

EUROPEAN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: A CASE STUDY ON THE NARRATIVES OF EUROPE

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Abstract: This article is part of the scientific debate on European identity and develops the argument in respect of the problem of a deficit of democratic legitimacy in the European Union. The results of a case study bring to the fore the importance of the European public sphere in constructing a sense of belonging shared by Europeans.

Keywords: social identity; European identity; European public sphere; media discourse; European integration; Europeanization; narratives; meanings of Europe; participation; European citizenship.

1. The social construction of European identity

Following the major political and economic metamorphosis faced by Europe during the last sixty years, it can be said that the very identity of Europeans has changed. The social and cultural life of EU citizens is no longer necessarily linked to a specific place and the removal of borders, thanks to the processes of Europeanisation and globalisation, is giving way to an institutionalised “post-national condition”² on a political, economic and social level³.

Despite these profound changes, a number of empirical studies show that a healthy majority of European citizens state that they still identify themselves primarily with their own country, even though a large percentage of them refer to themselves in certain circumstances as “European” and the social category of European is not a contested one⁴. These results highlight a general difficulty with embracing the social construction of identity in contemporary Europe and understanding the social consequences stemming from the process of Europeanisation. This problem arising certainly from the difficulty of studying a complex phenomenon such as social belonging, is also linked to the fact that

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² Habermas, Jürgen. *The Post-National Constellation*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001. Print.

³ Recchi, Ettore, and Adrian Favell. *Pioneers of European integration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2009. Print.

⁴ For more information on empirical studies see Bruter, Michael. *Citizens of Europe? The emergence of a mass European identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print; Citrin, Jack, and John Sides. *More than Nationals: How Identity Choice Matters in the New Europe*, in Herrmann, Richard, Thomas Risse, and Marilyn Bremen. *Transnational identities: becoming European in the EU*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. Print; Karolewski, Ireneusz Pawel, and Viktoria Kaina. *European Identity. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Insights*. Berlin: LIT Verlage, 2006. Print; Petithomme, Mathieu. “Is there a European Identity? National Attitudes and Social Identification toward the European Union”. *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies*, 2008 2, 1:15-36. Print.

within the scientific debate on identity the issue is still often understood and studied within its national and essentialist definition. Thus it tends to be fixed and a given, territorially bound and understood as an immutable common feeling that is typical of early modernity. A concept of this type, that ignores the activities of processing and reflection inherent in social belonging in contemporary life, is ineffective in defining the sense of belonging to Europe by EU citizens who live in the dynamic and transnational dimension of late modernity. Any discussion on the subject of the sense of belonging in contemporary Europe involves starting from a different standpoint, one that sees belonging as an identity "in the making"⁵ and that imagines it to be "deterritorialised" and set in a transnational dimension⁶.

The construction of identity within Europe can thus be investigated, both in its individual and collective dimensions, by considering the configurations that it has taken on as a result of changes in the organisational structure of society following the process of European integration. This can also be done by adopting micro- and meso-social analyses that consider social practices and the mechanisms governing communicative intermediation, the spread of consciousness and the construction of meanings that individuals use to refer to the concept of Europe and that give a sense to the link with Europe itself⁷. These levels of investigation allow us to go beyond the concept that sees how the state, culture and civil society correspond to one another, something that is typical of societies within nation states, and permit us to trace the origin instead of a society that still perpetuates itself in the social practices at play that are active in the transnational space. This analytical ability enables us to pinpoint the discursive construction of Europe through the public sphere, civil society and European citizens, all functionally interwoven with each other and which, by defining the involvement of citizens in the process of integration, reinforce and promote a European identity⁸.

⁵ Beck, Ulrich, and Edgar Grande. *Cosmopolitan Europe*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. Print.

⁶ Shore, Chris. "Whither European Citizenship?: Eros and Civilization Revisited". *European Journal of Social Theory* 2004, 7, 1: 27-44. Print.

⁷ Eder, Klaus. "A theory of collective identity: Making sense of debate on a "European identity". *European Journal of Social Theory* 2009, 2, 4: 427-447. Print.

⁸ The concept of European citizenship is among the most controversial and hotly debated in scientific literature on this question. In some cases it is considered to be an institution that is symbolic rather than having any practical value due to the "elements of deficit" that define it. These include attribution on the basis of nationality that excludes some categories of immigrant citizens; the distance and poor representation of citizens due to a lack of actual powers on the part of the European Parliament; the absence of rights and social protections despite that fact that the concept of social citizenship has not been completely excluded from the project of integration. At the same time, this debate has generated interest in the role of citizens in the EU and participatory aspects leading to questioning about the existence of a European public sphere and the possibility of developing a sense of belonging through participation in European public life. For more on the debate, refer to Eriksen, Erik Oddvan. "An Emerging European Public Sphere". *European Journal of Social Theory*, 8, 4, 2005. Print.; Rumford, Chris. *The EU: a political sociology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. Print; Trenz, Hans-Jörg. "Elements of sociology of European integration". *Arena Centre for European Studies, Working Paper*, 2008, 11. Print.

The means of communication play a central role in the construction of European society and in promoting EU legitimacy. In a non-hierarchical and multi-level governing system, negotiation and consensus depend and build themselves on a horizontal means of communication between institutions and society. The European public sphere is the structure of functional intermediation that generates cohesion, participation and a sense of belonging to Europe and where this fails to develop, it negatively affects the process of democratisation within the EU⁹.

The public sphere and civil society are dynamic elements of the bottom-up construction of European society; they are driving forces of the process of Europeanisation, driven forward by those who themselves feel in some way involved at a supranational government level. Public debate and civil participation are also fundamental elements of a narrative construction of European society because the narratives of Europe that circulate in the public sphere make EU citizens "feel united", linking them to events in the past and allowing for reciprocal recognition. By creating such a link between Europeans, the narratives enable the development of a sense of belonging: a European collective identity¹⁰.

If we assume that a public sphere is emerging in Europe, it becomes necessary to ask ourselves how this is influencing the ways in which ideas spread, how national and European public spheres interlink, what meanings and information are transmitted and between which social categories. In addition, it is important to understand how the public debate is evolving on various territorial levels as well as the role this plays within the processes of identification and with respect to the conceptualisation of Europe.

2. Media and conceptualisations of Europe: Findings from a case study

In order to look more closely at the relationship between the public sphere and the construction of a sense of belonging within Europe, I detail below some results from a research project designed to investigate the construction of European identity in a local context. The study concentrates on meso- and micro-levels and investigates shared narratives of Europe that are constructed through interaction and daily social practices and that circulate in networks of social relationships between "ordinary" Europeans¹¹.

⁹ Eriksen, Erik Oddvan. "An Emerging European Public Sphere". *European Journal of Social Theory*, 8, 4, 2005. Print.

¹⁰Eder, Klaus. "A theory of collective identity: Making sense of debate on a "European identity". *European Journal of Social Theory* 2009, 2, 4: 427-447. Print.

¹¹The research project developed out of the theory of "narrative identity" of the German sociologist Klaus Eder, according to whom the construction of European identity can happen by means of sharing the narratives in Europe that emerge, grow and circulate within the space of European communication. For further information, see Eder, Klaus. "A theory of collective identity: Making sense of debate on a "European identity". *European Journal of Social Theory* 2009, 2, 4: 427-447. Print.

In a case study, four different networks of social relations – joining secondary school teachers, pupils and their parents – have been selected. The networks were located in Tuscany, an Italian region that has traditionally been involved and active in European affairs. Two diverse local contexts have been chosen: Florence¹² and Prato¹³. These Tuscan cities are in close geographical proximity but very different in their economic organisation, cultural and political tradition, local history and social composition.

Between March and June 2012 forty individual interviews with teachers, students and parents were carried out in four schools – two *licei* [high schools] and two technical institutes chosen from different socio-economic and cultural strata. In addition, eight focus groups were organised within the classes. The number of students per class for the focus groups varied between ten and fifteen, involving a total of one hundred and twenty two in all, aged between fifteen and twenty.

The analysis of the narratives of Europe that circulate within these networks has enabled me to analyse how the conceptualisation of Europe has come about and understand how local and European identities coexist and communicate with one another and the role played by the public sphere in these processes.

2.1. Different imaginations of Europe

Europe has accumulated an immense narrative heritage. The many stories and unconscious assumptions within Europe circulate in the public sphere and among social networks, both physical and virtual, on a local, national and transnational level. The narratives allow us to order and understand the experience, and the sharing of stories is necessary in order to live in a multicultural and transnational context such as Europe and to contribute to the development of a feeling of identity.

“Europe” means something completely different depending on various contexts and circumstances as well as individual characteristics and experiences: it

¹²Florence is the capital city of the region and it is a prestigious tourist and university center. The city, governed by a left-wing mayor, is a major national cultural and economic center and the venue of annual EU cultural events like the “Festival of Europe”. Regional institutions as well as European and international organizations are located in the city, such as the European University Institute. Florence is influenced by transnational flows of people, cultures and meanings that shape everyday social practices and relations.

¹³Prato is an industrial district specialized in textile production. It is the Tuscany's second largest city, which experienced significant internal and external immigration. The second largest Chinese immigrant community in Italy is located in Prato. The formation of a Chinese ethnic economy operating inside the industrial district and the textile industry economic crisis, started from the 1980s, generated a demographic and socio-economic change of the city, a critical situation related to immigrants integration and to a high level of unemployment. The conjunction of all these factors led to a political change in 2009 with the election, for the first time since 1949, of a right-wing major. Prato's local system has been extensively studied (see Becattini, Giacomo, et. al. *From Industrial Districts to Local Development*. Edward Elgar Publishing: Cheltenham, 2003. Print; Trigilia, Carlo. *Small-firm development and political subcultures in Italy*. E. Goodman, J. Bamford (eds). *Small firms and industrial districts in Italy*, London: Routledge, 1989. Print.).

can embody images of modernity, cosmopolitan ideals, just as it can be seen as one of the “evils” of globalisation or simply synonymous with the EU.

Responses to the question "what does the word Europe make you think of?" were very different:

«When I think of Europe, I think of the different people who have crossed it over time and followed on from each another. I can't accept the idea of excluding anyone who has spent any time in Europe. For example the period of Medieval history when the Arabs were in Spain, or the cosmopolitan world of the Enlightenment – these are concepts I like to think about when I talk about Europe [...] that melting pot, that vocation to contain so many differences that Europe must be able to provide [...]. There are some powerful ideas nevertheless that make Europe stand out: a strong sense of democracy and the rule of law»¹⁴.

As mentioned earlier, not all Europeans perceive Europe in the same way:

«The images that spring to mind are Italy, the crisis, the Euro and the German Chancellor! Because ultimately, and especially in the papers and on television, when talking about Europe she's always there because there's a crisis and she is becoming the leader [...]. The history of Europe is that we have a crisis and this crisis brings us all together!»¹⁵.

Gathering and putting together different stories of Europe and investigating their origins is one way of illustrating which factors influence the construction of the citizens' link with Europe and the various elements that determine this. These include the milieu in which people live, the distribution of economic, social and cultural resources, different life experiences, varying educational achievements, different professions and the networks of social relations underpinning them. These are all characteristics that affect the conceptualisation of Europe and explain why people have such different ideas of Europe that lead to their having different links and senses of identity with it too.

2.2. The weight of media on the ideas of Europe

The media participate in the construction and spread of ideas, values, interests and opinions on Europe and the European Union¹⁶, which in turn affect the social construction of a European identity. The interpretations and salience attributed by the media to news influence public perception and varying “uses” of means of communication and of information that lead to the construction of different meanings associated with Europe.

The question “how did this idea of Europe emerge?” highlighted this fact:

«Reading, studying, finding out about things from the radio, newspapers, books. And on the internet, as well, I sometimes look for information on these

¹⁴ Italian and Latin teacher, High school, Florence, female, 48 years old.

¹⁵ Parent, Technical institute, Prato, male, 45 years old, factory worker.

¹⁶ In the narratives that were garnered, the terms "Europe" and the "EU" tend to overlap and be used interchangeably reflecting how Europe is used in communication within the public sphere, in national and supranational institutional speeches, in news reported by the media, in public debates and in informal discussions in everyday conversations.

questions [...]. My husband belongs to Attac, the international organisation, and he communicates with other activists from different countries and takes part in their activities so of course I have to admit that this influences our idea of Europe a great deal. More generally, I have signed up to lots of mailing lists so I receive information on international initiatives and recently I've also signed lots of online petitions, some of which are EU-related, and it seems a good thing to me to add my voice to these popular initiatives»¹⁷.

Some of the interviewees receive and go in search of a large quantity of in-depth information about European issues, through a number of media sources, some of them international, and chiefly by way of the radio, newspapers, specialised magazines and journals and internet. They belong to a group of individuals who have a specific interest in questions concerning Europe and who, for various reasons, often professional ones, surf institutional websites and take advantage of the possibilities offered by internet. They are often people with an international background and of mixed heritage and who have travelled or lived abroad. Knowing several languages allows them to study issues more in depth through the international press and foreign websites.

Interactive participation such as that offered by the internet, being able to link via social networks, mailing lists, blogs and online forums, all aid participation in the public sphere and in civil society organisations on a European and transnational scale. These media tools bring them into contact with people of different nationalities and backgrounds with whom they can share their ideas, opinions and narratives of Europe and the EU. And this has real influence not only on the conceptualisation of Europe but also on the construction of a social link between Europeans.

The internet is also the tool used to take part in forms of direct democracy, online debates and public consultations that enable new types of solidarity to spring up between individuals who share interests and values, that is to say Europeans who join together to express themselves and ensure their voices are heard. The actual sharing that stems from taking part in transnational networks affects their awareness of belonging to a social group called Europeans.

Most of the parents and pupils interviewed, on the contrary, stated that they do not try to find out about Europe via media, nor are they interested. Despite this the influence of the media in formulating their opinions and their behaviour towards Europe is evident. Interviewed pupils and parents share meanings associated with Europe that stem from being exposed to messages generated on national media, whether through watching television news or reading online newspapers, both of which are frequently described as ways of getting to know Europe and which, for many people, is the link to it.

«These meanings come from the mass media, watching TV, going online, indeed all these means of communication, it's a huge melting pot! I don't read newspapers chiefly due to lack of time [...] so I just limit myself to watching TV basically ... and going online, you get the same news as you hear on the TV, so you

¹⁷ Literature teacher, High school, Florence, female, 47 year old.

could say that my main source is the TV news but I have to admit that it's not something that I find that interesting»¹⁸.

The students who participated in group discussions in class share the ideas about Europe that are circulating on their own networks and reflect the image of Europe itself broadcast by other means of communication:

«We hear about Europe through the media, it's impossible to avoid comment on something that's happening, see an image of what's going on, the media bombard us with information and so you form an idea of Europe. What I read in the Italian press is that Europe is there to impose laws that Italy doesn't respect and so if we are to make ourselves fit into this Europe, which after all is something of an abstract body, we have to make sacrifices and our new Prime Minister raps us over the knuckles if we step out of line. However, I've never heard talk about Europeans, whether on the news, or on TV, there's never been any discussion on Europe, on who Europeans really are, perhaps because we're second class citizens in Europe as far as politics and the economy are concerned and perhaps because at the end of the day people aren't that interested in Europe»¹⁹.

2.3. A cosmopolitan European identity

Exposure to mass media and the content of messages they broadcast has a direct effect on tendencies towards Europe and contributes to the process of social construction of a European identity. Those who gave weight to positive narratives of Europe and who share favourable meanings vis-à-vis Europe stated that they use several media sources, including international ones, and that they look out for news about Europe because they are personally interested. Positive news items on the EU are also spread by those who appear to have more open and cosmopolitan identities. A Europe-oriented identity can be seen in those who have greater knowledge and familiarity with it and a better chance of fulfilling their needs by visiting other countries. These are individuals who are familiar with international cultural resources and participate in a public, transnational sphere and European, civil-society organisations.

«Being European is a tradition involving civilisation and culture; it's about the values of openness, freedom, democracy that have evolved over time. The European is ready to accept others, clearly upholding basic tenets such as the refusal of the death penalty. I feel proud to belong to this wonderful reality because there are marvellous things there, from a natural as well as artistic-cultural point of view. Proud of belonging to this part of the world that has produced so many beautiful things. From music, to culture, to shows, philosophy, art. For me, Europe is constantly part of my life because my points of reference and the way I think and do things are never just Italian, but at the very least European»²⁰.

Just by considering Europe as a daily fact, something that is simply part of one's everyday reality makes identities more open towards Europe. Awareness of

¹⁸ Parent, Technical institute, Prato, woman, 53 years old, unemployed.

¹⁹ Pupil, Technical institute, Florence, 17 year old.

²⁰ Parent, High school, Florence, male, 55 years old, head of photography.

the existence of European institutions on the home territory where we live combined with the fact that Europe is involved in all our lives, that our way of living is also regulated at a European level and not just locally and nationally, are all elements that help us build a strong identity with it.

«The first ideas we have of Europe stem from school, at primary school we start talking about Europe. Today the Europe I observe means all the many things that have become easier in my everyday life, if I think back to how I used to travel before the Treaties that opened up the borders and all the things I had to do, or if I remember life before the Euro, when you had to change your currency. And then there are all the food safety standards that we implement [...], all the non-Italian products that you find on sale when you go shopping, the public works that are carried out in towns and cities, structurally and on an ecological level, I am seeing so many changes, thanks to Europe, as well as getting to know people better. And I suppose it's the same for other Europeans»²¹.

2.4. A functional and localistic European identity

On the other hand, there are those who have emphasised all the endless media news stories on the negative connotations of the EU and who show a complete lack of interest in Europe and talk of their indifference or antagonism towards the EU project. These individuals have a weak European identity and confirm the hypothesis that such information tends to distance them from having any interest in a European dimension. An analysis of different socio-economic realities highlights that these differences are also linked to cultural and material factors such as a low knowledge base of activities and opportunities offered by the EU and are due in addition to a sense of exclusion from European practices and experiences.

«When I see the word Europe, I find myself feeling confused. In the sense that right now.... crisis, problems... between various EU countries... and the sense that we aren't so united, that we don't have a clear economic and political programme. We are less united than the United States of America. In the end, the Euro, which is something that brings us together, have made us collapse! [...]. Europe could be seen as an opportunity perhaps, but unfortunately we either are unable to or don't succeed in taking up these opportunities [...]. The problem is Italy. Here what we're experiencing of Europe is the crisis»²².

In the face of such narratives of inequalities, of a "two-speed" Europe, that talk of a sense of exclusion from European society, people react by closing themselves off and through identity-based "reterritorialisation"²³ that gives rise to an emotive rootedness with one's place of origin which is familiar and offers security.

«Europe interferes in our lives! There are specific matters that only we Italians know how to solve, not Europe, all this policy of sacrifice, it's the Italian

²¹ Parent, High school, Prato, female, 49 years old, public sector employee.

²² Pupil, Technical institute, Prato, 18 years old.

²³ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. Print.

government that knows where to go to find money and not the EU. From my perspective the countries that are stronger than us have forced us to make choices that have not helped us. The weight of nations can oblige smaller countries, Italy included, to submit to the policies of the larger countries. I don't see why anyone must feel French, English, German or European when we aren't!»²⁴.

In these instances a more exclusive identity emerges in which the sense of belonging, linked to one's homeland, and the strong involvement in the local economic and social realities, together with the lack of trust in the national and European political institutions lead to a concept of a European identity as an extremely abstract condition. The perceived distance from international-based, social relationships influences the sense of closure towards Europe²⁵. The knowledge of the global market and the use of internet give people a “global awareness”; however, this does not mean they are automatically able to feel they are global citizens²⁶.

3. Conclusions

Different narratives of Europe are shared among Europeans: stories related to the cultural and historical roots of the continent, institutional and “official” narratives of the EU, biographical stories weaved together with collective memories. Multi-level stories, a mixture of values and references coming from the local and national heritage and linked to the European postnational plot.

In the broad range of the narratives which have emerged, the influence of the local context, where the stories originate, can always be identified. The stories of Europe are embedded in the regional territories. They are composed by elements coming from the political, economic, cultural and institutional local context and are developed in a European perspective.

The results of the case study underline the relevance of the local dimension on the meanings associated to Europe, which are built and explained using local resources. There is a dynamic relation between the local, national, supranational and transnational dimensions. These levels interact in the European identity construction process.

Europeanization is not just a matter of political and economic regulation, but also of social relations, expectations and normative values which overlap and are transnationally interconnected. The local dimension is part of these processes and the regional cultures, values and identities can be commended and conciliated in the European dimension.

From the narratives of Europe we can see shared criticisms of the Italian media as well as expressions of disapproval of the way in which the EU is represented through these means of communication, especially by television. The

²⁴ Parent, Technical institute, Prato, 59 years old, shopkeeper.

²⁵ Leonardi, Laura. *La società europea in costruzione*. Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2012. Print.

²⁶ Geertz, Clifford. *Mondo globale, mondi locali*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999. Print.

criticism concerns the absence of an international dimension to the news, the sparse and superficial media coverage of topics and events with a European dimension, often only given coverage in specialised journals and on special-interest internet sites. The general absence of any analysis of European policies by the mainstream national media is especially clear to those people who use and understand international media. Those who are more informed and interested in a European dimension are aware of the pertinence of information provided and the objectiveness or lack of it on the part of the means of communication.

«There are so many things involved: the redistribution of resources, employment, education. There are countries that have good ideas, in Europe, but these are not discussed in Italy. Here we are still talking about the same old things, about politics and national news. In Italy you know if Armani has held a new fashion show because all the TV news run five minute bulletins on it, but there is no five minute slot on Europe. You only know about things concerning Europe if you look for them. There are no jobs, there is no money to pay for education, the retirement age is rising and there's no work for the young. We need to talk about it because it's our future!»²⁷.

In translating European policies and in explaining, on a national level, EU notifications, an important role is played by the political class and the national media because it is they that mould the national public attitude towards Europe. Indeed, the political class and the national media act as filters for EU communications and this go-between role does not always favour the link or the sense of inclusion with Europe.

And yet the question of inclusion for European citizens and the closeness of European institutions to the countries themselves both play a large part in the crisis of legitimacy in the EU and in the political crisis that stems from the spread of Euroscepticism.

The public discourse on Europe is a central element in constructing a European society and the building of spaces for communication between Europeans is part of the political project of the EU. The European institutions can sustain this process, already underway, by including ever more citizens in the European public sphere, reinforcing the system of means of communication for European matters and creating a European public dimension. The European public sphere already exists but does not involve everyone as it is fragmented and divided. There is a strong component, the intellectual and political élite who actively participate, there is an intermediate public sphere made up of organised civil society, and then there is civil society in the full sense of the word, that represents a “weak” public space²⁸.

Those who do not have access to the European public sphere are limited to the debate on a national level. The European institutions have the task of bringing themselves closer to those who perceive Europe in a more distant fashion and who

²⁷ Parent, High school, Firenze, female, German national, 52 years old, doctor.

²⁸ Eriksen, Erik Oddvan. “An Emerging European Public Sphere”. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 8, 4, 2005. Print.

often belong to the lowest strata of society and they need to do so by getting closer to the realities of these people.

Linguistic plurality among European citizens is one of the biggest obstacles in constructing a transnational discursive space. Even if the spread of languages grows and involves all social and cultural strata, the public sphere and European media cannot reproduce the characteristics of a national public sphere, yet need to penetrate the existing national and local public spheres and so they must adapt themselves to a multi-level and plurilinguistic model²⁹.

European institutions can moreover promote other places where Europeans can meet and exchange views, such as transnational spaces for participation and communication (European associations, virtual communities, transnational movements) and thereby support the concept of European citizenship that is not just formal but actually based on social practices that involve active participation in public activities, that is to say a citizenship that understands how to conciliate the differences between the various ideas of Europe and its many identities and cultures spread across the European area³⁰. This would facilitate the democratic legitimacy of Europe by spreading a narrative of European citizenship that is not only an institutional narrative but also a narrative of belonging.

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²⁹ Linguistic and cultural plurality could be tackled by promoting it, highlighting the many differences within Europe, placing a higher value, for example, on translations, and not dumbing down to a *lingua franca* because "one language" is also a legacy of the nation state.

³⁰ Eder, Klaus, and Bernhard Giesen. *European Citizenship between National Legacies and Postnational Projects*. Blackwell: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.

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