

Identity in Europe Today

What does it mean to be European today? Can we speak about a European identity? How could we classify such a group? Does it mean an individual residing in Europe today or would the individual be required have been born in Europe? As Europe is ever widening its borders it is evitable that what it means to be European is constantly being renegotiated and the issue of identity is extremely prevalent in our era of globalisation.

There are approximately 50 states in Europe, the largest both in area and population being Russia and the smallest the Vatican City. Politically however Europe is comprised of those countries which make up the European Union. The European Union established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 developed on the foundations of the European Economic Community (EEC) is an economic and political union of currently twenty seven states.

If we take the definition of culture as 'a historically transmitted system of symbols and meaning and norms' (Geertz, 1973) what could we describe as European culture? What are Europe's shared symbols, meanings and norms?

Arguably one of the most significant bonds the EU has developed is the creation of a single market through a standardized system of laws which apply in all member states, assuring the freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital. Each European Union member's citizens share the capacity to travel freely from one member state to the next, to seek employment and take up residence. In a climate of accessible mobility more people are granted the opportunity to travel away from their own home environment, learn other European languages and in so doing expand their own socio cultural horizons and shape their own identity in new and diverse ways. The introduction of the monetary unit the Euro in 1999 announced it as the official currency for eleven member states. Ireland, along with Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and Finland were the first member states to adopt the currency. This figure has since grown to sixteen member states.

Yet, not all members have agreed to adopt this currency most controversially is the absence of the United Kingdom and Denmark who agreed to an 'opt out' clause in the treaty which exempts them from participation. The Euro is a recognizable symbol of European political identity with the aim of facilitating easier flow of people and goods within the European Union.

Schneider(1976) has differentiated between symbols and norms by pointing out that in a broad sense symbols tend to pervade cultures, forming symbol 'galaxies' that constellate around core symbols. Conversely, norms tend to function within contexts he refers to as normative 'institutions', such as the church, the family or the workplace. Due to their contextuality, Schneider argues that normative statements provide specific symbols that can direct inquiry towards core symbols. Within the European context can we speak of shared institutional values that underpin the European Union?

Spirituality and religious faith is a crucial marker in human identity and its capacity to consolidate communities or in the other extreme tear asunder whole nations is clearly mapped throughout human history from the early

ages. In this sense, Europe is no different. Christian faith is a link between the majority of European Union member states. Although today in Ireland there is often the absurd statement of 'being a non practicing Catholic'. Surely, for example we couldn't imagine someone proclaiming to be a non-practicing football player? Nevertheless, Ireland is still a predominantly Catholic country as are many other European member states including France, Italy and Spain etc. Religion has a strong influence on the education system within Europe and the Vatican City although geographically the smallest state holds great importance as the focal point for the Catholic Church in Europe. Increasingly across Europe however, education institutions are experiencing a change to their student demographic. No longer are the schools and colleges enrolling children whose grandparents may have attended their school systems but newcomers from other parts of Europe and the rest of globe are settling in their neighborhoods.

Multicultural education is the buzz word of our generation. Identity in one's own individual country and indeed in Europe as a whole is not limited to purely European ethnic groups therefore the question of identity in Europe must include such as those who are not of European descent, those who do not have easy access to employment and citizenship rights; how are their diverse backgrounds and cultural identities shaping and impacting upon established understandings of what it means to be European today?

Cultural identity as defined by Geertz (1973) as an 'identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct'. Acceptance seems to be the key concept here. Once a newcomer to Europe learns to adapt to the new environment the opportunity to expand their cultural identity which is ultimately about coalescing ideas about 'being' and norms for 'acting' acceptance into the new group is optimized.