Laura Leonardi

[Changes in the We-I Balance and the Formation of a European Identity] in the Light of Norbert Elias's Theories

Presentation

The reflection on the theme of European identity is mainly inspired by *The society of individuals* (Elias 1987, 1991) but the reference to his work is more extensive. Norbert Elias's processual and figurational sociology provides a theoretical frame in which the increasing complexity, the structural differentiation and the formation of individual and collective identities are held together and cannot be understood separately, but only in the dynamic of their interdependences, in a micro-macro perspective. In the light of the Eliasian concepts - figuration, civilization, social habitus, balance of power, we-I balance – it is possible to analyze the problem of European identity, taking into account the process of individualization and processes of change in European society.

The paper proposes to overturn the point of view usually adopted to analyze the problem of European identity, which focuses on the macro-institutional dimension of the phenomenon of integration at European level. This point of view considers the individual atomistic and decontestualized dimension, separating, indeed, individual identity and collective identity and, above all, ignoring the implications of the individualization process underlying social changes, which creates new interdependencies and requires new forms of regulation. On the contrary, Elias takes into account the process of individualization, the fundamental importance of considering the I-with-a-we, the dimension of power and social inequalities, which are systematically set aside in the mainstream analysis, while are constantly emerging at empirical level (Winkelkotte, Jentges 2011). Elias's approach, then, helps to overcome the reference to the national dimension and in particular, the methodological nationalism in the analysis of European identity[1].

This contribution puts forward in the first part a theoretical reflection on the Eliasian concepts of identity and integration, we-I balance, especially on the balance of underlying power and on the importance of its dynamics. In the second part, we are going to refer to some empirical researches on European identity reinterpreted in the light of the Eliasian theory.

Social identity and supranational integration process

Why do we start from Norbert Elias to deal with the problem of European identity in the current context? Owing to a dissatisfaction towards the prevailing approaches. The literature on European identity, on the other hand, is largely dominated by political science and by the functional point of view. The used concept of identity is often vague, the search for an essential term or a central category is related to determine norms and values which are taken as data and are essentially static, in an essentialist vision (Wessels 1995). The underlying idea of society does not give due attention to the formation of individual identity, as it is assumed that individuals have a passive role: they adapt to collective identities which are considered predetermined and constant over time (Harrie

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[1] According to Elias's analysis, the term "nation" can indicate both the processes of integration and disintegration. If one considers the nation state and its historical evolution as figuration, the term nation becomes a political-functional concept of integration. The historical comparison of integration processes of the nation state and of Europe shows parallel developments. Therefore it must be kept in mind that the process of development of the delimitation of territorial states is not 'given' but is historically constructed (Roche 2010).

2006). The economic approach, that has characterized European politics in recent years, has acknowledged this approach with tangible effects on individual experiences.

To address this issue, however, in my opinion, we must return to a field that will allow us to grasp the conditions of individual and collective identity construction in connection with the structural changes of society and modes of interaction and communication among individuals who compose it.

The recurring weaknesses in the various conceptions of European identity are primarily attributable to the dominant macro-institutional perspective, which focuses on the collective dimension of identity, separated from that individual. This perspective examines the political, economic and cultural institutional processes, removing the social space, social relationships and daily life, the so-called Europe vécue[2] (Giarault 1994, Kaelble 2009).

In the classic functionalist approach, it is assumed that the functional structures in the construction of individual identity are characterized by continuity and stability: therefore, the attention is focused on the formation of personal identity, concerning individuals who are confronted with social groups of reference and with taking roles. The model of the increasing individualization assumed by Elias, however, takes into account the existence of spaces that allow a degree of choice regarding the construction of individual identity, derived from the peculiarity of how the individual interprets the social roles and lives in them. The feeling of congruence perceived by the individual, therefore, is no longer being identical to him/herself over time, as each situation requires a personality and a corresponding social behaviour. Considering the process of individualization, as Elias does, it leaves room for a model of identity as a "reflective project", which differs in different social groups of age, of vital areas. A conception of identity has been affirmed by that changes with the changing of historical and cultural circumstances, which is a reaction to certain events, but also production of meanings (Eder 2005).

From Elias's perspective, the European integration process is inscribed in the *unplanned* social process that through various stages marks, from time to time, the transition from smaller and less differentiated social units - which gradually lose their function as autonomous and self-governed survival unit – to wider social units, which are more differentiated, more complex and increasingly interdependent. This long-term historical process has seen in Europe the steady emergence of a certain number of increasingly large *survival units*, that were originally formed by a smaller number[3]. The direction of social change has led to a greater integration, especially with the birth of the nation state: however, this process is not linear, historically it has seen phases of disintegration and it is reversible.

During the growing integration of humanity the states lose sovereignty, in a process that can stop or regress. «Humanity split up into states is increasingly becoming the framework of reference, as a social unit, of many developmental processes and structural changes. Without global frames of reference such processes and structural changes cannot be either adequately diagnosed or adequately explained. The incipient breakthrough to a new level of integration that can be observed on all sides demands a breakthrough to a new level of synthesis in sociology» (Elias 1991:163)[4].

In this context, *integration* means the emergence and consolidation of a *new socio-political centre* and a *growing identification of people with this centre*. European nation states have fulfilled this integrative function above all, Elias underlines, thanks to the social protection offered to individuals[5]. However, today the growing regionalism or

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[2] Europe vécue, in which the implicit and unconscious identification is rooted with norms and common lifestyles and shared solidarities, is distinct from 'thought' Europe, corresponding to the "public debate" on Europe, and 'wished' Europe, the creation of the European institutions (Girault 1994). The identification with Europe is not known if it is first urged by that one experienced and by the intensification of trade and interdependences, or by the others, as the relationship is circular.

[3] It has to be kept in mind that the process of individualization implies new forms of social regulation, new interdependencies that require higher levels of consolidation, see Sciolla (2009).

[4] Elias introduced the term 'humanity' as a possible reference to the present stage, where, in fact, in scientific practice, the state-owned companies that have been the 'model' of society within which it is addressed the study of social phenomena, lose meaning for analysis, since the process of integration has been further developed and, this time, on a worldwide extended level.

[5] Elias talks about welfare state to indicate the model of the welfare state that, declined in a different way, has characterized contemporary European national societies. The social protection guaranteed by the state units as survival unit, triggering uncommon processes of identification, has allowed the emergence and strengthening of a new we – I balance connected to the changes occurred in the levels

nationalism as a frame of collective identity may instead be a boost to the disintegration on the level of the European Union. One cannot a priori assume neither that the integration process of the nation state will continue to be achieved also on a European level, nor the opposite, namely that an integration in the long term also in this area cannot be developed.

Process of identity formation and changes in the we-I balance: the importance of context. The changes in the structure of the we-I balance are, therefore, linked to changes in a context, also of the organisational form of the survival unit on which level the integration process is attested. «The scope for self-control, the personal freedom of choice, offered by a certain kind of state to its members, is an important criterion for the degree of individualization» (*Ibidem*: 181). For Elias these changes, together with the civilising process, involve the progressive inclusion of individuals as such, not for their membership to groups and communities. With them the social structure of personality, the social habitus changes. In modern society, the social habitus of an individual is composed of many layers, which constitute the many concepts of we, which make difficult the we-I balance. People refer to the circle of family and friends, villages or cities in which they reside, the national, post-national, continental formations of more nation states or humanity itself. The we-identity is a fundamental component of the individual social habitus and the I-identity is the result of an ongoing process that is interwoven with memory, knowledge and previous experiences.

It is interesting to emphasize here that, in the Eliasian perspective, the processes of identity formation and the dynamics in the we–I balance of power *are not mechanically produced*, but through social relationships, communication, forms of symbolic mediation, language first, that allow for *mutual recognition* and the formation/transmission and preservation of *memory*.

The question of identity becomes especially relevant during phases of transition, because the formation of groups at a higher level of integration do not have sufficient potential to produce a we-identity, while still strongly surviving the previous we-feeling. In this process, drives to individualization are also involved and lead people to seek their own individual way of life. The overcoming of the apparent duality of individual and collective identity occurs when people seek their identity founded on the awareness of the chains of interdependence in spaces pertained to specific context of relationships.[6]

Regarding the dynamic of the *unplanned* social processes we notice that it «is tending to advance beyond a given stage towards another, which may be higher or lower, while the people affected by this change cling to earlier stage in their personality structure, social habitus» (*Ibidem*.: 211). This also applies to the European integration process: the characteristics of collective national identity are linked to personal identity through the individual social habitus. However, the weakening of the we-identity is not the same in the various nation states.

According to Elias, *European national habitus* are the main brake to a closer political integration on a European level and they have a retarding effect. Just the process of European integration is an example of it: «the national habitus of the members of European states puts a barrier in the way of the formation of a European continental state» (*Ibidem*). However, Elias notes, the habitus is changeable, it can change under certain circumstances.

The importance of power dimension and inequalities in the processes of collective identity formation. To better understand the conditions that allow the formation of identity, we should recall the issue of the balance of power within the figurations, which is the basis for the development of the *collective* side of identity.

In agreement with the position held within balances of power, the we-feeling, regarding the universe or part of

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of integration.

[6] However, the focus on the individualization of the potential ways of life does not take into account that no individual can waive the communication and interaction with others and that individual and collective identity, however, are in the same category.

the members of the figuration, may be more or less strong. This feeling depends on a conscious evaluation by individuals and it is in any case influenced by their emotional feelings[7]. To better understand the implications of this reasoning, we should recall the Eliasian definition of power, conceived as the monopolistic control of any resource for the satisfaction and rise of interest, present in all human relationships and which distribution is dynamic. [8] For each power there is a countervailing power. A mutual dependence of relation powers are set up and they manifest themselves as balancers of power (*power balance*), but this is never equally distributed and struggles and competitions are constant to achieve it. The tensions and conflicts that arise from the unequal distribution of power belong to the dynamics of the figuration. They never have a defined direction in the historical development and they can interfere with the we-feeling and weaken it, shifting it to other collective identities, or they may strengthen it.

In the process of development every time that the level of integration shifted from a lower to an higher level, there was a corresponding *transfer of power resources*. For individuals this means to live «at a greater distance from the social centres of power, which decide over their fate» (*Ibidem.*: 165). This has happened in the transition from the tribes to the state and it is also happening in relation to the process of integration at continental and global level[9]. During these phases, which characterize the process of integration, individuals lose chances of power, the powerlessness of the single person grows towards what is happening at the top. This loss of power can be corrected through a long *learning process* and can lead to a rebalancing. Elias calls once again into question the importance of the cognitive and reflective component of human relations in the formation of the individual collective identity.

The effects of power relations on the balance between we-identity and I-identity could be better analyzed considering the position of the *established* and the *outsiders*. In fact, looking back to the historical process of evolution of social structures in Europe, Elias identifies some key stages of the formation of European states as we-units through which a series of *social conflicts* between *established* and *outsiders* led to recognition and inclusion of the second ones and their integration into the nation-state societies. However, the processes of change always produce new conflicts: in contemporary societies bourgeois and working classes, as we-established groups at state level, who are opposed together with a new wave of outsiders (eg. immigrants). In Europe, this is different from the United States of America, which have in their tradition the absorption - within certain limits - of outsider groups.

The originality of Elias thesis towards the link between the we-identity and the integration process is particularly in the emphasis that the European integration process touches the *collective memory* in the image of the we. The integration process is accompanied by an emotional component that has an important role in the formation of identity and it must not be overlooked; in fact, it is unthinkable to address the issue only in terms of rationality. The we-identity has a value if it has a meaning and an affective drive, which are missing or weak elements in the European dimension, especially if they are compared to the value to define ourselves as German, English, French instead of European. «The integration unit on the continental level may be understood to be a practical necessity, but unlike the older national units is not associated with strong we-feelings» (Elias 1991: 226). Without underestimating the strategic and economic factors that hinder deeper integration in Europe, it should not be forgotten that the national habitus negatively affects the formation of post-national state associations. Elias points out that these difficulties can be overcome through compromise, with a voluntary process, requiring a long process of sedimentation in the personality structure of the single States Members, a long learning process. Regarding the analytical level, Elias observes even in the case of the integration of European countries «difficulties in the way of European union will remain inaccessible to analysis, particularly scientific analysis, as long as individuals are regarded merely as we-less I's, and the role of the we-I balance and of the we-ideal and we-identity in individual feeling and behaviour is misunderstood» (*Ibidem.* : 221).

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[7] *The affection and emotion* are closely linked to Elias, and denote the quality of the subjects, symbols, situations and people perceived among other things, in order to cause a specific disposition to the need in the observing subject (Elias 1990; Tabboni 1993). Emotions designate the quality of relationships in the figurations, they may still be very clung with strong bonds to other people, be open and free, they may also not be filled.

[8] Every person has specific chances of power within their respective figurations.

[9] Compared to the statement of the integrated state plan, Elias points out that the State, especially with supporting functions (social status), took over the family as survival unit, which gives essential and permanent continuity, and has become the main framework reference for the we-identity.

I-less-we or I-with-a-we? The heuristic value of the Eliasian theory for the empirical analysis

From the outset, European policy makers have found that the popular legitimacy[10] from the EU is derived by the system of governance and by the ability to resolve complex problems. This is not a negligible aspect, also in Elias view: the drive for integration is strong, given that nation states have been shown no longer to be able to perform the function of the survival unit, to protect their citizens (eg Chernobyl, pollution). They have been increasingly powerless on the economic and military level but soon, also on that scientific and cultural one. The ruling classes are too taken up by current and short-term problems, while challenges to European countries are growing from emerging states. The resolution of those problems, which the nation state cannot answer to, is a step forward towards the creation of an integrated plan. However, it is not sufficient to create the conditions for the formation of a European identity.

This last observation has important implications in terms of methodology: as noted by Elias (1991: 177), indicating a prevalent misunderstanding in the analysis of the European integration process, «from changes in economic organization which promise an increase in the national product»: that would be to say that to economic processes is also attributed a function of production of processes, which have greater social cohesion, of creation of social bonds, etc.. Beyond that, there is no empirical evidence of the existence of a virtuous cycle of production for integration and social cohesion from the side of the economic market processes. Actually, we notice on the contrary, that in prioritizing the economic or technical aspects, one neglects the relationship between individual and society, which has instead an important explanatory potential regarding the ability/inability to develop a we-identity in the European sense.

The *top-down* process, conceived by European policy makers, is expected to have an effect of socialization in the European project, through its institutions, in favour of the formation of a European identity, but it has not, as many empirical studies point out, the wished consequences.

It was hypothesized that the construction of supranational institutions would have fed the European identity also at individual level, through continuous exposure to the symbols and institutionalization of the European governance and that the feeling of identification over time would have been spread and intensified. Instead it does not seem that the integration process was accompanied by a progress of attachment to the EU. An interesting fact is that from 1980 to 2006 the awareness of how the EU works, which should also emerge from its structure as a "survival unit", has not increased. In 2006, according to the Euro barometer of 2006, only 43% of citizens claimed to know quite enough about the functioning of the EU and between 2000 and 2005 only 2% constantly declared to know a lot about its policies. If there was an attempt by the elites to trigger a top-down process, it seems to have failed, as the majority of citizens ignore how the EU works (Petithomme 2008: 26).

It has been suggested a correlation between the identification process and the elapsed time from the entrance in the EU (Bruter 2005), which should lead to a convergence of national memberships in the long term. However, the data do not confirm this view. Within the groups of countries, the duration, as a variable that promotes the formation of a European consciousness is not confirmed. In Spain and Portugal we find the same percentage of people found in later accessed countries, who do not know the functioning of the EU. The same happens in the founding countries: the percentage of those who are uninformed is as high as in others. Another problem is setting the fact that social scientists, in order to determine the degree of membership to the European project, focus *on the national level*, but this is scientifically restrictive. For example, there are inner differences within the countries among citizens, according to the social status, level of education, degree of ethnocentrism. There may be convergences among people belonging to different social classes in different countries, as evidenced by several investigations.

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[10] The traditional bottom-up legitimacy, prevailing at national level is not applied to the EU. National democracies are "input Democracies", while the European Union is appearing as an output-oriented democracy (because it requires a negotiation among the European parties and at the level of the Commission to reach agreements even away from the initial projects).

Mathieu Petithomme (2008), in a survey on the attitudes towards the European Union conducted in the United Kingdom, France and Belgium found that for the all considered independent variables, there is a national trait that sees the British more skeptical, the French moderately positive, the Belgians more enthusiastic regarding the positive vision of the EU and they feel proud to be European. For all independent variables, however, there is a double effect on the national context and the considered variables. In all countries the positive attitude increases with education among young people, among people with a good knowledge of the functioning of the European Union. The social status has also an influence, for example members of the upper classes are more inclusive, especially in the United Kingdom. The ideological variable has a weight, generally among those who are left-oriented, with the exception of France, as well as the "living in the city" variable is positively correlated.

Therefore we can talk of a series of joint factors that characterize the different attitudes towards the EU: the cultural and political skills, the social position, party preferences and ethnocentrism which affect the attitude and differentiate subgroups. The socio-economic variables have significance beyond national differences.

A further differentiation in the commitment to the European project appears with reference to national and regional divisions. National, regional and European identities could be seen each other as exclusionary or concentric. On the contrary it increasingly emerges that they coexist in different ways in the various contexts. Therefore it is not useful to adopt an approach that considers different identities as mutually exclusive. Often, in fact, surveys and research start on the assumption that national and European identities are alternative to each other, while surveys show that on the average the feelings of national and European belonging co-exist. European identity can be enhanced if based on interactions that cross borders, a matter of fact of everyday life, as it is the awareness of the existence of European institutions in the territory in which one lives.

Grundy and Jamieson (2005), for example, comparing European metropolitan and regional areas are relatively unfamiliar to the view that a weakening of national identity would lead to a greater global or European identification. Ruiz Jiménez (2004) states that it is a mistake to see the national and European identity as a competitive and at zero-sum. They are compatible because of different order and with different meanings, in many cases that national is cultural, the other instrumental, but the configuration in each national reality is different because it is the result of various historical dynamics, with different consequences for the European identity.

Kaelble (2009) argues that the following things contribute to strengthen the identification with Europe: the internationalization of lifestyles, the consumption at European level (import among European countries), travel across borders for study, work purposes, mixed marriages, the convergence in many aspects of work, study, health, welfare, media, etc.. The identification with *Europe vécue* does not mean a loss of identification with the national dimension: they often go together, confidence in its own country often means the same in relation to other European countries (*Ibidem*. :204).

The European identity is emerging as increasingly less centred on state-centric and regional identity, but more constructed and reproduced by mediated and reflective practices.

However, if we consider the dynamics described by Elias in the transition from integration to other plans, in order to develop a sense of European belonging, it is important that individuals are aware that their actions as individuals or groups of individuals have a weight, that might affect on the level of European integration; at the moment, however, they are convinced that their *voice* does not count at all: 59% of Europeans in the twenty-seven countries considers not to be able to influence the European level and 75% does not feel involved in decisions on this level (Petithomme 2008).

This sense of exclusion from decision-making processes at European level can be profitably explored through the dimension of power and the established-outsiders figuration. According to these figuration the problem of European identity can be reformulated as follows. We are witnessing a gradual process of social integration at higher levels and this is involving the progressive transfer of power. However, in the gradual transfer of their loyalty to higher levels, people have also lost safety and capacity of involvement in the short term. Each shift of *confidence* from a survival-unit to another, to a higher level of integration, is accompanied by an evolution of balance between individual and society. This means that the previous form of society is still persisting in giving sense of belonging and security to individuals, while the new stage of integration cannot be in the short term able to promote the creation of a new we-image. The concept of survival-unit and the notion of trust applied to the Eu-

ropean reality basically recall what is defined the *social model*, as a fundamental in nurturing feelings of belonging and identification: the same Elias recalls it as characterizing the level of national integration (Welfare state) and it is the product of figurations in which a particular set of power relations between insiders and outsiders allow the ability to identify who is in a privileged position and who is not. It is an *essential feature of the civilizing process*, it could correspond to an aspect that Stephen Mennell (2007) has well remarked: a kind of social competence which anticipates every danger - the unintended effects of the planned activities, the so-called externalities - the breaking of social codes that govern daily life, the economic risks or issues of survival. This competence has characterized the *European social model*, but it has lost ground on the level of nation states, while not founding a consolidation on European level. The problems on a global scale are becoming less controllable on a national scale, but they would be on a higher level of integration. Market fundamentalism has interrupted the process of European integration, creating an imbalance between established and outsiders that goes beyond the borders (welfare for few people and uncertainty for many).

In recent years, confidence and expectations related to specific policies have increased - processes rooted in an Europe vécue - more than in the identification in the European Union as a "wanted" Europe. A process of identifying "by voice" has its roots in an Europe vécue rather than through the exit[11] (Medrano 2009). For example by those who voted against the project of constitution but for another, more social Europe. Therefore, it emerges a controversial dimension that is fully embedded in the dynamics of the we-I balances through the questioning of the established – outsider relationship.

Concluding remarks

Elias's analysis of the relationship between the changes in the we-I balance and integration processes leads to shift the focus of the analysis *on the increasing interdependence of action and communication and chains of interdependence* that are a prerequisite for the formation of the collective identity.

The construction of a European identity does not pass through particular values or convictions on their precise meanings in the great variety of interpretations of these values. It is rather the process of discourse (talking about) - referring to the importance of the forms of symbolic mediation, especially within the language of figuration - the communication around different interpretations, potential meanings, values and terms that are crucial for developing a we – feeling. So it is also the behaviour that may be experienced together, socially, in specific figurations. It is in the confrontation and negotiation between individuals and groups within the dynamics of power that the we-feeling is produced. European identity, therefore, is only one of the possible collective identities, and it is always in direct correlation or approximation/delimitation with others. The importance of the individual dimension in its interdependences and structure of the balance of power, is significant. The more the European citizens live in areas of their lives regulated and negotiated at European level and not only local and national, the more they refer to the European dimension in their daily life construction of individual and collective identity. The more this is experienced and verbalized, the more the other areas lose strength as spheres of activity for the feeling of belonging as European citizens. The more it happens and the more people organize themselves for an identification by voice, through conflicts that will restore new balances of power. In these dynamics it is possible to see the importance of including in the analysis, in order to understand the processes of formation of a European identity, the I-with-a-we instead of the *homo clausus* at the centre of functionalistic interpretations of the integration process.

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[11] Identity has the social function of making individuals able to imagine themselves included in a given community. Identities are therefore constantly changing because a social group may decide the exit or the voice over their national character in a given community (Petithomme 2008).

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