

The concept of European Identity in: “February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe” by Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida

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Abstract: The concept of European Identity is analysed by Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. The significant topics Common Foreign Policy, the Core of Europe as well as what binds Europeans together are presented in the essay after the critical reading.

Keywords: European identity, Common Foreign Policy, the Core of Europe, Jurgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida.

Introduction:

For Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida [1] the Europe-wide demonstrations against the Iraq War February 15, 2003, marks the “birth of a European public sphere” [2], the war as a “catalyst” [3] of populations being deprived of initiative and political power, overwhelmed by a transatlantic militaristic cooperation, uncoupled from public control. In their opinion, “the war made Europeans conscious of the failure of their common foreign policy” and therefore can be recognized as a moment of a common political articulation. While this conclusion points out a particular problem of the political system of Europe – the lack of a common policy – it implies at the same time the need for a binding base for a common policy: If Europe is not to fall apart, these countries [core Europe nations, M.B.] will have to make use of the mechanisms for ‘strengthened cooperation’ created in Nice as a way of taking a first step toward a *common foreign policy*, a *common foreign policy*, and a *common defense policy* [4].

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In other words: the need for a broad identification beneath the countries of Europe or a European identity.

According to Habermas, the development in the European Union and therefore in the biggest part of Europe itself and, at the same time, the most attracting and dynamic part of Europe, has come to a key point: The binding and reformative effect of the “construction of a common market” is “exhausted” [5] and therefore demands for a change in policy, a “transformative politics” [6] fostered by the member states by forming a common will taking recourse “to the motives and the attitudes of *the citizens themselves*” [7]. To succeed with this endeavor, the current situation of “unity without commitment” [8] – probably being the product of the mere economical approach of the past – has to be altered by a “consciousness of a shared political fate, and the prospect of a common future” [9] being a crucial point not only for national identity, but especially in forming a sense of *supranational* identity: “The population must so to speak ‘build up’ their national identities, and add to them a European dimension. [...] The citizens of one nation must regard the citizens of another nation as fundamentally ‘one of us’” [10] the following I will only cite with the number of the page(s) in brackets since it’s only about a single text.

However, the project of constructing a European identity is paved with obstacles: Since the history of Europe is best characterized by “ongoing rivalries between self-conscious nations” with “National consciousness, formed by national languages, national literatures, and national histories”, it seems difficult to establish any kind of common sense or vision.

While there certainly are some shared features beneath the nations of Europe, and especially beneath the “core European nations” [11], which he considers to be the “locomotive” [12] for the fate of the European Union, like

Christianity and capitalism, natural science and technology, Roman laws and the Code Napoleon, the bourgeois-urban form of life, democracy and human rights, the secularization of state and society, [...] [a] Western form of spirit, rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, [...] individualism, rationalism, activism. [13]

These traits don't necessarily serve as *unique* parts of a common identity, since these achievements lost their identity-forming character by their worldwide success (cf. *ibid*) [14]. That's why, for Habermas, there are two essential components in building up a truly unified Europe by identity: Putting weight on the question *how* to establish this identity and ‘equipping’ this process of actively forming an identity with historical experiences.

Therefore, he acknowledges, but at the same time emphasizes, the necessarily artificiality of such an identity. He promotes consciousness of such a constructed, artificial identity being, on the one hand, only honest about the natural character of identity, and, on the other hand, to enable a consensual and reflected identity, derived from a controversial historical legacy without hiding aspects of or deforming history but actually, in some way, learning and profiting from it: “Distinguishing between the legacy we appropriate and the one we want to refuse demands just as much circumspection as the decision over the interpretation through which we appropriate it for ourselves” [15]. That approach implies simultaneously the importance of a public sphere, in which, after all, the historical selection and evaluation can take place, where a vision “must articulate itself from out of the wild cacophony of a multi-vocal public sphere” [16], fostered by intellectuals, reflecting the plurality of the European sphere.

In the course of his article, he points out several “candidates” for such an historical fundament, underlining that “historical experiences are only *candidates* for self-conscious appropriation; without such a self-conscious act they cannot attain the power to shape our identity.” [17] One applicant is represented by the historical synchrony, to a certain extent, of historical phenomena like nationalism, as well as numerous national conflicts “between town and country, sacred and secular authorities, [...] the competition between faith and knowledge, the struggle between states and antagonistic classes”, which might have led to an “acknowledgement of differences” [18] serving as part of the solution for the dilemma of integrating highly autonomous and diverging nations.

Others are:

1) Secularization, to a certain extent, since “citizens here [in Europe, M.B.] regard transgressions of the border between politics and religion with suspicion” [19], which is strongly connected with state's neutrality.

2) The “evaluation of politics and market” e.g. “Europeans' trust in the civilizing power of the state, and their expectations for its capacity to correct ‘market failures’” [20] as the result of the French Revolution and the triumph of capitalism. [21]

3) “Sensitivity of citizens to the paradoxes of progress” [22]), enforced by the development of the party system during the French Revolution (conservative, liberal, socialist) evaluating and dialectical reflecting the ambivalence of modernity.

4) A certain “ethics of solidarity [...] against the individualistic ethos of market justice”, born out of the experience of mass poverty during the industrial dawn of capitalism and emerged collective social fights and achievements. [23]

5) “Sensitivity to injuries to personal and bodily integrity” as “the moral basis of politics” [24]. A product of the totalitarian regimes of Europe and the epochal catastrophe and fall of European civilization of the Shoah.

6) The “domestication of state power” and “a *mutual* limitation of sovereignty, on the global as well as the national-state level” during the “supranational forms of cooperation after the Second World War” [25] in the form of the UN or the EU itself.

7) A “reflexive distance from themselves” and “rejection of Eurocentrism” for the sake of a “global domestic policy”, due to the experience of “imperial power” of several leading, actually the “core European”, nations, and “the loss of its empire” [26].

Furthermore, he points out specific European traits by stating that Europeans would have “keen sense of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’; they have no naively optimistic expectations about technological progress” [27], while “The threshold of tolerance for the use of force against persons lies relatively low.” [28]

Indeed, I very much support Habermas’ goal of forming a European public sphere in order to develop a conscious and critical civic society and find it compelling to use the historic differences and experiences of otherness not as an obstacle, but rather as unifying aspect of plurality. Only I have serious doubts how the long-term alienation not only of the ‘European Union people’ from ‘its’ institutions carrying a lack of democratic representation [29] from the beginning anyway, but of the broad public from the political and likewise the intellectual sphere in the particular nations could be mended and transformed into a configuration of mutual trust and influence again. Observing the European nations, especially the eastern European nations, still struggling with their own definition of the relationship between people and politics, not to mention their enormous opposition concerning the delegation of national rights to a supranational level [30], but even “core European nations” like Spain, Great Britain, Austria, Germany – both on the political as well as on the public level, regarding movements like “Pegida” in Germany – re-establishing national borders, crying and craving for national or even regional autonomy [31], dismantling the ground of their own prosperity, the Schengen area facing the so-called “refugee crisis”, I get the impression of centrifugal force, rather than unifying plurality.

I frankly fear the expanding distance between popular discontent increasing into dangerous anger and the particular national political strata, abandoning all historical stories of connection in some way while, ironically, facing otherness on a whole other scale. Being confronted with ‘outer Europeans’ not only seem to overwhelm any imagined values of tolerance and “cosmopolitan order” [32] but reveals the deep differences within Europe itself, even overlaying the almost ‘traditional’ racism against southern and eastern European countries fed by a persistent ugly feeling of superiority especially in Germany, which could be seen exemplary in the public rhetoric during the expansion of the EU and Schengen into eastern Europe.

In a similar light I criticize Habermas’ impression of Europeans often critical position towards technological progress. Where he describes a “keen sense of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’”, I wonder, especially regarding his descent from the Critical Theory, and must oppose since I rather observe a deep-rooted anti-Western attitude and anti-Americanism in particular, almost inseparable connected with suspicion against modernity and technology development, especially beneath the European Left and the eastern European countries for decades distorted by a perverted Socialism.

In this sense I feel also obliged to criticize his statements about “old Europe” being challenged by the hegemonic politics of the United States [33] and the European support of liberation, but rejection of illegality [34]. On a political level, this might be true without a doubt, but on a public and even personal level I see the same mechanisms as described above, criticizing

treaties like TTIP not only because of its embarrassing lack of democratic control, but rather because of its threatening ‘Americanism’ of liberality and economy.

Conclusion:

Concluding I wish that one time a – economically as well as in terms of values – unified or at least closer connected Europe can come into existence, not for the sake of a “counterbalance” of the USA, but furthermore in establishing a model of international levelling overcoming the intellectually and economically disturbing world of borders and by this I want to emphasize also on a future abolishment of the European outer border guarded by the tacitly accepted inhuman existence of institutions like FRONTEX. But before the deep gap between individuals and people and the strata of political decision is not resolved, Europe and its idealistic vision is to erode and vanish.

References and Notes:

[1] In the following, I will name Habermas as origin of the quotations, since he is the main author while Derrida is only co-signatory.

[2] Habermas, Jürgen: February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, vol. 10, Oxford and Malden 2003, 291-297, p. 291. In the following I will only cite with the number of the page(s) in brackets since it’s only about a single text.

[3] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 292.

[4] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 292.

[5] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 293.

[6] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 292.

[7] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 293.

[8] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 293.

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[9] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 293.

[10] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 294.

[11] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 292.

- [12] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 292.
- [13] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 294.
- [14] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 294.
- [15] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 295.
- [16] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 293.
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- [20] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 296.
- [21] Cf also: „Europeans have a relatively large amount of trust in the organizational and steering capacities of the state, while remaining skeptical toward the achievements of markets.” (295).
- [22] Ibid. Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 296.
- [23] Cf. also: “They maintain a preference for the welfare state’s guarantees of social security and for regulations on the basis of solidarity” (ibid).
- [24] ibid. Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 296.
- [25] ibid. Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 296.
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- [28] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 295.

[29] A fact that came to the surface during the financial crisis of 2008 and especially the modus operandi regarding Greece. Of course an experience, which took place after the article like the following and therefore more an ex post critic from a whole other historical point of view.

[30] Which was already recognized by Habermas himself 2003, at this time not even being members of EU (cf. 292).

[31] Cf. separatist movements like Catalonia or Scotland carry Habermas' statement: „In the framework of the future European constitution, there can and must no separatism.” (292) ad absurdum.

[32] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, p. 294.

[33] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, cf. 293.

[34] Habermas, J. & J. Derrida (2003). February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. In: *Constellations*, Vol. 10, N 3, Oxford and Malden 2003, cf. 295.

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