NEW WAYS?

WHAT THE REFERENDUM FOR INDEPENDENCE IN SCOTLAND HAS TAUGHT US

Irene Dominioni

Student, Erasmus Mundus Master in Journalism, Media and Globalisation, Aarhus University and Amsterdam University

irene.domdec@gmail.com

The article "La diversità da rispettare" ("The diversities to respect", my translation) (Panebianco, 2014) appeared on the main Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, in the aftermath of the result of the referendum on independence in Scotland in September 2014. The editorial puts forward a reflection on the broader meaning that this result represented for European states, as relief in the face of a negative outcome. The enthusiasm of secessionist groups such as those in Spain and Italy, in fact, would have become more concrete if the Scottish nationalists had won. According to the author of the article, there are three lessons to learn from the Scottish referendum: national states in Europe are not outdated, still being perceived as the political organisation to rely on for the future; the importance of history, which founds its strength on the memory of local communities; and European integration, which is not to be intended to be a synonym of the obsolescence of the State. Europe, the author states, is in fact a club of national states united by common interests, and if part of them crumbles, the Union suffers. The different motivations, histories and geopolitical needs mark the European-ness of each state and these diversities need to be taken into account in order to increase integration and contain the growing Euroscepticism. The author concludes that Europe needs the old states, as well as a federation that can better handle certain common problems.

The article addresses the difficult balance between the peculiarities of the different member states and the common scope of the Union. In order to pursue integration and build a common identity, differences between the states in terms of culture, aims and expectations towards the EU should be introduced in a common discourse, based on shared rules and goals, mutual respect, flexibility and openness to negotiations. This complex process is not only traceable at the macro-level of the Union, but also at the micro-level of the single nations, which makes crucial horizontal and vertical integration twice as arduous. Italy, for instance, reflects a deeply multicultural reality, a north-south divide, separatist groups in the northern regions, and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia with their own local identities. Multiculturalism, in sum, is recognisable within the countries and among them, where different cultures coexist, sometimes clashing or holding back the other. To see them as an opportunity for progress as

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part of an intercultural approach is a challenge that requires a dynamic contamination of cultures and identities, working towards the construction of a shared European culture in which everyone is able to mirror him/herself. "Identity contamination" phenomena are already happening: the obsolescence of traditional geographical boundaries, the introduction of the euro and the free movement of goods and people have set the premises for integration. In the era of the Internet and social networks, the downfall of these boundaries has become even more evident, to the extent that our mental boundaries are reshaped and our identities are put into question and rendered multiple. Proof of this is a recent study conducted on Italian identity and Europe, which shows how Italians are conscious of having dual identities: Italian and European. The online presence of the European public and their continually redefined identities could represent a way to promote tangible integration, if addressed constructively by the European Union, by truly making the online media a platform for participation.

The discussion at the seminar "Europe behind (mis)understandings" developed around the theme of public participation online and the opportunities that the Internet represents for the European Union to foster a sense of common belonging. The question of the role of Europe in the process of globalisation was addressed along with how it inserts itself into the reality of the Internet as a "global village", in the words of Marshall McLuhan[1], who draws the conclusion that the Internet plays a controversial and somehow contradictory role within the EU context. Social media was acknowledged as having huge potential in terms of the participation and involvement of the public in European matters, presenting a chance to construct targeted campaigns. The Internet represents an instrument endowed with the possibility to extensively reach the European audience and create a form of horizontal communication, such as online debates. The idea of "sharing knowledge", resounding with the tools that are offered nowadays on social networks, was appreciated. A number of obstacles, on the other hand, were observed and pointed out by the participants. One of the most prominent of these is the digital divide that is still present in our society, often in the form of spoken language, since the main language of exchange between people at international level is English, which is still not part of the everyday life of many people in European countries, and which could therefore represent a shortcoming in online interaction. Also, an online communication strategy could mobilise only those who care about a discussion over Europe and stimulate them, leaving a good portion of those who do not have particular interest in the EU outside the discussion. It was also acknowledged that the initiatives that the European Union has already promoted in terms of online discussion have mostly proven unsuccessful, arousing a series of negative reactions that managed to unite people in different countries, but against the EU. The Internet, in sum, remains a "mood thermometer" of the audience, an unsurprising fact given the amount of misinformation and incivility that the freedom of the World Wide Web allows. With these factors in mind, the question of how to set the premises for a constructive online discussion on the EU and positive, extensive involvement in the EU still remains.

The discussion also touched upon the theme of identity and the difficult integration of local and national identities within the construction of a hypothetical European identity. The participants observed how individual and national views on Europe are still stereotyped and that the need for future citizens is somehow to overcome part of national identity, in order

1. For more information, see http://www.openculture.com/2010/04/marshall_mcluhan_the_world_is_a_global_village_.html

to obtain a more European one. This is yet not happening, because of the strength of national identity and its related selfishness of interests, on the one hand, and the inconsistency of a true meaning of a European identity on the other. European citizens may like to think of themselves in international terms, but in practice what being European involves is not clear. Europe itself is a concept that is still evolving, and despite the pessimists, some participants have observed that we have already witnessed great achievements in the European project and there is still room left for progress. New generations are undoubtedly closer to the concept of Europe than the old ones, further from memories of war and closer to peace and dialogue. This might represent the most suitable understanding for the future: whatever action the EU is undertaking in the direction of integration might not bear fruit in the short term, but it is certainly meaningful and important for the generations to come, who are those in need of being preserved.

References

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