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What is a European Identity? The Emergence  
of a Shared Ethical Self-Understanding in the  
European Union

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## **Abstract**

Against the common view that a European identity is a functional precondition for legitimate EU governance, this paper argues that conceptual weaknesses of the term ‘collective identity’ inherited from social philosophical and sociological tradition 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 the concept of ‘collective identity’. The ways in which people refer to themselves as members of we-groups will be outlined in order to contribute to an innovative model of the problem and therefore policy-related formation of collective identities. In each sub-section the relevance of these conceptual considerations for evaluating whether or not ‘the Europeans’ see themselves as members of a community will be shortly illustrated. The paper concludes that a strong European identity is not a functional precondition for legitimate democratic governance in the EU as far as every day politics is concerned. Only in extraordinary situations and in order to institutionalise integration in ethically sensitive policy fields is it necessary that the EU-citizens discursively agree on an ethical self-understanding of their way of life.

## **Keywords**

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

## **ERPA Keywords**

European identity, European public space, identity, normative political theory



## Introduction\*

The end of the Cold War opened new perspectives for the intensification, acceleration and even democratisation of the European integration process. Since then the European Union (EU) has become active on even more policy fields, including former core competencies of the respective nation states. Meanwhile, EU-governance touches fields that have hitherto been regarded 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 or biotechnology. Despite occasional setbacks, this amazing development of a relatively small foreign trade zone for the goods of one branch of industry in the 1950s to the worldwide only multinational political system at the turn of the century represents an impressive success story.

Nevertheless, many observers doubt that the EU is ready for democratisation and grand future projects like common social policies or a common security and defence policy. Drawing more or less explicitly on communitarian views<sup>1</sup> 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 / Scheingold, 1970; most recently see: Herrmann / Brewer, 2004: 2 f.; Risse, 2004: 250; Eriksen, 2005: 342 f.). 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 paper 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 tradition 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 functional prerequisite of democracy. In order to show this point the paper proceeds as follows:

The first part will provide a short overview of the debate on the perceived functional need of 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 policy-related formation of collective identities. In each sub-section the relevance of these conceptual considerations for evaluating whether or not ‘the Europeans’ see themselves as members of a community will be shortly outlined. The paper concludes that a strong European identity is not a functional precondition for legitimate democratic governance in the EU as far as every day politics is concerned. Only in extraordinary situations and in order to institutionalise integration in ethically sensitive policy fields is it necessary that the EU-citizens discursively agree on an ethical self-understanding of their way of life.

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1 Communitarians believe that the democratic process rests upon strong pre-political ties between the members of a political community. Tradition, solidarity and shared ethnic, religious, cultural, and so forth identities are in that view social preconditions for the modern democratic process.



## 1. Beyond identity?

### 1.1. *The perceived functional need of a European identity*

With accelerating speed European Union governance became active on 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 way into 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 only out of stubbornness that Europeans have different views on ethically sensitive policy fields.

If areas as constitutional policy, social policy, security and defence, immigration, internal security, or biotechnology come under EU-induced reform pressure, integration may tend to become highly controversial. Many analysts, therefore, suppose 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:* 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 institutionalised in very particular contexts and conflict situations. Constitutions can—under normative and historical aspects—be viewed as the outcome of generations over generations of conflict over the general procedures of decision making and the definition of a democratic nation's collective projects (Habermas, 1998: Ch. 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 historical defeats or victories of certain societal groups.<sup>2</sup> But even those groups who once did not agree with the institutional choices made have later on been fighting for reforms within the established frameworks and are—even in 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 once good reasons for institutionalising certain policies in a certain way. The memorised 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 it seems to be the case in the European context, they might—paradoxically—become aware of how much they are normatively and practically integrated.<sup>3</sup> *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 legitimising European governance.

*Example 2:* 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 institutionalised under specific

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2 First comparative discourse analyses of the debate on the European constitution have recently been published (Trenz, 2004b; Fossum / Trenz, 2005; Oberhuber et al., 2005).

3 Public reluctance to change therefore is not only a matter of threatened group interests—often enough those interests would be favoured by a change—but it expresses a paradox of normative integration. Citizens know and—that should not be underestimated—accept the normative justifications their ancestors gave for deciding in favour of a certain set of rules.

historical circumstances based on a specific rationale and were fought for by certain coalitions of actors against others.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 institutionalisation of redistributive social policies on the European level.<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>7</sup>, 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 is another highly sensitive policy field. On the occasion of the US-led intervention in Iraq 2003 it became visible how differently the EU member states perceived the issue. It has been heavily criticised 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 of the war—public opinion across Europe was clearly against the war.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, in countries like Poland strong moral arguments in favour of the intervention were brought 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 organisations (Lenz / Schmidt / von Wrochem, 2002; Levy / Sznajder, 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 in the recent decade. Moreover, it could have contributed to the further development of a just, multilateral, and legally bounded world order (see among others: Habermas / Derrida, 2003; Habermas, 2004; Fischer, 2000, 2005).

On issues like European immigration, internal security, or 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

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4 See among others Baldwin, Esping-Andersen and Skocpol (Baldwin, 1990; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Skocpol, 1992).

5 Most prominently, Habermas, among many others, takes a common heritage of welfare state convictions for granted as a common European ethical resource that just would have to be rediscovered in its European dimension (Habermas, 2001).

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 happily 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 where to go from here, there are however very strong differences in public opinion across the EU (see e.g. whether one’s nation should send troops to stabilise Iraq, *ibid.*: 40-41).

9 There is not yet much empirical research on this aspect (Hansen, 2002; MacQueen, 2003; Joerges / Ghaleigh, 2003).

tremendous political uncertainty—in normative as well as in practical terms. However exaggerated some assumptions about the presumed strength of national identity or the assumed value consensus within the national publics are, it seems to be plausible that some sort of broadly shared convictions are the precondition for the institutionalization of the grand collective policy projects the EU has already put on its agenda.

Yet, when an issue is recognised 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—blockade 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 of the complexity and heterogeneity of values would run into disappointment, especially when ‘hot’ political issues are discussed on a European scale. How to accommodate twenty five 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 sometimes heavy burdens of historical guilt that normatively constrain the range of acceptable policy choices?<sup>10</sup> Given their overwhelming heterogeneity, how could the 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 / Rumford, 2005; Eriksen / Fossum, 2004; Fossum, 2004).

If these contradicting concerns are valid—(a) identity is a functional precondition of democracy and (b) 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 the further the integration process penetrates former core functions of national sovereignty.

### ***1.2. What is a ‘collective identity’?***

In order to bring into realisation 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 institutionalise 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 only clear 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 regarded to provide a communitarian fundament for bridging deep conflict and for the acceptance of sacrifices in favour of the common good. Shared values are

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<sup>10</sup> About the difficulties of coming to terms with past traumatic experiences of victims as well as perpetrators see e.g. Giesen and Elster (Giesen, 2004; Elster, 2004).

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).<sup>11</sup> 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 even proposed to completely give up this inflationary used term, replacing it with other more precise categories (Brubaker / Cooper, 2000). Still, ‘collective identity’ is an indispensable concept of cultural and political sociology needed in order to theorise 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 rather because of matters like mutual acknowledgment and ethics—questions along the lines of ‘what is good or better for us to do?’.

In this perspective, the terms with which Brubaker/Cooper recommend ‘identity’ to be replaced do not solve any conceptual problems, since neither purely descriptive terms<sup>12</sup> nor rather ‘emotional’ terms like ‘feeling connectedness’ (Brubaker / Cooper, 2000: 19-21) provide the theoretical means to cope with 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 just an accumulation of individuals who contingently share these or those characteristics or who ‘feel’ something. In those cases we are encountering a very special quality of social relations (see: Tietz, 2002: 64-72).

## 2. The categorisation 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 Brubaker/Cooper suggested give examples of different ways of categorising objects—humans or anything else<sup>13</sup>—by certain characteristics (Brubaker / Cooper, 2000: 14 ff.). Living on a certain territory, ethnic origin, culture, religion, language, history, life style, and the like are often used indicators 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: 215 ff.). Yet, even if a number of individuals share certain identifiable characteristics it 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/Cooper, I therefore propose to distinguish between *numerical identification* (or categorisation) and *qualitative identity*. Only the latter one may include value-judgements and the ethical self-understanding of the individuals concerned ( Tietz, 2002: 215 ff.; Brubaker / Cooper, 2000: 14ff.).

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11 In contrast, Habermas showed that a civil form of solidarity has been and can be produced in the democratic process (Habermas, 1998: Ch. 4).

12 Brubaker/Cooper propose terms like ‘identification’ and ‘categorisation’ 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 (Brubaker / Cooper, 2000: 17).

13 Needless to say: stones, toys, computer, dogs as well as ‘speaking’ computers or parrots do not have qualitative identities.

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 out of 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: e.g. for the purposes of social statistics, bureaucracies, or for legal uses these criteria are sufficient.<sup>14</sup> We operate with them. But, for the sociological question about deliberate and active membership in a political community it is 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.<sup>15</sup> They confuse the ontological dimension (*numerical 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 of 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; Malmborg / Stråth, 2002).

Such attempts categorise people along observable characteristics taken either from the present or the past. Some of those typical identification strategies are more plausible than others—however, pure categorisation 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 little and big 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, neighbouring regions, and more distant parts of the world. None of these attempts could quiet the intense debates about who belongs to Europe and who does not. The question stays contested.

There is, however, one formal criterion that has strong practical implications. This single, most relevant common political characteristic of the Europeans is the European citizenship status. On the base of this criterion the EU-citizens are clearly to identify numerically 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

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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 the 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.

and duties.<sup>16</sup> 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?

### 3. Qualitative identities: Universal and particularistic identities

In the footsteps of new accounts of analytic philosophy, I will in the following part of this 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 scrutinising 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 community of all beings that have the capacity for language and action ( $we_1$ ) and two kinds of groups smaller than the entire mankind. Those can be referred to as particularistic we-communities. The members of groups who interact and co-operate for the purpose of different aims will be called  $we_{2/commercium}$ . And finally there are also particularistic we-communities who pursue together some 'social goods' (Walzer, 1983: 6-10) and developed a collective identity in the sense of a shared ethical self-understanding. They will be called  $we_{2/communio}$ .

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

#### 3.1. Humankind: The universal $we_1$

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

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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.

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.<sup>17</sup> Countless of these convictions are valid across all boundaries of language and culture. The universal *we*<sub>1</sub>-community includes all beings capable of speech and action.<sup>18</sup> ‘Membership’ in this community is the logical precondition of being at all a candidate for membership in any particularistic *we*<sub>2</sub>-community.

What can be said about the identity of the Europeans in this sense? First of all, it is evident that the EU-citizens are ‘members’ of the universal *we*<sub>1</sub>. As such they can become members of particularistic *we*<sub>2</sub> 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: 111-130). 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.

### 3.2. *Weak collective identities: The we*<sub>2/commercium</sub>

Particularistic *we*<sub>2</sub>-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 co-operative 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 the members of the *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub> 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 the EU-citizens a *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub>? In order to find that out we have to try to get access to the Europeans’ views about themselves as Europeans. It seems that weak European identities in the sense of a *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub> 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 partial sceptical, but altogether rather pro-active opinions of the EU citizens on European politics. Eurobarometer findings indicate that between 41 and 53 percent of the 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 (ibid.: 94-96). The European institutions are quite well known even if their relative importance is not always properly understood (ibid.: 106, 109).

Nonetheless, ‘if the EU were scrapped’, indifference and regrets would be mixed (ibid.: 86-88). 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 believe of being member of a particularistic group—like it or not. This phenomenon is well known and documented also from the

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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 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).

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 Europeanised policy issues (Peter / Semetko / de Vreese, 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: 130-162; Trenz, 2004a). There is a transnational mass medial agenda of common European policy issues which reinforces the awareness of ‘sitting in the same boat’. However idiosyncratic (e.g. individual, interest group specific, regionally, or nationally different) 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 democratisation of the EU. If one anyway sits in the same boat, one should better decide democratically about the rules of coexistence at least for the time 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 properly behave on ‘the boat’ and by which procedures to decide 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: 149 f.). Yet, that does not mean that they already agree on the content and the objectives codified in a constitution. It is only the parts of a constitution that refer to the basic individual rights and the institutions and procedures of governance which 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.

### 3.3. Strong collective identities: The *we 2/communio*

In everyday life political communities rather resemble the *we 2/commercium*: ‘Egoistic’ interests are negotiated against each other, mutual obligations are established, and contracts are signed and later on fulfilled, but the participants primarily follow their own reasons without orientation towards any common interest. The affiliation within a community in this minimalistic sense consists of the awareness of the individual participants to be—willingly or not—part of the ‘game’ and to be 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)<sup>19</sup>, the initiation of a collective project, or a major revision of it—in those situations, suddenly a certain nerve might be touched, and people 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 value-integrated *we 2/communio*.

The members of a *we 2/communio* share values<sup>20</sup> 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

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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 traumatising 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 (be it ‘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 for ‘what is good or better for us to do?’ (Tietz, 2001: 113-124).



consist of the widely shared ethical self-understanding of the individual members of a *we*<sub>2/communio</sub>. This shared ethical self-understanding is ‘inherited’ to a certain degree. Indeed, individuals are born as members of existing communities and get socialised into the basic ethical convictions of the group—later on they deliberately share some of these beliefs and challenge others. But there is also another way that leads to strong collective identities: people might come together and create new *we*<sub>2/communio</sub> groups in order to pursue a common ethical project.<sup>21</sup>

Especially in the latter case the participants put emphasis on *present* common problems and the question how they want to live together in the *future*. Collective identity develops through political conflict, and political conflict is action-related (Delanty / Rumford, 2005: 51).<sup>22</sup> 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 depends strongly on how the members of the *we*<sub>2/communio</sub> see themselves today and which future they are striving for (compare also: Stråth, 2005).

For the establishment of far-reaching collective projects a weak collective identity in the sense of a *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub> might *not* be sufficient. It may well be that a certain ‘critical mass’ of public support needs to be mobilised in order to institutionalise costly policies (in material and non-material terms, if we discuss for example about redistributive social policies, or if the lives of soldiers are put into danger). By far, though, not every public debate is an identity-discourse that contributes to the clearance of the ethical self-understanding of the community members as communitarian positions would suggest (Habermas, 1998: Ch. 9). Only in the face of rather extraordinary problems or conflicts, is the shared ethical self-understanding of the community members challenged. In those cases we are talking about ‘hot’ ethical convictions.<sup>23</sup>

Does the population of the EU share some sort of an ethical self-understanding? Is there a European *demos* with a collective identity in the strong sense of a *we*<sub>2/communio</sub>? The Eurobarometer is an often cited source for the empirical study of the state of an developing European identity in the strong sense of a *we*<sub>2/communio</sub> (for a recent overview and analysis see: Citrin / Sides, 2004). A quite stable minority of 10 percent of the EU citizens rates their European identity higher than their national identity or claims 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 as members of their nation first and Europeans as well, which may rather indicate a *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub>-like European identity or just *numerical identification*.<sup>24</sup> Still, many Europeans (47 percent) associate the EU with a feeling of pride (ibid.: 84), more than 60 percent feel some degree of European pride (ibid.: 99), and 66 percent feel attached to Europe (ibid.: 103).<sup>25</sup> Asking for ‘identity’ in such a general way turns interpretation into a rather problematic undertaking, however. More detailed information on

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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 analysis of multiple identities depending on the concerned policy area (Risse, 2001: 201).

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 17th 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 political statement of reservation against the EU (ibid.).

25 Over 80 percent of EU-citizens feel national pride (ibid.: 99).

whether the 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, health care and pensions). Nevertheless, the European Union is considered to influence this policy field rather negatively (*ibid.*: 27 ff.). With regard to the Iraq war, many observers have the impression that EU-citizens—in both the old and the new member states—were quite united in their ethical views (Habermas / 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: 27 ff.). On average citizens express much support for the CFSP/ESDP and 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 U.S. (*ibid.*: 116-129). 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 U.S. or the active promotion of human rights) (*ibid.*: 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 twenty five 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 in second in the 1999 national elections and entered the government coalition in 2000 (Rauer / Rivet / van de Steeg, 2002; van de Steeg, 2004). A similar pattern occurred in the media discourse about the European constitution (Trenz, 2004b; Fossum / Trenz, 2005; Oberhuber et al., 2005). A cosmopolitan European identity—at least with respect to the outside world—may emerge (Delanty / Rumford, 2005: 189-195). In other debates—e.g. about the introduction of the common currency (Risse, 2003) and the Kosovo intervention (Grundmann / Smith / Wright, 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.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper 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.

(1) 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 categorisation 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 recognised—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.

(2) It can be further stated, that Tönnies' conceptual decision to put society (*commercium*) and community (*communio*) into radical opposition and, moreover, to idealise 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 criticised by Brubaker / Cooper (2000), Niethammer (2000) and others. We-groups in the weak sense of a *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub> consist of members that refer to themselves as 'we'. They share certain beliefs about their common undertakings without holding shared ethical convictions. In everyday life political communities rather resemble a *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub>. This in turn has important virtues. As a matter of fact, it is a central civilising achievement of the liberal state of law and modern representative democracy to organise 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 is, in addition, an important mechanism for peaceful change and reform in modern democracies.

(3) With regard to the European Union as *we*<sub>2/commercium</sub>, we sketched indications for a widely shared perception of 'sitting in the same boat' and the conception that the EU is a relevant level of governance that is relevant to citizens' lives. The 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 democratising the EU political system.

(4) Moreover, European identity discourses have taken place with regard to many issues. Although, shared ethical convictions may emerge with respect to the concerned policy areas over time, this of course would have to be researched in much more detail.<sup>26</sup> Methodologically, it seems to be worthwhile to analyse the processes of political identity formation policy-issue by policy-issue instead of speaking in an undifferentiated and general manner of 'the collective identity'. It is logically possible that 'we<sub>2</sub>' 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*<sub>2/commercium</sub> and a *we*<sub>2/communio</sub>.

(5) It has also been stressed that collective identities in the strong sense develop through political conflict. They do not emerge out of thin air, but rather in broad public debates about deep conflicts on 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

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26 The author is part of a research project on discourses about military and humanitarian interventions in European and U.S. 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.

policy issues.<sup>27</sup> What can be done in order to further the character of the EU as *we 2/communio* is debating and tackling the issues that the broader public deems highly important and openly discussing 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 only clear, that Europe has to find common solutions for the challenges. Sharing a collective identity in both the weak and the strong sense does not mean, though, that conflicts disappear. The hope that identity would make things easier will certainly be disappointed. Identity discourses do occur because 'we 2' have different views on ethically problematic issues. Differences will remain. Hence, a shared collective identity in the strong sense should be rather 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 be our common past soon—burdened with guilt or reason for pride of our achievements. The future European identity will rise from both the positive experiences we will make 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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27 For the pragmatist model of community building by co-operative problem-solving see Dewey (1927; for the case of the EU compare: Kantner, 2004: Ch. 4).

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