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JANUARY
2016DOES A EUROPEAN IDENTITY
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English translation of Tom Hardy

Perhaps a better question is: To what extent is the existence of a European identity desirable? At this time of identity explosions, deviations and tensions, when we are passive spectators of a desperate race to reinvent illusory ethnic and religious communities, exclusive and exclusionary national identities, and extremist and sectarian mutations, does it make sense to keep insisting on a European identity?

“Identity” is one of those words that continually crops up during public discussions and debates, and is an imprecise tool for summarising the tensions between unity and diversity in our societies. Identity arises in all discourses and in the name of identity myriad actions and reactions are justified, memberships fragment and break down. It is a vague concept unless we use it with an adjective – cultural identity, ethnic identity, national identity. The discussion on European identity has taken the path of the last of these – national identity – with a flag, an anthem and, above all, an external threat. The origin and *raison d’être* of the idea of Europe lie in the rejection of the atrocities committed in the name of a national identity. So let’s forget about this notion of a single identity, this lethal weapon, and find a way to feel solidarity with a process and part of a project. An identity project is not an end point or a fixed state, but a tension between identifications, de-identifications and contra-identifications that are always in process, that we move towards rather than reaching. This field of tension, where identities are developed and defined has multiple dimensions of which three will be highlighted: the functional, relational and ideal dimensions.

The *functional dimension* is the one that guides policies and intends to organise society. That is to say, it plays the role of a social foundation, as Kaufmann points out, by placing something at the heart of social regulation (2015). Rather than wondering about definitions of identity, which in most cases speak of other eras and become obsolete as identities mutate, it might be worth changing the question. What use do we make of this concept? What do we use identity for in political and philosophical discourses, and in daily life? We should make an effort to learn about other approaches and uses in order to better understand those we have in common. Paul Ricoeur speaks of the need to learn to tell the same events in different ways, based on new projects that contribute to renewing their interpretation. For Ricoeur, as well as listening to *our* version of our own history, we

should learn to listen to others telling our story, above all when the humiliation of some coincides with the glory of others.

The *relational dimension*, always shrouded in vagueness, these days allows for fundamentalisms and identity perversions to be constructed against an enemy, a worrying “other”, a scapegoat for a worn-out identity. Speaking of identity is a way of locating the eternal otherness that disquiets us because it calls our supposedly superior values into question. The assertion of a difference is the prior condition for speaking of identity. This may lead us to another dimension which, more than relational, we could call pathological, which seeks only “others” and their opposing values: a common enemy against whom the collective character is consolidated. By contrast, a sense of co-belonging with the people we know and those we don’t – without suspicion or distrust and without differences leading us to close ranks – oscillates between establishing and leaving behind, creating and recycling, assimilating and de-assimilating without one action being opposed to the other.

The *ideal dimension* is the identity model of the past which, faced with an anonymous and unpredictable future, condenses all kinds of assertions of identity. In this sense, cultural, ethnic and racial foundations – as well as national – perpetuate and cultivate essentialist and fundamentalist identities. We need to talk about the feelings of identity, and the passions and imaginaries making identities increasingly volatile and even explosive. Let us reject the backwards step that forgotten identities revive – origin myths that only manage to trivialise the identification project, linking identity with history. This single identity – that of the victors – erases oppositions in order to consolidate allegiance and resorts to the homogenisation of images, stories and characters, articulating them as symbols of a collective identity where the fulfilment of some means the frustration of others.

Let’s return to the original question: Does a European identity exist? Experience has shown us that a shared currency is not enough of a basis to make us feel European. We must build through our differences, not in spite of them; not juxtaposing, but conceiving a common future of shared feelings. Or, as Ulrich Beck said in *Cosmopolitan Europe*, perhaps rather than a single identity that connects all identities, what we need is an account of Europeanisation that makes the connections between initiatives and failures easier to understand, an understanding of the present that looks to the future where identity consists of setting out on a path, of opening up, finding, moving forward, guiding ourselves, confusing ourselves, getting lost, seeking, testing the ground, finding, building and inventing.