to found communities in a stronger sense and strive for collective projects if they agree about certain views of what constitutes a 'good life' for them.

Weak Collective Identities: The $We_{2/commercium}$

Particularistic we_2 -groups in the sense of a *commercium* additionally draw on a 'collective identity' in the 'weak' sense of a shared interpretation of their situation or the awareness of being involved in a cooperative enterprise. That, however, does not include common ethical convictions: everybody follows only his or her own idiosyncratic desires and purposes. Various motives may be involved; however, it is not a common, ethically motivated project that the members of the $we_{2/commercium}$ participate in. The members see the group rather as a club or neighbourhood (Walzer, 1983: 35–42) or as a kind of *condominio* (Schmitter, 1996; 2000), not as a family.

Are EU citizens a $we_{2/commercium}$? In order to find that out, we have to try to access Europeans' views about themselves as Europeans. It seems that weak European identities in the sense of a $we_{2/commercium}$ have already developed. Citizens experience in numerous spheres of life that the relevant economic, legal, and political space is not longer exclusively the national state. That can be demonstrated on the basis of the partially sceptical but generally proactive opinions of EU citizens on European politics. Eurobarometer findings indicate that between 41 and 53 percent of Europeans believed in the past decade that they do benefit from membership (European Commission, 2005: 71). EU citizens are at least aware of the fact that they are members of the national political community as well as the European. Almost 54 percent see themselves as citizens of both (2005: 94–6). The European institutions are quite well known even if their relative importance is not always properly understood (2005: 106, 109).

Nonetheless, 'if the EU were scrapped' (2005: 86–8), indifference and regrets would be mixed. One does not necessarily love the EU. An overwhelming

majority, however, considers the EU a reasonable thing and would be even ready to grant it more decision authority under certain circumstances. The experience of living in a common legal space and having a common market – at first just numerical criteria – seems to lead in the long run to the shared belief of being a member of a particularistic group – like it or not. This phenomenon is well known and documented also from the study of elites who work very much exposed to European institutions, like EU officials and Brussels correspondents (Laffan, 2004; Lepsius, 2004; Siapera, 2004; Wodak, 2004).

The national media cover a broad range of European and Europeanized policy issues (Peter et al., 2003; Trenz, 2004a). If citizens want to inform themselves about European political topics, they can do it in their mother tongue through the national mass media (Kantner, 2004: 130–62; Trenz, 2004a). There is a transnational mass medial agenda of common European policy issues which reinforces the awareness of ‘being in the same boat’. However idiosyncratic (e.g. individual, interest group, regional, or national) their purposes might be, Europeans seem to be quite convinced that, with regard to a growing number of issues, they will cooperate with each other in the EU in order to achieve those purposes.

In a classical liberal as well as in a procedural democratic view, this weak identity of a *we*_{2/commercium} is sufficient for the democratization of the EU. If one is unavoidably in the same boat as others, one had better decide democratically about the rules of coexistence, at least for the duration of the journey. For our first example, European constitutional policies, that would mean that for the parts of a European constitution that define the rules of how to behave properly on ‘the boat’, and the procedures for deciding about ‘course corrections’, we do not need ‘more’ European identity than we already have. A majority of Europeans (68 percent) support the idea of a European constitution (European Commission, 2005: 149f). Yet, that does not mean that they already agree on the content and the objectives codified in a constitution. Only the parts of a constitution that refer to basic individual rights and to the institutions and procedures of governance can be agreed upon based on a weak identity in the sense of a *we*_{2/commercium}. The initiation of collective projects and the codification of collective aims in a constitution involve a more demanding type of widely shared convictions.

*Strong Collective Identities: The We*_{2/communio}

In everyday life, political communities generally resemble the *we*_{2/commercium}: ‘egoistic’ interests are negotiated against each other, mutual obligations are established, and contracts are signed and later fulfilled, but the participants primarily follow their own purposes without orientation towards any common interest. The affiliation within a community in this minimalistic sense consists of an awareness by the individual participants of being – willingly or not – part of the ‘game’ and perhaps already equipped with certain rights within an institutionalized setting.

Sometimes there are, however, situations in which another kind of goods is at stake: collective instead of individual interests. It might be a major historical event (either catastrophic or fortunate),¹⁹ the initiation of a collective project, or a major revision of it: in those situations, suddenly a certain nerve might be touched, and people might begin to argue quite passionately for their normative convictions and values. In such historical situations the political community appears or has to prove itself as a value-integrated *we*_{2/communio}.

The members of a *we*_{2/communio} share values²⁰ regarding a distinct common enterprise. They share certain conceptions of what counts for them as a 'good life'. In light of this conception of a 'good life' they interpret their past and continue their traditions. Only collective identities in the strong sense consist of the widely shared ethical self-understanding of the individual members of a *we*_{2/communio}. This shared ethical self-understanding is 'inherited' to a certain degree. Indeed, individuals are born as members of existing communities and get socialized into the basic ethical convictions of the group; later they deliberately share some of these beliefs and challenge others. But there is also another path that leads to strong collective identities: people might come together and create new *we*_{2/communio} groups in order to pursue a common ethical project.²¹

In the latter case in particular, the participants put emphasis on *present* common problems and the question of how they want to live together in the *future*. Collective identity develops through political conflict, and political conflict is action related (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 51).²² How the members of a community narrate their *past*, which events in which interpretation are considered to have main importance, how events are ranked, and so forth, depend strongly on how the members of the *we*_{2/communio} see themselves today and which future they are striving for (compare also Str ath, 2005).

For the establishment of far-reaching collective projects, a weak collective identity in the sense of a *we*_{2/commercium} might *not* be sufficient. It may well be that a certain 'critical mass' of public support needs to be mobilized in order to institutionalize costly policies (in material and non-material terms), if for example we discuss redistributive social policies, or if the lives of soldiers are put into danger. By no means, though, is every public debate an identity discourse that contributes to the clarity of ethical self-understanding of community members, as communitarian positions would suggest (Habermas, 1998: Chapter 9). Only in the face of extraordinary problems or conflicts is there a challenge to the shared ethical self-understanding of community members. In such cases we are talking about 'hot' ethical convictions.²³

Does the population of the EU share some sort of ethical self-understanding? Is there a European demos with a collective identity in the strong sense of a *we*_{2/communio}? The Eurobarometer is an often cited source for the empirical study of the state of a developing European identity in the strong sense of a *we*_{2/communio} (for a recent overview and analysis see Citrin and Sides, 2004). A quite stable minority of 10 percent of EU citizens rate their European identity higher than their national identity or claim to see themselves as Europeans only (European Commission, 2005: 94). This might be properly interpreted as a political statement

of deliberate political identification with Europe. The aforementioned fact notwithstanding, almost half of all European respondents currently see themselves first as members of their nation and then as Europeans as well, which may rather indicate a *we_{2/commercium}*-like European identity or just *numerical identification*.²⁴ Nevertheless, many Europeans (47 percent) associate the EU with a feeling of pride (2005: 84), more than 60 percent feel some degree of European pride (2005: 99), and 66 percent feel attached to Europe (2005: 103).²⁵ Asking for 'identity' in such a general way turns interpretation into a rather problematic undertaking, however. More detailed information on whether EU citizens express shared basic convictions of what they think is the right way to live together can be obtained from issue-related survey data.

With regard to our second example, social policies, Eurobarometer findings indicate that these issues are very important for EU citizens (especially unemployment, healthcare, and pensions). Nevertheless, the European Union is considered to influence this policy field rather negatively (2005: 27ff). With regard to the Iraq War, many observers have the impression that EU citizens – in both the old and the new member states – are quite united in their ethical views (Habermas and Derrida, 2003).

With regard to our third example, defence and security policy, Eurobarometer has developed somewhat more detailed questions in recent years. Defence and foreign affairs seem to be less important, but citizens evaluate the EU's role in this field positively (European Commission, 2005: 27ff). On average, citizens express much support for the CFSP/ESDP, and they value the EU's role in the world and its effects on world politics in generally positive terms in comparison to the role of the US (2005: 116–29). Clear differences between the aforementioned majority opinions in the member states are also evident, however, when it comes to the details of this policy (i.e. the desired degree of independence from the US or the active promotion of human rights) (2005: 124).

Another way to study whether a European identity in a strong sense is developing is media content analysis of debates on European policy issues with an ethical dimension. The findings of many empirical media content analyses meanwhile lead to the conclusion that a similar set of frames prevails when European issues are debated in different countries (Risse, 2002: 15). Surprisingly, this also holds true with regard to ethical issues: instead of 25 different national frames of meaning on each topic, there are merely a couple of normative positions that are critically debated in each country. This pattern emerged in the debate about European sanctions against Austria when the right wing populist FPÖ came second in the 1999 national elections and entered the government coalition in 2000 (Rauer et al., 2002; van de Steeg, 2004). A similar pattern occurred in the media discourse about the European constitution (Trenz, 2004b; Fossum and Trenz, 2005; Oberhuber et al., 2005). A cosmopolitan European identity – at least with respect to the outside world – may emerge (Delanty and Rumford, 2005: 189–95). In other debates – e.g. about the introduction of the common currency (Risse, 2003) and the Kosovo intervention (Grundmann et al., 2000), – national narrations and particular historical experiences differ to

a further degree, but still the universe of possible ethical views is very clearly structured along similar ethical viewpoints being debated in every country.

This does not emerge from any kind of central coordination or force. Speakers in the public realm, editorial staff, and journalists seem to perceive these ethically sensitive issues as common European problems of broad public interest. Fundamental questions like ‘How do we, as EU-citizens, want to live together?’ and ‘What is good or better for us as Europeans to do?’ in many crucial policy fields are already intensively discussed in the European public sphere – even if they still remain largely unanswered.

Conclusions

This article has tried to contribute to the clarification of important conceptual questions regarding the scholarly debate on collective identities in general and the European identity in particular.

First, in public debate and scientific discourses it is quite common to try to answer the question of who might possibly belong to the European Union by identifying some ‘objective’ measures that would allow a categorization of a certain group of people as European or not. Contrary to these strategies, we can conclude that the problem of a European identity cannot be solved by classification or as we called it *numerical identification*. It might be that people who share identifiable characteristics in time and space fail entirely to see themselves as group members or that they, despite not having ‘European’ geographical, ethnic, religious, and historical features, do consider themselves as a – not yet recognized – part of the community. The poor, women, and political minorities claimed equal rights in national democracies’ history in a similar fashion. If something is to be said about European identity in the qualitative sense, one has to evaluate how Europeans see themselves as Europeans.

Second, it can be stated that Tönnies’s conceptual decision to put society (*commercium*) and community (*communio*) into radical opposition and, moreover, to idealize the *communio* led the tradition that followed him to rule out from analysis a whole universe of we-groups. This pushes empirical investigators who find certain shared convictions among the members of *commercium*-like groups into difficulties that can only be solved by stretching the concept of the *communio*. In so doing, they certainly contributed to the conceptual confusion criticized by Brubaker and Cooper (2000), Niethammer (2000) and others. We-groups in the weak sense of a $we_{2/commercium}$ consist of members who refer to themselves as ‘we’. They share certain beliefs about their common undertakings without holding shared ethical convictions. In everyday life, political communities generally resemble a $we_{2/commercium}$. This in turn has important virtues. As a matter of fact, it is a central civilizing achievement of the liberal state of law and modern representative democracy to organize political life by procedures for conflict resolution without pressure to reach consensus on values. Citizens in a democracy have the right to be different and distant from each other. The pluralism of values and the

search for political compromises are, in addition, important mechanisms for peaceful change and reform in modern democracies.

Third, with regard to the European Union as *we_{2/commercium}*, we sketched indications for a widely shared perception of 'being in the same boat' and the conception that the EU is a level of governance that is relevant to citizens' lives. EU citizens are aware that there is a European economic and legal space which progressively shapes their everyday life in a multitude of policy matters. Most consider this aspect – for different reasons – to be a useful thing. This positive assessment, though, does not mean that they have already agreed on shared conceptions of a 'good life'. This weak identity, however, is sufficient for democratic institutions to function. A missing European identity in this perspective remains a poor excuse for not democratizing the EU political system.

Fourth, and moreover, European identity discourses have taken place with regard to many issues. Although shared ethical convictions may emerge with respect to particular policy areas over time, this of course would have to be researched in much more detail.²⁶ Methodologically, it seems to be worthwhile to analyse the processes of political identity formation systematically, policy issue by policy issue, instead of speaking in an undifferentiated and general manner of 'the collective identity'. It is logically possible that 'we₂', as the members of a certain nation (or as citizens of the EU), share many ethical views on welfare politics but not on genetic technology – or the other way around. The issues concerned may also be debated as a matter of compromise between different interests to a certain degree and as an ethical issue to a varying extent. The EU as a citizens' community develops characteristics of both – a *we_{2/commercium}* and a *we_{2/communio}*.

Finally, it has also been stressed that collective identities in the strong sense develop through political conflict. They emerge not out of thin air, but rather in broad public debates about deep conflicts over value-laden policy issues. This point implies that big identity-political campaigns are very likely to miss their aims. Why should modern, self-conscious, and rather sceptical citizens be impressed by someone attempting to impose an artificial 'identity' on them? How should self-appointed 'identity constructors' be able to 'create' identities, to make citizens 'more European', and to fabricate a kind of *Homo europaeicus*? Instead, ordinary citizens seldom talk about collective identity as such. They sometimes discover ethically relevant aspects of selected controversial issues. A 'collective identity' in the strong sense emerges (if it emerges at all) in the group members' discourses about important policy issues.²⁷ What can be done in order to further the character of the EU as *we_{2/communio}* is to debate and tackle the issues that the broader public deems highly important and to openly discuss policy alternatives and possible choices.

Constitutional policy, redistributive social policy, security and defence, immigration, internal security, and biotechnology policies are among the most challenging ethical problems on the EU's policy agenda. The answers to the open policy questions have not yet been found. It is clear only that Europe has to find common solutions for the challenges. Sharing a collective identity in both the

weak and the strong senses does not mean, though, that conflicts disappear. The hope that identity would make things easier will certainly be disappointed. Identity discourses do occur because 'we₂' have different views on ethically problematic issues. Differences will remain. Hence, a shared collective identity in the strong sense should rather be conceived as a 'normative corridor', one that is large enough for internal conflicts. Intra-European conflicts can be expected to be an ongoing feature, but they are no insurmountable obstacle to collective action. In a liberal democratic community, one can agree upon common policies without 'speaking with one voice'.

Needless to say, human convictions can always be wrong. Occasionally, the wrong decisions will be reached. Our choices today will soon be our common past – and we will be burdened with guilt or will have reason for pride in our achievements. The future European identity will rise from both the positive experiences we will have together and the crises that we may (not) overcome. A new reflexive political tradition can only develop in the course of the emerging history of our cooperative problem-solving efforts.

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Notes

- 1 Communitarians believe that the democratic process rests upon strong prepolitical ties between the members of a political community. Tradition, solidarity and shared ethnic, religious, cultural, and other identities are in that view social preconditions for the modern democratic process.
- 2 First comparative discourse analyses of the debate on the European constitution have recently been published (Trenz, 2004b; Fossum and Trenz, 2005; Oberhuber et al., 2005).
- 3 Public reluctance to change therefore not only is a matter of threatened group interests – often enough those interests would be favoured by a change – but expresses a paradox of normative integration. Citizens know and – which should not to be underestimated – accept the normative justifications their ancestors gave for deciding in favour of a certain set of rules.
- 4 See among others Baldwin (1990), Esping-Andersen (1990), and Skocpol (1992).
- 5 Most prominently, Habermas (2001), among many others, takes a common heritage of welfare state convictions for granted as a common European ethical resource that simply has to be rediscovered in its European dimension.

- 6 Eurobarometer data seem to suggest that there is no unequivocal support for a European welfare responsibility and that there are severe cleavages along the lines of region and culture (Mau, 2005).
- 7 Also 'at home' in the nation state, the rich do not cheerfully pay for the poor.
- 8 Except in Denmark, a vast majority in 'old Europe' considered the intervention not justified (European Commission, 2003: 4–5). Regarding the question of where to go from here, there are however very strong differences in public opinion across the EU, e.g. on whether one's nation should send troops to stabilize Iraq (2003: 40–1).
- 9 There is not yet much empirical research on this aspect (Hansen, 2002; Macqueen, 2003; Joerges and Ghaleigh, 2003).
- 10 About the difficulties of coming to terms with past traumatic experiences of victims as well as perpetrators, see e.g. Giesen (2004) and Elster (2004).
- 11 In contrast, Habermas (1998: Chapter 4) showed that a civil form of solidarity has been and can be produced in the democratic process.
- 12 Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 17) propose terms like 'identification' and 'categorization' by external observers or agencies like the state, 'social location', or 'self-understanding'. But even 'self-understanding' is used in a descriptive sense of counting oneself among a certain class of objects and is an ethically neutral matter of self-description.
- 13 Needless to say, stones, toys, computers, dogs as well as 'speaking' computers or parrots do not have qualitative identities.
- 14 For the individual citizen, membership in a political community usually coincides with the classification by national authorities: whoever possesses a Norwegian passport is Norwegian, usually also lives and works there most of his life, has the right to vote and the obligation to pay taxes. Problematic cases like permanent inhabitants without full citizen status, however, illustrate that 'objective' characteristics do not automatically lead to inclusion into a community (see Brubaker, 1990; Walzer, 1983).
- 15 Under 'substantialist' conceptions of collective identity I understand models that assume that certain essential properties or natural features *per se* determine collective identities.
- 16 The five freedoms of the internal market apply to every EU citizen. EU regulations and policies are valid in each member state and are implemented by the nation states.
- 17 By learning words like 'human', 'animal', 'dead', and 'computer', children also learn many convictions related to those concepts. By learning the system of personal pronouns, children learn what it means to be a person, what it means to interact with a 'you', to be a member of a 'we', who is referred to by others as 'they'.
- 18 These beings share a linguistic sense and are prone to be morally offended. Universal principles can be justified based on reasoning what is equally good for all of these beings (Apel, 1988).
- 19 The identity of the political community often becomes an object of reflection in the face of dramatic events, in situations of perceived crisis, intense social change, or when people try to cope with traumatizing collective experiences or striking injuries of fundamental, ethical, or moral convictions of the community members (Giesen, 2002; 2004). But it could also be major positive changes like the defeat of a dictatorship.
- 20 Under values I understand attributes that are reified into 'goods'. Every attribute (such as 'democratic', 'great', 'fit') can therefore become a value that is important for the ethical self-understanding of the members of a community who are proud of making these values essential for their shared life form (e.g. 'democracy' for Germans today in contrast to their ancestors; 'greatness' for the ancient Greek; 'fitness' for the

- community of body-builders). Only the group members as participating speakers can answer the question 'What is good or better for us to do?' (Tietz, 2001: 113–24).
- 21 This of course does not yet say anything about the moral justification of such projects: they might even prescribe practices that violate basic human rights (e.g. here we might think of xenophobic movements or discriminative cultural practices within particularistic groups). This is why liberals as well as proceduralists strongly argued against communitarians that universal principles need to define the limits of the autonomy of particularistic groups to design their political, cultural, or religious practices.
 - 22 For a similar argument see Risse's (2001: 201) analysis of multiple identities depending on the concerned policy area.
 - 23 Classical political liberalism tried to exclude ethical issues as much as possible from the public sphere and leave them to the realm of private idiosyncrasies. This was one lesson learned from the religious wars that shook Europe in the seventeenth century. Yet, in a dynamically changing society, this legalistic method transforms controversial ethical issues too early into judicial ones and hence perpetuates existing injustice against discriminated groups and ignorance of the legitimate demands of new social movements (Benhabib, 1992).
 - 24 About 40 percent explicitly consider themselves members of the national political community only, which can be interpreted as a political statement of reservation against the EU (European Commission, 2005).
 - 25 Over 80 percent of EU citizens feel national pride (European Commission, 2005: 99).
 - 26 The author is part of a research project on discourses about military and humanitarian interventions in European and US quality newspapers: 'In Search of a Role in World Politics. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in Light of Debates in European Mass Media, 1990–2004.' The project is conducted at Free University Berlin and funded by the German Research Foundation (RI 798/8–1). It is led by Thomas Risse and Cathleen Kantner.
 - 27 For the pragmatist model of community building by cooperative problem-solving see Dewey (1927); for the case of the EU compare Kantner (2004: Chapter 4).

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■ **Cathleen Kantner** teaches as assistant professor at the Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science of the Free University Berlin. Her current research focuses on public debates about European security and defence issues with particular reference to shared normative beliefs. Previously she has been at the Humboldt University Berlin, the Bundeswehr Institute for Social Sciences and the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence. *Address:* Free University of Berlin, Otto-Suhr-Institute of Political Science, Center for European Integration, Ihnestr. 22, D-14195 Berlin, Germany. [email: kantnerc@zedat.fu-berlin.de] ■