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Images of Europe or how Europe builds an identity through images

European integration is not only an economic and political process, but most of all a mental one. The creation of a European collective identity ("we, Europeans") seems to be a challenge at this time: the theory according to which Europe could fail because of a "lack of mythology" (Wolfgang Schmale) keeps referring us back to the efforts of European institutions aiming at creating a European identity and drawing most of the time from the "invention of tradition" repertory of 19th century national movements. We must be tied by our search for common points. "We, Europeans" leads to such concepts as "cultural heritage", which the images featured on bank notes are meant to convey. We are also looking for European "memory lanes" that should serve as historical landmarks of a "common" foundation within the "European home".

Obviously, the European Union should not only be seen as a politically and rationally organised group of nations. The European project needs an emotional foundation, a shared sense of community and cohesion. "One cannot like a domestic market". Those words from Jacques Delors were quoted many times to express this idea of a "desire for identity".

To establish the European Union as a more touching formula, all the existing tools for building a national identity are used – i.e. national symbols and rituals such as flags, a hymn and bank holidays; but also representations of a common culture and history conveyed through exhibitions, museum projects, history books, educational material, special TV programmes, and EU publications.

Those strategies designed to create a sense of collective European "We" are surprising: the use of national tools was given little thought and the recent human science studies were completely ignored. A review of the theoretical and methodical approach to the issue of the generation of self-images (identities) would allow us to become aware of certain aspects of the issue. What social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms are linked to the assertion of shared characteristics on which the identity of a community lies? Creating an identity always implies the drawing of a border between "we" and "the others", defining what is specific to us through the definition of that which is "foreign" and does not belong to us.

"Here is what we are" or "here is what is contrary to us": so does Assmann phrase the binary principle falling within the debate on what must form the nature of a community.

That thoughtless way of talking of a common cultural base (despite the diversities) and of a shared European heritage also contradicts the fundamental hypotheses of the latest research on the Nation: those are based on the principle that a community or a nation is not united through the existence of objectively identifiable common points but through the representation (imagination) of those common points.

The creation of those representations is generated through debates, or stories rather: identity – the sense of belonging to a "we" – is the result of an ongoing "(re)-production" of what is told via public communication. As regards the development of a European "we", European identity-building policies so far have had little impact.

Representative and legitimate texts from the European Union (acts, orders, official statements, etc.) will not enrich the collective representation of the European Union, its current writing process and its "common" history.

The representations/imaginations of Europe will be much better determined through the words and stories continually expressed in communications. A special meaning must be given to images and what they convey. The initial thesis behind the "Iconoclash., Kollektive Bilder und Democratic Governance in Europa" project focuses – beyond the level of official representations or campaigns aiming at reinforcing a European identity – on "genuine", apparently neutral, pictures of reality that circulate daily among European communication companies. Images are not a mere illustration of reality but rather a visualisation of it; to that extent, they are quite relevant in the analysis of political democracy in terms of creating models of cultural perception of the collective representations of the political and social reality. More so that in a text, what is there to see in those visual proposals is much more marked with ideas of belonging on the one hand, and "otherness" or "foreignness" on the other hand.

The impact of images, which establish themselves as the "true" (evident) comeback of reality, proves quite efficient in the generation of affective and emotional (in the positive as well as negative meaning) representations of Europe. This thesis is closely akin to the hypotheses of "visual turn" in human sciences, according to which images must be given a critical role in the impregnation of collective representations. Those visual representations however only create a seeming repertory of "common" images as the meanings behind those images are open to a wide variety of analyses that vary depending on national codes and perceptions.

In this field of scientific research on a "European identity", the issue is not about "contributing to the strengthening of a European identity", as indicated in many EU texts, but much more about analysing the building process of a European identity by integrating the concept of "hidden mechanisms of power" (Pierre Bourdieu) and by thinking about the issue of a European identity-building policy.