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Identity and Borders:

An Anthropological Approach to EU Institutions

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Identity and Borders:

An Anthropological Approach to EU Institutions

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For an anthropologist Europe-building presents at least two original features. First of all, the recent history of postwar European institutions shows an alternation of accelerations and steps back. One can't describe it as a linear process that would reflect the progressive acceptance of something considered a priority by the people. Secondly, the process of building Europe is never completed. "One day Europe will be a united political entity" : this vision was shared by the first generation of the "pioneers." "Later the 'esprit européen' will triumph": this kind of assertion has given room to a more skeptical vision of the future.

However, the most salient characteristic of official discourses and practices is the link between immediate present and indeterminate future. It doesn't seem possible to be European without a projection into a world which doesn't yet exist and even, as we will see, can't be adequately qualified according to the classic notions of political science.

What is interesting for the anthropologist is less to describe the European institutions and their functioning than to analyze the imbrication between present and future (Abélès, 1996) in a political project that seems unable to exploit the resources of the past. Studying two general directorates in the Commission.[1] I was struck by the way in which events were digested, without people getting too involved in their diverse implications. One official said: "At the Commission everything goes faster than in an ordinary administration. Everything goes forward, there is no going back. It's a little like if one drives without a rear-view mirror." In reality, this process can appear as a way of masking reality. It is as if there is an inability to consciously face up to the hard realities of efficiency.

One could say that the Commission is unable to face up to its relationship with its own past. Or rather that, in some sense, it is pulled between two extremes: either the apologetic

exhibition of a past as the heroic "time of pioneers" of the 1960s or the rejection of any reference to conflicts no matter how recent. "Driving without a rear-view mirror" has the disadvantage of blocking out any question of reflexivity in an institution that - if only because it is called upon to render accounts of the meaning of its actions to member-states and citizens - is permanently called upon to question itself. "Driving without a rear-view mirror" is an expression of the self-confidence of those who perceive themselves as the architects of Europe. It may be also interpreted as introducing a dimension of uncertainty that underlines to the whole project.

The founders of Europe, Monnet, Schuman, Adenauer, Spaak, aimed to create a transnational unity by concentrating on specific areas: for example, at the beginning Europe was only an common market for coal and steel. Once Europe had begun to cooperate in these areas, interdependence of policy logics would promote "spillover" into others. The aim of the Monnet method was to initiate the *engrenage*. *Engrenage* means an "action trap" in which agents, once set in a specific course of action, find themselves obliged to take a set of further actions that point them in a direction in which they did not necessarily intend to go. The *engrenage* functioned in such a way that it would be impossible for the member states to go back. They would be more and more involved in the whole process, without making great proclamations of federalism. It is symptomatic that when the British government refused in 1950 to be part of the ECSC, the memo explaining its position underlined that the UK refused any "commitment." And it is true that, to be effective, the "spillover" involves the "commitment" of the member states. The UK always resisted this kind of involvement: in the 1980s, it generated the notion of "opting out" as an alternative to the *engrenage*. Although the Monnet method has been successful in pushing forwards European unification, it had one unexpected consequence: the political aim of the

project has never been clarified. And what is most interesting for the anthropologist: it *must* not be clarified.

Monnet's vision was of a federation of member states, with a substantial component of supranationality modeled on the nation state, the United States of Europe. This vision has not even begun to be realized. On the contrary, the word "federation" seems to repel most of the member states. Intentionally the word "federalism" was not used in the text of the Maastricht Treaty (February 7, 1992). These reactions against federalism are meaningful. It is interesting to observe that all European political leaders try never to name or define the European political system as it is constructed.

Jacques Delors' phrase "*objet politique non identifié*" to qualify Europe has been echoed among most of the political elites. It reflects adequately the tension which has occurred between a political process which leads to more and more integration and the impossibility for the architects of Europe to promote a representation of a possible completion of the European project. The most noticeable contribution to propose a global pattern of European Union was the Draft Treaty elaborated by Altiero Spinelli inside the committee of institutional affairs of the European Parliament and entitled "Reform of Treaties and Achievement of European Union" (1982). We find in this report an explicit federalist orientation. This Draft Treaty has never been ratified by the member states.

European Union may be "unique" in the sense that integration has never been achieved. Some of the authors analyze the EU as a "part-formed political system" (Wallace, 1990). The lack of a constitution appears as a symptom of this non-achievement of Europe as a new political entity.

The more recent Maastricht Treaty doesn't give much more detail on the future of Europe. In recent years, there was often question of a Europe of "variable geometries," by which I mean differing associations and affiliations among the different nations according to needs and taking into account the perspective of an enlargement to a membership of twenty-five nations. Once again the leaders are eager not to "lock in" the Europe-building process. The absence of identification of what could appear as "political Europe" (a new sort of nation state? a federation? a postnational?) can be interpreted in two different ways: for many politicians and political scholars this situation reflects only situational difficulties that can be overcome. Anthropologists have to take into account the difficulty not only of finding an adequate word to designate the future shape of Europe, but also denial concerning the opportunity to adopt a clear position on this point. In all speeches, reports, and literature produced by the political actors, this indeterminacy has become a commonplace; it is also illustrated in another field, communication.

Many attempts have been made to create an image of a united Europe and to communicate this image to the people (Black & Shore, 1994). The European Commission is in charge of promoting the idea of a united Europe and making the people feel like European citizens. To do this, it created the European passport. The creation of a European emblem, the flag with twelve stars, and the European anthem also aim at forming a common European identity. But it took almost thirty years for the flag to become officially recognized by the European Union. Likewise, it took seven years before the Community adopted Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as the European anthem; but it is a music without words.[2] In general one is struck by the lack of European symbolism. What we can call a symbolic deficit corresponds to the absence of a coherent set of political concepts and discourse. Everything is working as if Europe was destined to remain a virtual object.

European politics: a permanent negotiation

Does this situation correspond to the lack of a common political project? The opposition of the

UK and the division between big and small countries does not facilitate the realization of an

politically identifiable Europe. It seems, however, that the problem lies elsewhere, namely in the

permanent confrontation amid the different cultural and political identities in the European arena

(Bellier, 1995). I have observed this confrontation in the European Parliament and in the

European Commission , and I will give now two case studies of the difficulties created by these

cultural differences.

The European Parliament is the reflection of a common contradiction among its members,

between the awareness of the necessity of cooperation, that is European integration, and the

existence of very strong particularities and cultural disparities. In this sense, the difficulties

experienced by the national delegations in effectively communicating within the parliamentary

groups is quite representative of the general situation. The fact that the offices are assigned by

national group reinforces this impression of compartmentalization. In this context one cannot

help but bring up the question of languages. Aside from the fact that it requires an army of

translators and interpreters (let us not forget that 81 linguistic combinations must be provided

during parliamentary sessions), the simultaneous use of 11 languages does not exactly encourage

communication.[3] It is revealing to meet representatives who, after ten years at the European

Parliament, continue to speak only their native language mixed with some bad English. If one

spends a little time in the bars and restaurants of the European Parliament one can observe how

the representatives socialize: they briefly greet their colleagues from other countries, but prefer their own countrymen when it comes to having a drink.

In terms of the practical aspects of the parliamentary sessions, the need to translate each document into many different languages requires considerable logistics: not only translators, but also trucks to transport the tons of paper. One representative told about his first days at the European Parliament: "The first night, I was a little blue: I found myself with nearly 25 pounds of paper." What is striking during the sessions is the amputation that political speech undergoes during interpretation. To make oneself understood through the interpreter, one must be brief and simplify one's language to the maximum: no more room for rhetoric, nor for wit. And despite all this, the message sometimes doesn't get through. Certain representatives who speak several languages say that they are often amazed by the liberties taken by the interpreters when there is no direct equivalent from one language to another. As for the translations of reports, incorrect or discrepant words frequently slip in, which can disrupt commission work by giving rise to misunderstandings. Thus, on the subject of a directive proposed by the Environmental Commission, it was noticed at the last moment that the Dutch member had received a text that did not correspond to the others.

The European Parliament is, in other words (Abélès 1992), a real tower of Babel, where shifting from one language to another neutralizes debate. The plenary sessions often look like a succession of monologues. From time to time, when two MEPs from the same country take the floor one after the other, one may foresee the beginning of a more spontaneous discussion. The shared community of language allows more direct exchanges and favors some liberty of tone. The speakers draw on the same vocabulary and the same frames of reference. They move in the same discursive universe. On other occasions, the lack of linguistic unity depersonalizes debate.

Pluralism then becomes an important factor contributing to opacity. Because each country's political language mobilizes a different rhetoric, certain subtleties are almost impossible to translate across linguistic and political cultural divides. The speakers who do not simplify their discourses must expect some distortion of their words. This is not because the translators are incompetent, but simply because some terms are difficult to find in another language.

One day, when a Greek MEP was talking, the interpreter in charge of the translation suddenly declared that the speaker was making a good joke that was impossible to properly translate, and he called for the courtesy of the other MEPs. The whole assembly laughed at this remark, while the Hellenic MEP was delighted to be so well understood. In general terms, when the humor of MEPs is well translated it elicits adequate reactions, but the laughs can often be heard slightly after the humorous point is made. This is because of the gap between the enunciated and the interpreted word. Sometimes the speaker is surprised to hear his colleagues laugh after the content of his discourse had become more serious.

Plurilingualism corresponds to a well-regulated timing of the sessions but it does not stimulate political debate. The risk of misinterpretation is less problematic than the irreducibility of the linguistic differences which disrupt the communicative process and make impossible a direct exchange. The plenary sessions are a sort of limping compromise between a political debate and the transmission of information and reports. Arguments are juxtaposed and dialectic forms of expression or opposition are rarely observed. A Portuguese socialist MEP, Maria Belo, who is a psychoanalyst by training, commented on the situation: "one speaks without hearing; it is organized in such a way that one does not listen nor hears the other." For Mrs. Belo, true communication is even less possible in the context of the plenary session: "we speak for the minutes of the session." Simultaneously one notices that the deputies speak from their seat and

never address anyone but the president of the assembly. "All the discourses begin with an address to 'Mr. President'; it is symptomatic that nobody ever addresses the European citizens." While such forms of address are standard parliamentary procedure, they underline the characteristic opacity of European parliamentary practices, which transform the agora into a new Tower of Babel. While the upcoming economic and political union is brought up in every field of endeavor, languages remain the great unspoken truth in the construction of Europe. The inability to choose a single headquarters for the European Parliament is echoed by the impossibility of finding a common language.

Should one fear the deepening of the gap that separates the citizen at the grassroots from an assembly that wants to be democratic? For the debates to concern the public a little more, it would be required that a real discussion start among the MEPs. While it looks as if multiple languages are an obstacle to communication, one must suppose that Europeans from different nationalities really want to communicate. Shifting from one political language to another means simultaneously remembering the diversity of traditions and histories that have so heavily weighed upon member countries. While national political parties, drawn together by their programs and objectives, constitute common political groups in the Parliament, they also confirm the existence of transnational ideologies and diverse families of thought. Convergence of political program and practice, however, does not erase the differences of political methods and political culture.

The former French President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing learned this lesson as a newly elected MEP, when he tried to convince the liberal members of his group to affiliate with the Christian-Democrat group. He had to face strong opposition, essentially from the Dutch, Germans, Belgians and Portuguese who considered "liberalism" as synonymous with the separation of

church and state, whereas the French considered it mainly as an economic project. Between partners differences may occur, more often in the field of international relationships where national parties from the same political family have sometimes adopted different positions over time. Similar tensions occurred in the Socialist group during the first Gulf War. They reflected the transformations undergone by Socialist parties over the last half century. The majority of the French and German members of the Socialist group in the European Parliament supported American moves, while the Greek Socialists kept denouncing US imperialism. This shows how it is difficult to harmonize political strategies even among those who belong to the same parliamentary group and speak a common political language. These observations also suggest that the process of de-territorialization does not necessarily facilitate the creation of a public space of debate in the European Parliament. As in the Commission, intercultural contact may actually reinforce national barriers instead of generating a common identity. Even Commission civil servants, perhaps even more than elected officials, suffer from the loss of references and the lack of elaboration of a new universe of representations.

It seems clear that the prefiguration of a Community culture is not well established in the Commission or in the Parliament. To be modest, what is generated inside the European institutions is a universe of compromise where the conjugation of multiple identities is done essentially in a pragmatic fashion. In the frame of the permanent process of negotiation that characterizes Community political practice, the most common notion that everyone refers to as emerging from the European project is the idea of a "common good" (Abélès, Bellier and McDonald 1993).

This notion, which is omnipresent in Commission discourse, sustains the process of differentiation between the EU and the other economic powers, most notably the USA and Japan.

The notion of a common good is also used in the dialogue between the Community and the member states. The notion of a "Community interest" was advocated during the negotiation with the member states to define the level of the European subsidies given to each country under the regional policy in 1993. In this particular context, what was required was to satisfy the different needs of the member states, but to implement a fair distribution it was necessary to have a notion of a superior interest. To take a decision from the point of view of the Community interest meant also reducing regional disparities and achieve the necessary transfers for regions to adapt to the Single Market. It meant the simultaneous identification and prioritization of real needs in the countries, at both the regional and national levels. From their side, the member states put forward the principle of "subsidiarity" which, as a consequence, introduced more flexibility for the Community to deal with regional and national problems.[4] During the preparation and the conduct of the negotiation, the opposition between the Community interest and subsidiarity was observed in operation.

The Community is, to a certain extent and quoting Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950), a "floating signifier." He uses this concept to designate notions that are both essential and vague, allowing for their evocation alone to be of great significance. It is similar to the case of the "mana" which somehow stitches together indigenous discourses (Lévi-Strauss 1950: xlix). In this sense mana has an excess of meaning that gives value to the word used in a political context, as well as in its invocation in magic and rituals. From mana to Community interest the distance is huge, but the essential point is the marking function and the power of acknowledgement attributed to this concept. The usefulness of this concept may be seen in the debate about the Structural Funds, which highlights the growing importance of subsidiarity against the background of the danger of the renationalization of Community policies.[5]

The consciousness of a common belonging therefore finds in the invocation of a Community interest, and in the reference to the "European idea," the possibility of affirming itself against what is established as alterity (that of nation-states as opposed to Community) and as particularisms (the national histories as opposed to modernity). We cannot assert here and now that what is happening is the production of a European identity. On the contrary, European institutions and practices dramatically demonstrate the deterritorializing effects of Europe-building. From an anthropological viewpoint, one may consider deterritorialization as an enriching and stimulating factor (Appadurai 1996).

Cultural pluralism does not produce only centrifugal effects. Learning relativism, as can be observed in Community institutions, is one of the most interesting aspects of the process of pluralization. It implies a continuous questioning about methods, ways of thinking, and management that in a national context are supposed to be "natural" and legitimate, all but preventing any form of questioning. The situation in Community institutions induces the need to compromise between different ways of facing problems, on different grounds (such as economic, environmental, audio-visual, etc). At the Community level, dossiers acquire a higher complexity because they must account for different national regulatory arrangements. The material interests of the social categories affected (like fishermen, farmers, miners, or bankers) also vary from one country to another. At the same time, national analysis and perspectives may diverge because of the weight of cultural traditions (for instance the Northern and Southern member states of Europe do not share the same viewpoint regarding ecology), and the political dividing lines do not necessarily coincide from one state to another.

MEPs acquire a practical knowledge of the meaning of cultural complexity, and they are sometimes confronted with a very difficult choice between what is best for Europe and what is

dictated by their national affiliation. In political debates, the existence of European parliamentary groups does not necessarily produce common positions. These positions can be the outcome of very laborious compromises, which may reflect the differences between national political traditions and the apparent similarity of parliamentary party orientation. It is quite striking that political practices at the European level imply the primacy of compromise and negotiation. In parliamentary committees or in the plenary sessions, there is less of an air of confrontation and more a sense of perpetual negotiation between rival powers. Similarly, within each political group what is primarily sought is compromise between national delegations.

Cultural diversity is part of Europe, and it is assumed that any given language either determines or reflects a culture. Such notions were once common in social anthropology or ethnology, and were important throughout the construction of nations and national languages. Every nation, it was thought, had its soul or culture and its language in which to give it expression; later theories added to this the notion that the language used might determine the culture. Within social anthropology, such ideas can now seem arcane, although they have become common currency elsewhere. In the context of the European Commission, the question might be phrased differently now from an anthropological point of view: we might say, for instance, that some misunderstandings arise because the concepts with which people work do not always find backing in the language they hear or use. This is an issue difficult to express since it has to rely on language, and on language difference, for its expression. In an important sense, however, the linguistic and the conceptual could be said, from the point of view of an older model of language-and-culture equivalence, to have parted company.

The conviction and worry of many officials that the Commission does *not* have a single, coherent and clear culture of its own is further encouraged by a consciousness of the existence of different languages. For the anthropologist, however, culture is contextual and relational. The Commission regularly constructs itself in relation to the outside worlds of clients and experts, member states and members of the European Parliament. Also, officials do not always like to speak openly about national differences. There is a strong feeling among many officials in the Commission that stereotypes are something that European civil servants have gone beyond: "*We don't think in terms of national differences.*" There is an "*esprit européen"* and a European identity. If there are differences, they are "*personality differences."* If there are cultural differences, then that is part of Europe's "richness." And so on.

There is an immensely positive discourse to be heard along these lines. It can generally be heard in the contexts of obvious displays of commitment, in some contexts of negotiation, and especially from those newly arrived. It is also likely to be the response to any unknown outsider naive enough to pose a direct question on the issue, and it thereby constructs the boundaries of the Commission and its cultural proprieties. "Personality differences" and "cultural richness" have become statements of political and moral correctness, and seem to leave the idea of a European unity intact. Such statements are matched by an evident tolerance in the language sphere of linguistic usages that elsewhere would be considered "mixed" or simply wrong.

But national identifications and stereotypes *do* occur in the Commission. Why should this be so? The way in which "Europe" itself is defined means effectively that it can conceptually require the existence of the nation. Among lower-level officials, giving positive content to "Europe" can be difficult. This is partly due to perceived problems of information flow. More commonly, Europe is contextually defined by what it is not: temporally, it is not the past, it is not

war; spatially, it is not the US or Japan, and it is not roots, national attachments or prejudices. "*I only have to go home to feel European,"* one official explained. "Europe" and the national, home identification can conceptually require each other. At the same time, national identification continually threatens to intrude and divide the Europe so created.

There are two main reasons for this. First, there is the obvious reason that, for 200 years, the nation and national identification have posed as inalienable objects, and have been important means of identification for the self and other, a means of asserting or describing difference. Secondly, the Commission is both fed by and reproduces this traditional mode of identification and difference. For better or worse, national identity is encouraged in the Commission by some features of the modes of recruitment and promotion. These aspects structure important contradictions into the heart of the organization.

There is much bitterness about the aspects just mentioned. The conceptual opposition of Europe and national identification can contextually become contradiction, and a moral and political opposition. People who had been in the Commission for years, who feel they have struggled to build something called Europe, can suddenly find themselves passed over for promotion – ostensibly on national lines. Moment of anger and disillusionment are rife on these points – to the extent that one senior person explained : "One certain way to failure is to be European."

This issue of national identity is permanently present. To appreciate this question properly, it is important to bear in mind the following general points. When different conceptual and behavioral systems meet, they often lead to a perception of incongruence. The systems do not match, do not 'fit', giving a sense of disorder; there is commonly both a perception of, and empirical confirmation of, disorder in the other. These perceptions are often cast in national

terms; it is there that difference is most commonly noticed and it is in those terms that it is readily understood. Definition and self-definition are always relational and contextual; cultures are not homogenous wholes but relationally constructed; and nations do not consist of essences or given national characters. Rather, nations provide the boundaries through which difference is most easily constructed and recognized. At the same time, difference is also widely understood in terms of the ideas which accompanied nineteenth-century nationalisms, notably positivism and romanticism. These points are not meant to imply any stage-by-stage process of thought but a simultaneity of definition and experience, a unity of theory and observation.

Put more simply, we often make sense of difference unthinkingly in terms of a dichotomy such as rationality/irrationality ("we" are rational, "they" are irrational), reason/emotions, realism/idealism, practicality/impracticality, work/leisure, work/family - and many other similar dualities that can easily and contextually evoke each other. It is in terms of such dualities that differences between the sexes have also been understood, the two sides of the human brain (there is said by some to be a part for "reason," another for "emotions"), and much else besides. In various and ever changing forms, such dualities are pervasive.

These are dualities in terms of which differences between northern and southern Europe have often been asserted or described, and in other contexts they can describe differences between different countries - Britain and France, for instance. These differences operate at the level of everyday life in the Commission. For instance, differences of gender, nationality, and language (including pitch and use of the body) between an English boss and a French woman working for him resulted - for both - in apparent empirical confirmation of French emotionalism on the one hand and British coldness and rationality on the other. When the French woman had problems at home, her problems brought no sympathy : "*She seems to get so emotional about*

everything anyway." Irritation and mutual misunderstanding were then further encouraged when the English boss asked the French woman to stop calling him *Monsieur...* and to call him *Jim*. This seemed at once contradictory and singularly inappropriate to the woman: "*I don't understand."*

The use of first names among the British derives from a self-consciously British tradition in the civil service wherein everyone is ideally part of a team, sharing information collegially. Sometimes, when the British, and especially those with a British civil service background, come to the Commission, it can feel like "anarchy." The systems do not match - to the point that there can appear to be "no rules at all." But then the British always knew the Continent was like that: all emotion and no rationality, "*all ideas and no practicality.*"

The British, Danes and others know, of course, about the "hierarchy" in the Commission. They spend some time trying to change or subvert it. For them, the hierarchy is not structure. At the same time, their behavior can encourage the view that they are "difficult" and themselves "anarchical." There is a mutual perception of anarchy involved then when different systems meet, and each perception can feel empirically true.

In very general terms, there is often a north/south divide in the Commission. The attribution of "north/south" changes contextually, but the countries generally in the north would be Britain, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Luxemburg and sometimes Belgium; and those in the south would include France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal. On certain points, Belgium becomes definitionally the "south." However, France is itself divided in some contexts into north/south attributes, as are many other countries, and countries of the north or those of the south can become metaphorically opposed among themselves through the same imagery. The Spanish are sometimes said to be the rationality of the

south, and distinguished from Italians, just as the Irish sometimes become the festive soul of the north. All such divisions can be used not as simple national or geographical divisions but as metaphorical statements in which moral and political perceptions and preoccupations both take up and are distributed in various ways across geographical and ethnological space. Some do not talk of north or south, but of "*nordiques*" and "*latins,*" for example, or of "*nordiques*" and "*méridionaux.*" At the same time, the prospect of new northern countries becoming part of the Community, together with an impending change of president and presidential style, are among the factors that have injected a special north/south salience into any perception of national difference[6].

Among those from the north, there seems at present to be a far greater sense of unease. This is partly because the idiom of a rational, ideal-type bureaucracy is theirs and it is this discourse that can most easily define "problems" with public credence or legitimacy. In the meeting of different systems in the Commission, there is an incongruence, at once conceptual and practical, of the frontiers between administration and politics, and between public and private or personal. Seemingly political, private or personal matters appear where, for those from the north (and especially for the British and Danes), they should not. This intrusion or mismatch is inherent to perceptions of disorder, and leads to a sense of unease. There is a feeling of "contradictory forces," of "unpredictability," a lack of trust. There can seem to be no consistency in time (including no obvious, shared filing system or erratic minutes) and no coherence in space (no coordination, no collegiality, no readily shared information). There can seem to be only idealism and competition, sabotage and power. Everything seems linked to the person (networks, key players, or the President).

For other officials, whatever their background, there *are* some modes of coordination, which are also essential systems of control. There is structure, there are ways of getting information. Make friends. Be sole master of your *dossiers*. There is lots of autonomy. There is plenty of space in which to do creative and exciting things. It is "democratic." If there's a problem, send it up the hierarchy. It's not difficult. For many from the north, however, it *is* difficult and there is a problem. There are no job descriptions. The hierarchy is there only as a check, and to be used to get rid of problems. There are no clear rules. "*You are treated like a child.*" A hierarchy has to check even your simplest letters. "*You cannot take responsibility.*" It is "*like trying to re-create your job everyday.*" Here we can see the ideals of the relative impartiality of an administrative system, a system ideally independent of politics and the personal, encountering systems in which the political and the personal play an important role. There is pressure from all sides.

In southern Europe, patronage systems of various kinds operate as an important, if not the only, moral system. In the Commission as outside it, patronage systems have a self-evident importance for those who operate them. Indebtedness can be created as a matter of pride and honor, and similarly debts repaid with loyalty and support. It would, from within such systems, be naive to imagine that life works differently. Honor and manliness are among the rewards of knowing how to work this system, and shame, naiveté and stupidity among the sanctions on ignorance. Where those from the south see loyalty and pride, those from the north can see laziness, immorality and corruption. Where those from the south can see honor and propriety, those from the north can suspect fraud and the mafia.

At the same time, perceptions from the north can place moral stress on those from the south, with the latter feeling that their every move can bring accusations of corruption and fraud.

Some stories of self-confessed deviousness come close to a self-conscious appropriation of northern European stereotypes by those from the south. There are, however, many well-established modes of asserting social precedence (and manliness) that cannot find easy expression in the moral languages of northern Europe, and which can involve familial priorities and personal alliances of a kind that intrude in a way already described. Some of the actions of those from southern Europe do not always, they know, have the formal sanction of official rules and official approval, whether at home or in the Commission; they do, however, have an informal sanction, their own pride and virtue - a pride and morality that cannot easily be given expression in the idiom of the ideal model of an impartial and rational administration favored by those from the north.

Wherever one set of proprieties does not match another, there is ample space for misunderstanding to work both ways. There is space for southern Europeans to accuse northerners of naive idealism and to claim an honorable realism for themselves. Moreover, where southern discourses have fully a space for honorable loyalties and alliances, for their own precedence, reciprocities and proprieties, northern discourses can appear to southerners to have nothing. There appears to be a gap, a silence. Into this silence is read a whole world of suspect behavior, a world of corruption all the more insidious because it is not talked about or practiced openly. Many examples can be given highlighting north/south differences. Some examples can seem trivial, but they are part of the general misunderstandings involved in the encounter of different conceptual systems, which cannot be lightly dismissed for those who live them daily. This encounter of different systems poses some problems for the Commission. For example, definitions of "corruption" can be a source of controversy, and reporting procedures are themselves inevitably a part of the cultural differences already described.

The diversity of traditions, languages and cultures feeds into contradictory arguments. Sometimes officials learn of this relativism at their cost. On the other hand, the temptation is to fall back upon one's own cultural universe and to impute failure or simple difficulty to others' incomprehension, even going so far as to denounce their behavior as the expression of national or cultural membership. The deployment of stereotypes is a redoubtable weapon in that it refers to observable features, even when these are little more than caricatures. But the fact that everyone can use this weapon in his own way can further add to the disorder. The recourse to stereotypes is a factor of disorder since it multiplies the number of possible reference-points. Difference finds its place therefore in the very bosom of identity: the representation of the Commission as a unity is shaken by the emergence of a plurality of possible orders.

This generalized relativism can become a factor of anxiety when a change of direction or the departure of certain colleagues of the same nationality are challenged in terms of another order of reference. This can create disequilibrium. To overcome such changes there can be no question of fraternizing with the newcomers. Some will say that one should be "well-armed," but this refers less to the force of character than to a solid point of reference, even if this means defending oneself by producing stereotypes. For it is often at this price that one copes with such situations. Here much energy is wasted beyond that indispensable to daily work. But it is a particularity of the Commission to create situations of this type, the effect of which is to wear out certain individuals.

To better understand the processes induced by intercultural contact within the Commission I propose to introduce the concept of <u>transactional identity</u>. Rather than being the essences which cohabit within the same sphere of the Commission (the "German," the

"Frenchman," the "Englishman," etc.), these identities are the product of an ensemble of relationships that develop on a daily basis. When I impute a given "nature" to my colleague by referring to his "German-ness" or to his "Frenchness," this takes place within a given context. The concept of transaction brings to light the way in which identity finds itself negotiated in offensive strategies or comforts itself when confronted by the specter of generalized relativism.

We find also a confrontation of identities at a more political level. Indeed, political unification would imply an agreement on the basic political concept of the State. Currently, the meaning of this notion varies from one culture to the neighboring one. For example, there is a huge difference between the Jacobin tradition of France and the federalist tradition of Germany as well as between British parliamentarism and French presidentialism. The differences have created many misunderstandings and disagreements. There is, however, one common notion that has emerged - the idea of a European common good. This is evident in the elaboration of public policy. It works on two levels, either as a floating signifier that is invoked from time to time or as an operational reference. It also aids the European Union to define itself in the face of its member states. The pursuit of a European common good makes sense only in reference to the future. This is the underlying paradigm of the European political process. Here, the notion of unification has no meaning. Instead, we should talk of a harmonization, conceived as an indefinite quest whose accomplishment is forever postponed.

Working towards harmonization rather than unification means accepting difference and the necessity of compromise. Can an atmosphere of compromise strengthen an already feeble European identity? In other words, do these compromises produce notions and norms that permit

Europe to overcome cultural limitations tied to national differences? We observe exactly these types of processes occurring in the various areas of European policy making.

Politics at the European level implies that decisions made in any domain must encompass numerous interests and national traditions. It is at times very difficult to come to a compromise in matters that pertain specifically to the economic development of sectors that are perhaps central to one nation and only peripheral to another. In this way, the public views Europe as a veritable "*mise en scène*" of negotiation. European publications are opaque. It seems as if Europe is built by an ensemble of technocrats who seem to tinker around with various arrangements without the citizens being able to discern the general political orientation of their work. In other words, when moving from a national level to the European level everything becomes more complicated and loses its general sense. Consequently, Europe appears to dissolve into a multiplicity of partial compromises: the European Parliament, which, in principle, should publicize the construction of Europe instead reflects a disconcerting image characterized by a multitude of different subjects and the lack of debate on fundamental European issues (Abélès, 1992). Even the institutional question is addressed in technical terms.

The permanent need for relevant compromises sometimes gives birth to legislation that is very difficult to apply to all the member states, for instance the directives concerning public service ("service public," "public utilities") (Abélès, Bellier, 1996), and the difficulties in finding a compromise between three different conceptions: French centralization with the state as the unique incarnation of the collective interest; the German decentralized approach; and the recent British emphasis on privatization and deregulation. The European Commission has invented a new concept of "universal service." This notion represents an attempt to synthesize an approach that emphasizes competition and liberalism and the idea that everybody can have access to public

utilities. However, in the French context, the "universal service" is seen as the importation of competition and liberalism in an area in which equality and social cohesion are the main concerns.

To sum up, I think that several issues raised by European politics are closely linked: First, the difficulty communicating an homogeneous vision of Europe and developing a European citizenship. Second, the deficit of European ritual and symbolism. Third, the permanent quest for harmony that would be concretized in the production of common notions and concepts. All these issues deal with the very nature of what is called Europe building and with its structural inachievement and incompleteness. Europe has to be studied as a process, not as a product. It can't be reified under the categories of community and of identity. Community is a dream, a metaphor, rather than something real.

The impact of Europe in terms of harmonization, the way the European political practice begins to influence the national approaches of politics, reveals that, as an emerging un-identified political object, Europe deeply affects a very old and perhaps obsolete perception of identity rooted in territorial grounds. It would mean that deterritorialized Europe, virtual Europe, does not change people's identity but brings them to a completely new perspective on their own traditions. Even if there is no word in the political vocabulary to qualify Europe (is it postnational, supranational, poststate, multigovernmental?), it appears that Europe as an emerging form will significantly change Europeans' conception of politics and of identity.

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[1] I did this fieldwork in Brussels during one year, in 1993.

[2] Ed. Note: the anthem was adopted by the Council of Europe in 1972 and by the European Union in 1985. The flag was created by the Council of Europe in 1955, adopted by the European Parliament in 1983, and finally by the European Union heads of state and government in 1985. All European institutions have been using it since 1996.

[3] Currently, November 2004, the EU website lists 20 different languages. See http://europa.eu.int/.

[4] For a definition of subsidiarity see http://www.europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/cig/g4000.htm#S.

[5] For a definition of "Structural Funds" see http://www.europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/cig/g4000.htm#S.

[6] Ed. Note: The new president of the Commission, as of November, 2004, is the former Portuguese Prime Minister, José Manuel Durão Barroso.