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**FROM EUROPE TO EUROPEANS AND BEYOND.  
MEANINGS OF EUROPE THROUGH PEOPLE'S  
BIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES**

**Abstract**

This paper outlines results from the EU-research project “Euroidentities – The Evolution of European identity: Using biographical methods to study the development of European identity” ([www.euroidentities.org](http://www.euroidentities.org)). Based on narrative interviews collected in seven EU Member States the study can show processes of Europeanization in everyday life and everyday practices emanating for those who in one way or other are taking up the opportunities offered by an integrated Europe. Against the observation of the phase of erosion of loyalties the institutional European Union is undergoing, the bottom up study points to a “European Collective Mental Space of Reference” [Schütze, 2011] as created in cross-border and cross-cultural communication and cooperation. The paper delineates this collective phenomenon of mental space as defined through structures of opportunity for mobility and encountering diversity of cultures and ways of life, through frames of reference orienting and affecting processes of learning and mutual understanding across borders and boundaries, through occasions for comparison between differences, and new collective identification and changing feelings of belonging. The last chapter deals with unequal risks and chances for encountering the European mental space and beyond.

**Key words:** European collective mental space, sensitivity towards otherness, biographical cost and risks, biographical learning, sense of belonging to Europe, old and new inequalities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While the institutional European Union is undergoing a crucial phase of erosion of loyalties and solidarities among its Member States, as well as a partial re-nationalization, these same institutionalized supranational structures have extended individual room considerably to manoeuvre beyond ‘home’ for many citizens and social groups. European policies of unification can be said to have been creating biographical output – almost unseen and unnoticed.

Looking at people’s concrete daily life experience from a bottom-up perspective, we discover that Europe is becoming significant to an increasing number of individuals, for many reasons and in many ways. When analysing autobiographical narrative interviews with European citizens, we observe processes of Europeanization in everyday life and everyday practices emanating for those who in one way or other are taking up the opportunities offered by an integrated Europe, be it for reasons of a professional, vocational, educational, touristic, adventurous, or private relational nature.

In the EU-research project “Euroidentities – The Evolution of European identity: Using biographical methods to study the development of European identity” ([www.euroidentities.org](http://www.euroidentities.org)), researchers have interviewed citizens in seven Member States using the narrative interview and analysis method [Schütze 1992]. Interviewees were chosen according to how much they were in touch “with Europe”, through transnational work and cultural contact, through regulations concerning farming, cross-border communities, conflict and reconciliation projects, educational mobility, intimate cross-national relationships, and migration from outside Europe. The project was funded by the EU for 3 years, 2008–2011<sup>1</sup>.

The overall findings of the research point to the fact that Europe has emerged as a *sui generis* collective phenomenon beyond and below the nation; it is categorized as the “European Collective Mental Space of Reference” [Schütze, 2011] indicating practices of relating individual life experience to cross-cultural collective commitments and horizons in the light of which the national or local

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is based on the collective outcomes of the national research teams. The central concept of the European mental space was discovered and formulated by Fritz Schütze [2011].

sense of belonging and identification adopt a different meaning. The European mental space is less than an imagined community as it applies to the nation, and it is not necessarily a “we-community” with a mutual sense of loyalty among its members. The European mental space should not be confused with a stock of essential beliefs, but reflects on a stock of empirical practices and procedures emerging from actually getting involved in encounters with the stranger and the strange, and dealing with otherness and diversity. In the course of becoming involved in cross-border and cross-cultural activities, the European collective mental space of reference becomes very important for the orientation of European citizens, for the unfolding of their individual biographies, their biographical decision-making and the shaping of biographical work.

The notion of biographical work points to those narrative activities in which the individual’s past, present and future are bound together; the individual reviews his or her present life situation in the context of former developments and past experiences, reflecting upon their impact on future options, and working through the doubts, ambivalences and difficulties they entail.

In what follows, we describe the European mental space of orientation as created ‘bottom up’ in cross-border and cross-cultural communication and cooperation: through structures of opportunity, frames of reference, occasions for comparison, and new collective identification.

### **1.1. Structure of opportunities**

One of the more evident consequences of European unification and its emerging collective mental space is the implementation of a multiplicity of opportunities for moving across countries and encountering the diversity of European cultures, traditions and ways of life. Among them are educational exchange programmes such as Erasmus, Leonardo and others, subsidies for European farmers, and various forms of funding addressed to civil society organisations. The European Institutions have gradually facilitated the mobility of people within the EU Member States making it possible to leave and enter other countries without showing a passport, a common currency, etc. The structure of opportunities has also had the effect of encouraging people to look for better job offers in other EU Member States, and for more favourable milieus. It has made intimate contacts across borders more viable, and encouraged communication and cooperation regarding shared interests and activities.

### **1.2. Sphere of reference, learning and mutual understanding**

A second biographical consequence of European unification and its collective mental space is the emergence of a commonly shared sphere of orientation affecting individual and collective forms of learning and mutual understanding. Derived from everyday experience with cultural otherness, it is constituted through comparison and practices of sensitizing to foster an understanding of diversity, opening up a new range of biographical options: professional, work-related, private and political. In fact, seen from the point of view of the biographical process of the individual, increasing knowledge of other cultures, milieus, lifestyles, and experiences of creating a shared frame of reference in interaction processes all add up to a process of biographical learning. The individual gains a sensitivity towards otherness which ideally stands for a progressive overcoming of the generalized abstractions and stereotypes passed on through time and space by national narratives. At the same time, the discovery of the European mental space may bring about feelings of loneliness, disappointment and anxiety; it may be accompanied by biographical costs and risks. In whatever form the challenges of the European experience present themselves, they will anyway require biographical work and inner questioning.

### **1.3. New collective identification**

The third biographical consequence of European unification and its collective mental space concerns the discovery of new we-groups and ways of relating to issues and goals of cross-national and cross-cultural relevance, often organized in social worlds and arenas which transcend the European space and go beyond its borders and boundaries. Participating both pragmatically and symbolically in wider social contexts and meeting with otherness has an important effect on the individual's identification and sense of belonging, taking a wider shape than mere national and local identification. Indeed, although identification with Europe in the strict sense of being explicitly named as such is still weak, as various research shows, it is similarly true, and becomes evident in biographical interviews, that for citizens of EU Member States, identities and feelings of belonging are changing. The central feature of this change concerns the ways citizens conceive their own life world. These conceptions of identity emerge as a consequence of European opportunity structures, of a shared sphere of reference, and of the individual's commitment to experiences which go beyond national and European borders and cultural boundaries.

#### 1.4. Old risks of inequalities

Looking at the remarkable biographical impact of the European collective mental space on individuals and social groups, we understand how much it has widened the room to manoeuvre in the sense of overcoming biographical difficulties and traps, and of pursuing projects of self-realization and wider social commitment. We also realize how the European collective frame of reference when experienced by the individual draws attention to differences of national and cultural phenomena, thus allowing for comparison and a critique of unequal life opportunities and chances for “agency” in relation to multiple European others. We further recognize the adventurous character inherent in transnational encounters and the options for new identification. While considering all these elements as positive signs of the ongoing integration process, other and less positive aspects must also be taken into consideration. At the end of this paper, we shall stress that in fact, access to the European collective mental space, to opportunities and chances for biographical change cannot be taken for granted. We shall argue that not only do they require certain kinds of resources and favourable conditions that are not equally distributed among individuals, but that differences and inequalities between Member States are still present.

## 2. EUROPE AS A STRUCTURE OF OPPORTUNITIES

The range of opportunities the European Institutions provide for citizens has become wider and more significant as the process of European unification has gone ahead. The influence of the European Institutions is visible not only in the geographical mobility of individuals, but also, for instance, with regard to the economic means provided for the agricultural sector, subsidising farmers whose activities are not at all characterised by mobility. In more general terms, we can state that it is reasonable to view Europe as a structure of opportunities, which operates in different ways for different categories of citizens.

The European Institutions exert a powerful influence on the individual, who actively interprets and makes use of the opportunities provided by them. The Euroidentities project, investigating the process of integration through biographical methods, has the merit of shedding light on the enormous variety of life-paths and the wide *spectrum* of reasons for which people come into contact with Europe. Focusing on the actors allows us to observe that: a) the possibility of successfully enjoying this larger space for the unfolding of individual action depends on previous experience; b) the set of resources, both material and

immaterial, available can influence the final outcome of the biographies. However, we can say that Europe represents an opportunity for both personal and collective growth, promoting – through various forms of support – improvements in people’s lives and societal organisation, although we cannot ignore the fact that some biographical paths have been marked by suffering and disillusion.

### 2.1. Escaping from troubles

Many people access the European structure of opportunities as a way of looking for an alternative to the narrowness and the constraints of their social background and milieu. Transferring from one’s own country to another can be seen as a response related to problems experienced in various social spheres encountered during the individual’s growth, such as the family, school, and surrounding social context [Bagnoli, 2009].

With regard to problematic situations experienced in the family, it must be pointed out that we are in the presence of *multiple forms of intra-familial conflicts* which have marked the childhood and the adolescence of some of the interviewees. There are stories of sibling rivalry and stories of authoritarian parents who imposed strict regimes on their kids. There are people whose home life was characterised by excessive expectations and there are people who grew up in the presence of charismatic and idolised figures, who affected the further development of their personalities. Moreover, there have emerged a series of latent conflicts particularly in those who could not communicate with their parents, because of an upbringing based on the passive acceptance of adults’ decisions and points of view or because of a condition of diversity – as in the cases of homosexuals – haunted by shame and silence within and outside the family. Finally, there are stories of individuals – particularly young women with a high level of education – whose biographical development unfolds as a progressive attempt to “dis-embed” from a patriarchal familial milieu towards a more modern context.

Concerning the school context, we notice that the main problem emerging from the narratives was *isolation from the dynamics of friendship and love among the other school-mates*. Sometimes because of negative self-perception of the body (e.g., girls who felt ugly or fat in comparison with other girls), sometimes because of previous family problems (e.g., the feeling of being different when coming from a non-conventional family), sometimes because of a diversity of one’s own accepted neither in the family nor at school (e.g., homosexuals growing up in homophobic environments), some interviewees were, or felt, cut off from their school peer groups. There are also cases where the problem was

mainly a strict teacher or a conservative atmosphere in the school. For instance, the research has highlighted the existence of stories of unexpressed talents, i.e. people with particular skills – like the arts or music – who felt their inclinations frustrated by the school curriculum.

As for the social context, it has emerged from the research that there are *a wide range of reasons why people wish to leave the places where they come from*. The problems experienced in the surrounding context vary according to the age of the individuals. For young people of school age, these problems mainly overlap with those discussed above, since their social circles coincide with the family, relations, school and peer-groups. For young adults, however, the enlargement of the social environment combined with the drive to develop an adult lifestyle - getting a job and a flat, establishing a love relationship, etc. – can constitute the right biographical “cocktail” to reach the decision to leave.

Moving to another country can moreover occur when painful events induce periods of changes: “a decision to travel may also correspond with periods of transitions, when people are going through some change in their lives” [Bagnoli, 2009: 341]. However, the richness of the narratives teaches us that the trajectories of suffering are almost never related to one single problematic context, since they often intersect or flow into each other in different phases of life. For example, some people move in order to find a job abroad, but their mobility can be due to other causes, such as the will to free oneself from negative influences coming from the social circles closer to them.

## 2.2. Pursuing new opportunities

Reasons for moving are not necessarily negative. We collected biographies of people who moved in search of a more suitable self-definition somewhere else: for instance women aspiring to more egalitarian contexts in terms of gender; or people satisfying their curiosity by exploring other cultures; or people trying to rebalance their own status in the family, in particular individuals threatened by the successes of a sibling; or persons trying to sharpen their professional profile in pursuit of a specific career or taking advantage of new market segments abroad.

*The search for identity* as a mainspring of mobility mainly involves young people. The time spent abroad indeed is a sort of “extra time” meant for learning about oneself and one’s own talents and abilities. In Bagnoli’s words [2007], in the case of youths: “migration experiences [...] allow some degree of experimentation of different possibilities, before any commitment is taken” [*ibidem*: 28]. Living in another country can lead young women coming from traditional contexts

to reflect upon the taken-for-granted gender assumptions acquired during the socialisation process. The outcome of such an attitude, questioning profoundly what the concepts of masculinity and femininity are, seems to be an attempt to build egalitarian relationships and a renewed self-image in terms of gender expectations, and equal rights both in the private and public spheres. Living far away from home can also take on the symbolic value of protecting one's own status in the family context, particularly if: a) the person comes from a middle-class family characterised by an *ethos* which values international experience or b) there is another successful person in the family network whose image can threaten the positive results previously obtained.

*The search for adventure* again is mainly a driver for young people. As citizens of a globalized world, some young people feel that “my home is not enough”, and the desire to travel corresponds to the wish to discover, learn about and explore other cultures. The search for adventure – like the search for identity discussed above – cannot be limited to the EU Member States, but it is a fact that the EU facilitates a “trial and error” attitude and promotes reversible decisions. These youthful kinds of mobility take the form of temporary migrations, totally different from the classic pattern of the long lasting migrations of the past, although they can turn into a permanent stay in another country, as can happen in the case of some Erasmus students who decide not to come back at the end of their time spent abroad. We have also to take into account the cases of people, not necessarily young, who feel attracted by the idea of handling diversity and subsequently transforming this inclination into professional activities as Civil Society Organization workers.

*The search for career opportunities* generally implies the active exploration of new professional worlds. There are cases of people in search of contexts where they can make use of their professional aptitudes, and these can be suitably brought out by new significant others, such as teachers, colleagues and superiors in the same professional arena. There are other cases where people look for openings in new market segments, such as Western entrepreneurs doing business in Eastern Europe, or Eastern experts selling their expertise in Western Europe and vice versa. Yet in the professional sphere, it is worth remarking how some combatants for specific issues such as environmental matters or organic farmers actively look for other combatants abroad in order to create coalitions in opposition to national regulations or powerful pressure groups.



### 2.3. Life paths not always with a happy ending

As we have already seen, the encounter with Europe – as a structure of opportunity – represents a chance for the actors to manoeuvre the direction of their biographical development in a twofold manner: on one hand, some can try to overcome the most painful experiences of the past, while others seek an opening up of opportunities to design new life-paths.

In both cases, the biographical outcome of this manoeuvring is in no way to be taken for granted. The interviews clearly show that the encounter with Europe does not necessarily imply a positive impact on the individual's biography. We cannot ignore the biographies of those who, on the other hand, have not seen their life projects develop favourably. When we look at these narratives without a happy ending as it were, we need to consider that some interviewees failed in their pursuit of improvement, due to the various obstacles they encountered on the way. Also in Bagnoli's research, we can observe important differences in terms of biographical consequences of mobility, where the author distinguishes between "the outcasts", i.e. people who "live their existential condition as foreigners in terms of duality 'in between' home and the host country" and the "cosmopolitan outsiders", for whom "migration becomes the key opening a different level of experience and knowledge of the world" [Bagnoli, 2007: 40]. The experience of encountering new worlds requires, among other things, the ability to reflect upon one's own choices and to design one's own future, what we call *biographical work*. As we shall see, when experiences are not worked through and reflected upon, the individual may be exposed to several forms of risk. At least four profiles of risk can be observed, signalling how important it is to look into people's biographies in order to discover the unexpected effects of social processes.

The first risk is the possibility of becoming *an eternal wanderer*: an individual moving from one country to another without any sense of direction. This kind of risk appears to be more concrete where there is an insufficient capacity for self-reflection, where moving takes on the meaning of a sort of compulsion to leave. In these cases, Europe can end up becoming an escape route without exit. In particular, the younger generation might find itself caught up in the European abundance of temptations to move (e.g. for quick and better earning opportunities) without any clear plan for long-term self-realization.

The second risk is *the condition of marginality*, i.e., being caught up in a suspended situation between different senses of belonging. Some interviewees appeared to be destined to a situation of ongoing strangeness. These stories narrate the lives of those people who, at the same time, feel that they cannot return to

their origins and cannot go any further into the new worlds where they live. In these cases, the condition of marginality seems to depend on a subjective and paradoxical situation of a sort of “double bond”, where both a return or a fruitful stay (or even a new departure) are no longer conceived as an option and a subtle paralysis pervades their daily lives.

The third risk is represented by *the loosening of the emotional bonds* with significant others and the feeling of *estrangement* from the family of origin. This specific profile of biographical risk particularly involves those people who decided (or were forced) to cut social ties with their family and friends. Their narratives show that these drastic cuts with their primary social relationships and their past often contain an implicit regret for those phases of life definitively left behind, but not yet resolved. In this sense, biographical research demonstrates that transferring to another context allows people to distance themselves from painful situations, but it does not allow – *per se* – an escape from the memories of painful experiences themselves.

The fourth risk is represented by *a condition of professional cul-de-sac*. This regards people who, through mobility, have tried to improve their work situation, but lost the previous professional networks. Clearly, the attempt to make a career abroad is never guaranteed to be a success for anyone, but these biographies highlight how the most optimistic forecasts (i.e., earning more money, acquiring experience abroad, enriching one’s own curriculum) are not enough either to enter new work environments successfully or to convert the experience gained abroad in one’s own country. This last risk profile is worrying also in terms of professional identity, which can be seriously damaged by the frustrating failure to secure recognition from significant others of the efforts made abroad. Actually, not only in the field of work but also in other spheres (e.g. education), this research shows that those individuals who underwent a deep process of metamorphosis while abroad had the unpleasant feeling of being misunderstood at home, in the sense that the changes to their lives were not evaluated (sometimes not even noticed) by a context which had remained immobile.

### ***Summary***

Europe represents an important space to gain both material and symbolic resources. Indeed, behind most journeys undertaken by the interviewees it is possible to see a mixture of push and pull factors, ranging from the aim of pursuing better job opportunities to the desire for self-realisation in various areas of life. Nevertheless, it is important to reaffirm that Europeanization is a multi-faceted

process - involving mobility but also sedentariness – and that the EU operates both in a direct and indirect manner: directly stimulating educational mobility or indirectly facilitating economic opportunities in a number of countries, where it is possible to move without a passport and using a single currency.

Research shows moreover that Europe represents a sort of new “canopy”, which can exert an important influence on the biographical development of individuals. Ease in moving and communicating within Europe seems in fact to contribute to the enlargement and reinforcement of a set of knowledge and practises shared at a much wider level than the national and local ones. The experience of being abroad (or of crossing cultural borders) allows the most disparate categories of people to discover and deal with new social worlds, although we noticed the existence of some risk profiles (particularly for young people) where there is the danger of getting caught up in this structure of multiple opportunities. However, as an effect of these circumstances of encountering and facing up to diversity, we can observe the emergence of a European mental space, which enables people to communicate and make comparisons with each other, albeit with a multitude of cultural and linguistic codes.

### 3. EUROPE AS A COLLECTIVE FRAME OF REFERENCE

The emergence of the European collective mental space of reference is to be conceived not as a shared umbrella of beliefs, but as practices relating to the challenges of mutual understanding in situations of communication and cooperation across national borders and cultural boundaries. These practices which develop “bottom up” in everyday situations are Europeanizing the Europeans, though not everywhere and across all strata of society. It is through educational, vocational and cultural exchange that these practices are generated and adopted, through activities in international institutions, new social worlds, and private relations. In a theoretical view these practices refer to some of the basic methods of constructing reality. They constitute Europe as a collective frame of reference for “doing comparison” across physical borders and symbolic thresholds, allowing and inviting critical differentiation between nations, ethnicities, and milieus, administrative and institutional procedures, political cultures, social atmospheres, public spheres, and routines of problem solving. While developing these practices, the individual not only increases his/her body of knowledge but, in the name of cooperation, is challenged to understand and respect diversity and to become sensitive to other people’s sensitivities and loyalties. Along the way,

the individual will reconsider his/her practices and expectations and by and large adapt to communication and cooperation demands under conditions of diversity and cultural otherness. We could call this a biographical process of learning in which the ability to take the perspective of the cultural other and de-construct stereotypes is strengthened.

### **3.1. A space for comparisons**

The most relevant learning processes for developing a European collective mental space of reference become particularly evident if we look at individuals who are creating and joining social arenas and networks which centripetally focus on supranational problems and aims, developing their own intercultural styles of communication and negotiation (including the use of English as a Europe-specific lingua franca). Among many others, a significant role is played by those social arenas, organizations and social movements specializing in bridging gaps between cultures, nations, or religions with a history of aggression and conflict, as in the case of the two Irelands, Germany and Poland, France, and the Czech Republic as a result of World War II, or in the case of bridging gaps between different standards of modernization regarding the protection of the environment and human rights. All of these, by definition, are actively networking across national borders and cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries. Members of these groups move within different we-communities and develop new belongings while working on peace-building and reconciliation, on Europeanization and globalization. At the same time, processes of learning may also be observed in the case of individuals in situations of work migration and educational exchange as in situations of cross-national intimate relationships or when accessing Europe from non-EU countries. Wherever they take place, they are bound to initiate identity transformations in terms of a growing universalistic ability to take on the culturally different perspective of the other, but, at one point or another, they may also be hampered. If and when the discovery of the European collective mental space takes place, it is not focused on shared cultural values and norms. Quite the opposite, the making of European identities is constructed in a non-essentialist way by means of a collectively shared space of reciprocal and sensitive communicative practices. In this line of empirically based thinking, a critical view is adopted towards definitions of the European Union as a community of values and beliefs. As Stråth argues “it is important not to essentialize Europe but to emphasize the openness of concept much more than ‘European identity’ does” [Stråth, 2002: 398].

In a microscopic view, the practices emerging from the discovery of the European sphere of reference and comparison and constituting the individual learning process concern a wide range of activities. One group of activities is connected to the mere fact that in order to make contact at all, the individual has to make use of his/her foreign language skills (and/or English as lingua franca). The motivation for improving one's language capacities usually springs from a fascination with international meetings or from work needs. In the course of time the individual gets involved in different activities and milieus, even becomes an insider, gaining self-awareness and self-esteem, learning to defend a position and cope with defeat. During the battles to be fought and negotiations to be processed, the individual identifies with new collective orientations and role models, meeting alternative outlooks as a basis for making comparisons in a well informed and trans-nationally relevant manner, as well as a basis for criticising positions and contextualizing them in multiple discourses resembling a "universe of discourse".

In this sense, the European frame of reference with its ongoing practices of comparison can be considered a mental platform for creating mutual cultural, political and social understanding and recognition. It serves as a mental space of orientation in the sense of a third position to be adopted in order to overcome *cul-de-sac*-interactions structured by mechanisms of imposition, colonization, and domination [Schütze, 2011].

### **3.2. A space for developing sensitivity for social and cultural otherness**

When inquiring into the biographical processes of experiencing the European space as a commonly shared space of reference, we observe a sequence of steps and turns during the learning process. When crossing national borders and cultural boundaries and becoming an insider in the European arenas, social worlds and networks, the individual is doomed to encounter diversity on very many layers of everyday experience. The most striking appears to be the comparison of one's own and other people's national, ethnic, religious or other stereotypes and the attribution of collective identity. While having to deal with an ascribed and not always favourable collective identity, the individual starts to question the prejudices and stereotypes held by his/her own we-community, and undergoes a process of understanding the ambivalent nature of things. What seemed to be beyond doubt, the tacit knowledge of the in-group, is shaken, the world as it is there and taken for granted is questioned, and biographical work is needed in order

to allow for ambivalence and otherness. In processes like these, Europe provides the third position needed for reconciling ambivalent feelings of belonging.

In a microscopic view, this experience comes along as a chain of steps of understanding and recognition at the end of which the individual will have undergone an identity transformation, concerning the body of knowledge, action schemes, orientation system and images of self and others. Ideally it will bring about a growing sensitivity to the limitations of stereotypes, an understanding of the two-sidedness and polyvalence [Kłoskowska, 2001] of things, events and situations. In order to continue communicating and working with the culturally other, the individual will learn to recognize abstractions of belonging and ascribed collective identities as ambivalent and deeply dependent on the position in the social field, and the perspectives of the respective in-group. In the process, the individual learns to differentiate between ascribed collective identities and the actual social identity of the singular individual. As a side-effect, the individual understands the importance of the individual actor, the personal commitment to the common goal and readiness to take over responsibilities. This sensitivity towards the other and its diverging perspective allows the individual gradually to develop knowledge and practices for reconciling seemingly incompatible perspectives, and for bridging contradictory positions, perspectives, action schemes and orientations.

Outstanding favourable examples of the emergence of a “Europeanized” sensitivity and “hybrid” learning are found in community, conflict and reconciliation projects (for instance on the border of the two Irelands), as well as in cross-national intimate relationships, and in social relations established between non-EU citizens and citizens of the EU. The identity processes of outer Europeans in the EU as well as those of cross-national intimate relationships and the capacity for collectively creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect deeply depend upon biographical work on the difficulties, pitfalls and traps of multicultural understanding and misunderstanding, and on disappointment, discouragement and potential alienation. A closer look at the work of conflict and reconciliation groups can add more micro-processes of becoming sensitized towards otherness and cultural diversity. These groups are tackling the problem of overcoming national and ethnic myths and facilitating non-aggressive, even empathetic recognition of each other. They are dealing with relationships which have become widespread through collective historical processes of aggression and warfare. Here the obstacles to mutual understanding are potentially even higher than in the contexts mentioned above, since the preconditions of reciprocity are at risk. The pillars of identification most taken for granted, such as national

and ethical stereotypes, over-generalizations and stigmatization, need to be deconstructed in order to create an atmosphere in which the limits and partiality of those presupposed judgements can be admitted. In overcoming inherited judgements passed down over generations, the individual cannot but undergo a process of biographical work in the manner of self-discourse and critical assessment of attitudes and convictions thus far held to be unquestionable, thus creating an inner condition for better understanding the prejudiced other, accepting the difference in experience and views as group-specific constructions of reality, and recognizing the mutual perspectives and their embeddedness in different histories and narratives.

Up to this point we have focused on processes of Europeanizing Europeans as a process of identity transformation towards becoming more understanding, sensitive human beings in command of practices of collectively creating and establishing a non-essentialist mental space of orientation. Apart from this, the database of the Euroidentities project very clearly conveys that there is yet another side of the coin to experiencing Europe. Sensitivity towards otherness cannot be seen as an automatic outcome of crossing borders and boundaries. What is more, in order to bring this about, a number of 'good chances' and favourable circumstances are needed. This does not happen like a flash of lightning but emerges gradually through exposure to otherness and biographical work. It implies openness to face up to what is unfavourable and irksome to the self, and requires courage to recognize failure and mistakes, be they at work, in private relationships or in other contexts.

The process of cultivating awareness of diversity and sensitivity for otherness can be hampered in many ways. As can be seen in some transnational workers, mobility does not necessarily activate processes of openly reflecting on cultural difference, and identity work does not come into play without effort. Moreover, recognition and growing sensitivity are bound up with active participation in life worlds beyond the sphere of labour and consumption. Conditions tending to hamper sensitivity towards otherness appear not only to be a restricted amount of time spent abroad limiting the chance of establishing significant links with the autochthonous society, as we will see later, but also an instrumental attitude toward Europe as a source for career chances. Managers, corporate executives, and students on exchange programs as well as migrant workers will not necessarily develop a genuine interest in the foreign country and build a second home there, but may stay put in their national circles or international "bubble".

What is evident in the biographical study of identities are the risks and biographical costs of experiencing Europe, the European collective mental space

and beyond. For instance, the foreigner, stranger, or newcomer may meet with stigmatization when looking for a flat, he/she may be denied acknowledgement of educational and vocational grades acquired at home, job chances may seem to be reduced to low paid jobs, insiders may avoid contact and exclude the newcomer from informal contacts. Administrations may not be cooperative, and locals may use a dialect difficult for the outsider to follow etc.

Meeting the stranger and the strange may imply misunderstanding and difficulties from the start. Whatever might initiate the process of leaving behind the familiar life world and discovering the collective mental space of Europe will upset routines and expectations, and is often connected with experiences of loneliness, alienation, disappointment and defeat, of misunderstanding and being misunderstood, of being exposed to injustice, disadvantage and even hostility. At the same time, if these experiences are worked through by the individual, they bear the potential for a universalized understanding of difference and a practice of solving difficulties and obstacles of communication and cooperation by way of assuming the perspective of others.

### *Summary*

For most of its citizens the institutional structure of the EU and the activities of the Commission and the Councils seem to live a life quite apart from the life worlds, contingencies and concerns of individuals and their daily struggles. Nevertheless, these structures, remote as they may seem, in a fuzzy way have led to yet another biographical consequence “beneath” the political structure of the EU. Almost unseen and unnoticed, and hardly consciously reflected, this quality has arisen bottom up from everyday experience of cultural otherness and diversity, from discovering new social worlds, and relating to new milieus and reference groups cross physical borders and traditional boundaries.

On the way from Europe to Europeans and beyond, the individual discovers Europe as a collective mental space of reference establishing a body of knowledge and a communicative competence matching the challenges of cross-border and cross-boundary communication and cooperation. The European mental space is not to be confused with a canonical horizon of values and norms, but quite the contrary, it is a set of orientations of a non-essentialist nature, directing the individual toward taking perspectives in a universe of discourse. In the context of daily routines of comparison, Europe resembles a “third position” in the light of which the limits of perspectives are likely to be understood and handled in a more sensitized way.



This process is accompanied by biographical cost which, if not taken seriously and becoming an object of biographical work, will lead to paradoxical constellations and pitfalls in the development of identity. Regarding the process from Europe to Europeans, there are favourable conditions such as the existence of relevant others showing the way to Europe and preparing for its potential biographical cost, and unfavourable conditions such as a limited period of time spent abroad or spent with a premeditated corporate focus not allowing time for socializing with the local context. In this sense, the discovery of a European collective mental space of reference is a risky endeavour which may or may not lead to identity change and a happy ending.

#### **4. EUROPE AS THE SPACE WHERE NEW COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES ARE EMERGING**

For an increasing number of people, Europe represents a space where they can experience new opportunities in various spheres of life: educational, professional, and cultural. Participation in a wider social context has important consequences for the identification of individuals and for their sense of belonging, which assumes a characteristic wider than mere national identification. Europeanization, like globalization, enlarges the exposure to cultural models coming from differentiated contexts and this “contributes to the enlargement of the ‘repertoires of possible selves’” [Markus and Nurius, 1986, in Bagnoli, 2007: 24]. Indeed, as several researches show, although European identification is still weak, it is impossible to neglect that something is changing in the way European citizens conceive their own location and life worlds as a consequence of their commitment to experiences which go well beyond the national borders.

In other words, sharing a material and cultural space facilitates practices of comparison and mirroring which lead to a considerably enlarged repertoire of references around which identification is structured. From this point of view, Europe takes the shape of a scenario where new educational patterns, new opportunities in the field of work, new social arenas and new collective movements promoting new social stances (e.g., environmentalists) can develop. But looking at our results, we have good reasons to state that for European citizens Europe also represents the place where important processes of exchange, cultural comparison, and mutual learning occur, and where a collective frame of reference is emerging as the effect of the increasing sharing of cross-cultural experiences.

#### 4.1. From daily life practices to the sense of belonging

Between the *practices* of everyday life and the public views of Europe there is a dynamic of mutual strengthening. While the opportunities to participate in European experiences increase for citizens, the knowledge that nowadays people's lives can unfold in a wider dimension is simultaneously growing in public opinion. Similarly, we can say that when in public debate the awareness that people can develop their lives in a broader context grows, then one can feel much more stimulated to experience living outside the home country. And their broader experiences have significant effects on individuals' senses of belonging.

Staying abroad and relating to people from other nations triggers changes in lifestyles, consumption, and people's habits, that are sometimes limited to a particular mix of the two countries, sometimes giving rise to forms of *métissage* [Laplantine, 2004], which refer to a wider level of abstraction, putting themselves in a supranational space – the European space. Food habits, management of life times, cultural and leisure practices, and religious festivals are only some of the fields for experimenting with new routines and cultural mixing highlighted by the narratives of the Euroidentities Project interviewees. These combinations of *old* and *new*, of habits, of experiences lived at home and abroad are mirrored in new loyalties, which become more permeable, more flexible [Giddens, 1991, Bhabha, 1994, Bauman, 2001], also when the actors are not completely aware of them.

Our research shows, for instance, that even the mere Erasmus experience can make people develop a wider sense of belonging than they used to have previously, with important spin-offs both on the structuring of identities and on the forms of planning of their daily lives. Constant comparison with a different university system and social organization has been useful, in some cases, to enlarge the range of the affiliation system which, as a consequence of the experience abroad, has taken on an international connotation. Such enlargement of the horizons of identification (*I'm Polish but I'm a European student too*) has a stronger impact in terms of identities for those students coming from closed societies like Italy (blocked by a strong Catholic tradition) and countries of the former communist bloc like Estonia (for a long time suffocated by the Communistic regime) for which the openness to other worlds of life seems to have brought about a profound rethinking of institutional structures and values. This observation can be extended to other categories of interviewees, since we can observe similar phenomena in several cases.

Yet it must be pointed out that these profound changes in identity seen in the interviews – the collective identification, i.e. self-recognition as a member of

a group is part of the construction of individual identity and its transformation – only in a few cases correspond to a clear identification with a European *we-group*, since examples of informants who have declared themselves only European are wholly lacking. There are, however, emerging forms of more complex multiple and multi-stranded identification which, though recognizing the international dimension, do not imply a wish to renounce the local dimension of identity. In other words, “the nation still comes across as a source of identification but is no longer unique or commanding, far from its familiar self” [Soysal, 2002: 281].

So it happens that local forms of identification coexist with regional, national and supranational ones, becoming predominant only under particular circumstances when ethnicity or the attachment to one’s own region or city respond to fortuitous and instrumental circumstances (e.g. the “Neapolitan appeal” as emblematic of sociableness and a social *passe-partout*): a kind of *daily multiculturalism* [Colombo, Semi, 2007].

Though neither exclusive nor predominant, identification with an alleged European identity is not totally absent. In fact, a sense of awareness of one’s own Europeaness emerges clearly if we look at testimonies by people who have had a lengthy experience in a non-European country. In other words, it seems that one becomes more aware of one’s own Europeaness when far away from Europe, therefore from an external perspective. Being on another continent and feeling a sort of cultural stranger has the effect of producing a stronger identification with the home continent. Similarly, we see a more solid sense of belonging to Europe among those cases of individuals who came to Europe after living for a long time (or for all their lives) in a non-European country, but being socialized into European values and traditions – the case of people coming from former colonies. In the experience of these people, the impact with Europe resembles an encounter with something familiar, already known, but also desired. It is for this reason that under these particular circumstances, overloaded with the symbolic value of a myth, identification with Europe assumes a stronger depth and centrality than in other narratives.

However, apart from the variety of the reshaping of belonging as the effect of peoples’ experiences beyond national borders, what visibly emerges from most interviews is an enlargement of horizons of identification, even when this does not appear so clear at first glance. For instance, in cases where mobility has been driven by an escape strategy (*escape from*), experience abroad can lead to a sort of (*re*)*patriotization*, that is a re-discovery of one’s own country of origin and of its culture and heritage, as an effect of the intense biographical work needed in the circumstance of living cut off from one’s own homeland. Moreover, staying

abroad and experiencing the host country's daily life – with both its advantages and difficulties – can reinforce (re)conciliation with the milieu of one's birth as an important frame of reference and identification, at the same time assigning to the destination the role of *second home*. From this perspective we can see again an extension of belonging rather than a restricted way of self-conception in the social space, or a mere step backwards. Indeed, we observe people setting themselves in a space of comparison between cultures and different *we-groups* instead of accepting fixed and unquestionable collective identities confined within national boundaries.

In other cases, people can fall back on their origins, making them the bulwark of a sort of uncontaminated world in order to cope with the sense of inferiority deriving from the comparison with countries more advanced on the road of modernity. But if we consider that these people are dealing with the complex task of making connections between social, economic, and cultural worlds all distant from each other, this attitude should not be interpreted either as the rejection of the different, the new, or a mistaken recognition of the European Union. On the contrary, it signals the desire to take part without renouncing one's own origin. In this sense, this sort of glorification of one's own roots has to be seen as a demand for national specificities as an inalienable part of the European project. A European project which therefore incorporates differences without abolishing them. This latter point recalls Beck's idea of a "cosmopolitan Europe" [Beck, 2009]. As he underlines, while the concepts of multiculturalism, relativism and tolerance – which permeate the public discourse on Europe from the beginning – refer to difference as an inevitable "burden" to face, the cosmopolitan attitude assumes the idea that differences are in any case something able to enrich people's lives. This attitude can be seen as the passage from an "either/or" perspective to the more positive "both/and" perspective.

#### **4.2. Time and range of the exposure to a European context**

There are another two interwoven elements emerging from our analysis which appear to be important for the processes of collective identification: a) the period of time of exposure to a different socio-cultural context; b) the range of such an exposure.

With regard to the first element, related to time of exposure, it emerges clearly from biographical materials that the longer the time spent abroad and/or the longer the relationship with people from another country, the more profound are the transformations in terms of collective identification. A prolonged stay in

another life context necessarily implies the individual's participation in multiple relational networks: colleagues, university companions, neighborhood, friends, compatriots, and so on. Forms of mutual understanding develop among people involved in these networks that compound to enlarge their circles of belonging and consequently their systems of loyalty. Just to give an example, an Italian interviewee now working in Germany shows that he can feel that he is a member of his German work group, sharing professional habits with colleagues, at the same time spending free time with compatriots, whose professional ethic he does not appreciate at all. And yet the elements of affiliation between the "home country" and the "home abroad" can be numerous and varied: the football team of the place of birth and at the same time the football club of the town where one lives and works, the group of friends from childhood and/or those friends made in the host country, an NGO with activists from all over the world, etc. As argued by Giddens, "an identity does not automatically subvert the other ones" [Giddens, 2007: 256].

With regard to the second element, which refers to the range of exposure, we see that the biographical work, which leads to a re-allocation of collective identities, is as profound and full of consequences as the dimensions of life involved in the experience abroad are numerous. It is for this reason that the life-stories of people whose experience of Europe is linked to involvement in an intimate relationship with a foreign partner emerged as the most totalizing and those which highlighted the more significant transformations of the system of collective identification. Living in the country of a foreign partner and bringing up children means, indeed, having to take part in a whole set of new institutional arrangements (school, health system, etc.) and new relational networks (partner's family, neighborhood, etc.), as well as facing up every day to lifestyles, habits and customs different from those at home. It is easy to understand that in such circumstances there are more chances of transforming one's own collective references, mixing several systems of normative and ethic orientation if faced with an experience circumscribed to a specific sphere like education or work. For instance, in the case of farmers, since their participation in the European space is limited to the field of work and to the management of European funds and subsidies, this experience only partially enlarges their system of belonging, while on the contrary, it has been possible to observe the existence of a return to a shared image of a national we-community as a sign of protection of their agricultural traditions in opposition to the centralized management operated by the EU Institutions. Nevertheless, also in this case one cannot argue that we are in the presence of a complete lack of significance of Europe but it is reasonable to

assert that Europe assumes here the form of a shared image that – though remaining external to individuals' identities – constitutes a crucial point of reference which contributes to delimit and re-define the boundaries of the group.

These results of research do not lead us in a univocal direction and so it is legitimate to wonder if there really exists a kind of collective identification that we can call European identity. Finding an answer to this question is not simple. If European identity means a common background of language, norms, values, habits, and so on, allowing people to recognise themselves as a we-community with an inherent continuity, our research (as many others, see Stråth 2002, Rossi 2007, Jenkins, 2008) confirms that such a strong form of identification is not present among EU citizens.

However, if we look at the concept of collective identity (the feeling of membership in a group) from a non-essentialist perspective, i.e. without taking for granted that an essence – based for instance on religion or common roots – exists, our analysis allows us to assert that a sense of belonging to Europe is surely emerging. It is more about a new way of conceiving oneself in the social space, which does not imply either the abandonment or the weakening of past forms of identification in people's lives, such as the national or the local. On the contrary, these new forms of identification are not monolithic but multiple and, as they change, incorporate various levels of identification following the biographical experiences: local, national, supranational, and global [García Canclini, 1995, Appadurai, 1996]. From this perspective a European identity can be seen as one of the diverse possibilities of identification that people can utilize on the basis of the contingency of time, the developing of life trajectories, specific life-circumstances and so on [Sen 2006]. It can be conceived as something that constitutes one of the numerous pieces of an individual's identity.

It appears clear from these considerations that such an enlargement of the range of identification available to the individual nowadays constitutes an important tool for coping with the speedy and continuous transformations of our societies, characterized by an increasing social complexity which requires the adoption of a sort of *flexible thinking*. From this point of view, in order to improve people's skills in handling their changing and fluid lives, it becomes crucial that more and more chances to broaden one's frame of reference be given to everybody, avoiding any inequality in terms of national backgrounds, familial milieu, upbringing, age and gender. Moreover, we have to take into account that "transnational experience thus expresses itself as a 'form of capital' which meshes with other forms of capital, especially social and cultural capital, but which nevertheless stands apart as 'mobility capital' which can be deployed over the

subsequent lifecourse for personal, social or career enhancement” [Li, Findlay and Jones, 1998, in Findlay et al., 2006: 293]. So, promoting for many more people the opportunities of coming into contact with *otherness* and *differences* is of fundamental importance in order to avoid the risk that the possibility of both enlarging and enriching one’s sense of belonging be the privilege of a few.

### *Summary*

As a consequence of increasing participation in a European environment, people are involved in a more extensive system of loyalties. Studying abroad for a while, working abroad, or simply having relationships with individuals coming from another European country (in the field of farming as well as in a European arena focused on Educational projects) represents much more frequent an experience for citizens than in the past. This experience implies measuring up to otherness, to other cultures, to other groups, and this encounter can lead to adopting from others what is considered better, more useful, more worthwhile. So, together with forms of identification gained in the context of origin, new kinds of identification are available, which go beyond the borders of nations. In such a perspective Europe represents the space in which the range of individuals’ choices seems to increase because nowadays they can choose and modify their system of beliefs or values more easily than in the past.

## **5. LIMITS AND RISKS OF EUROPEAN UNIFICATION?**

European unification has had a remarkable impact on people’s daily life, significantly enriching the opportunities at their disposal both to overcome difficulties and to pursue personal projects of self-realization. Moreover, as we have seen, the growing process of inter-European mobility and the increasing tendency to internationalise life courses come hand in hand with cultural processes of great importance: the contrast between different cultures, in fact, seems to produce the activation of learning processes, as well as reciprocal recognition, which has significant effects on collective identification, the latter being now more prone to multiplicity, fluidity and hybridization.

If all these elements show the “winning” side of the ongoing unification process, we should not undervalue other aspects, which seem to constitute potential limits to the realization of an authentically unified Europe. As we shall argue, there is more than one reason to believe that a risk exists that the benefits coming from a United Europe are not fully and equally distributed: firstly, because

the possibility of taking advantage of them requires resources not available to everyone; secondly, because – at least according to the perception of the citizens interviewed– differences between Member States are still evident. In fact, while powerful processes of integration are occurring, it seems that parallel processes of division can start up, which appear most clearly in the case of non-European countries but to some extent seem to concern the European Union itself.

### 5.1. Europe for whom?

European unification has increased opportunities for an increasing number of people; nevertheless it should not be overlooked that the possibility of taking advantage of these additional opportunities is not as generally widespread as it might seem at first sight. Our research in fact shows very clearly that not only moving abroad but even thinking of moving becomes a feasible option only if there are different types of *resources and capital*. On the individual level, the decision to move abroad – even within Europe, i.e., in a geographical space perceived as neither too far nor too different – necessitates considerable personal resources, such as the disposition to take the risks connected with mobility that, as we have seen, are numerous both on an emotional and a material level. Living abroad requires on the one hand an ability to cope, at least temporarily, with the isolation or the feeling of not being accepted, and on the other, a particular ability to network and socialize with others who are different.

If these resources and skills, as related to personal feelings and experiences, are of a merely individual nature, there are other kinds of resources necessary to support mobility which are on the other hand deeply linked to structural elements, in particular to social stratification. Our research illustrates that the predisposition towards mobility has a clear social character since it is closely connected to the family of origin. Indeed, being open to travel, changing and exploring new possibilities in another country, seems to result from the family culture, i.e. from the so-called *cultural capital*. To some extent, the latter represents the *humus* where the motivation for internationalization matures, and which is typical of upper middle class and upper class families. In fact, they are often families whose friendships and acquaintances extend beyond national boundaries (where the parents have travelled for study or work, for example), or where travelling abroad for holidays is a normal part of the family's lifestyle, or where investing in the children's internationalization (through learning foreign languages or travelling for study from adolescence) is considered an essential element of the educational process.



Of course this does not mean that the phenomenon of European mobility is rigidly marked by social boundaries. Actually, in the case of the middle classes, the trend towards mobility can arise from previous experiences within the family, such as the migration of a relative or thanks to significant teacher figures or specific courses which include periods abroad. These can play a crucial role in opening people's minds up to an international perspective. It also has to be said that even in lower middle-class families it is possible to find an *ethos* of internationalisation, which in this case seems to be linked to expectations of social mobility and status promotion. On the other hand, as far as less privileged groups are concerned, the need to find a job, or a better job, can constitute a sufficient reason to move, even in the absence of cultural reasons. Therefore, we may conclude that the real difference concerning cultural capital is that while the world-view of the privileged social strata (open, mobile and internationalised), internalized since primary socialization, completely coincides with the EU value system, opening up to Europe is not immediate and spontaneous for less privileged social groups. So, if the aim is to produce equality, these findings should receive particular attention, especially in educational policies that play a major role in equalizing gaps in the field of cultural resources.

If cultural capital turns out to be crucial in producing the predisposition to move within the European space, *economic capital* seems to be as relevant in influencing the quality of the European experience when this involves (as in the case of educationally mobile or transnational workers) a move abroad. Money, in fact, not only directly affects the possibility of appropriately resolving practical problems (finding accommodation, coming back home from time to time, enduring possible periods of unemployment), but also considerably widens the chances of participating in all the social activities (on the cultural, leisure, and community level) that make the cross-cultural experience really meaningful, and which are not open to those who lack adequate financial resources and are forced to limit their experience abroad only to the working sphere. Also in the case of economic capital therefore opportunities to enjoy fully the European cross-cultural experience are not symmetrically distributed.

Finally, with reference to the so-called "*social capital*", i.e., the set of social relations people can rely on, we can assess that – according to research results – it plays a major role both in stimulating mobility and in affecting the experience of living abroad. Indeed, for many of our interviewees the idea of moving, or at least the choice of the destination, was influenced by the presence of relatives, friends, or people they already knew in the host country. In addition, the ability to adapt to the new country, to find solutions for their needs and to be emotionally

supported, are deeply influenced by the number and the strength of the ties, both at home and abroad, which constitute the social capital at their disposal.

In consideration of the role played by the various types of capital, and above all by their combination (since often a good supply of one type of capital is accompanied by a good supply of the other types), we can affirm that neither the possibility of having access to the European opportunity structure nor the ability to make good use of it are evenly distributed today.

### 5.2. The Europe of Inequalities

If the mix of resources that people can rely on, be they personal, cultural, economic and relational, which in the main is connected to their social position, seems to prefigure a risk of an unequal distribution of the chances for Europeanization, also inequalities between different countries, and the risks connected with them, should not be neglected.

The first and perhaps most important inequality that has to be mentioned is the one which separates *insiders* and *outsiders*. As said before, and as appeared from interviews with non-Europeans now living in Europe, the emergence of the European space – as a space based on the recognition of negotiation as a principal tool for the resolution of conflicts as an alternative to war, and belief in the rule of law, in democratic procedures, the freedom of religion and rights - as a matter of fact cannot but deepen the divide between those who are part of it and those excluded from it. Any kind of identity always implies the assertion of a difference. So, the idea of a “European identity necessarily contains a demarcation from the non-European. This is inherent to all distinctions, they are both inclusive and exclusive” [Stråth, 2002: 397]. With Kolhi’s words “there may be a new ‘European nationalism’ turning outwards, or inwards against those who represent the outer world” [Kolhi, 2000: 128]; immigrants, “the intruders”, can be used to take the role of “them” in a context where inter-state nationalism is no longer the rule among Western Europeans and where “immigrants from outside western Europe import the identity conflicts into the European countries instead of externalizing them as conflicts among states” [ibidem: 129].

Although the most important differences are those between countries inside or outside the EU, we must not neglect the fact that also within the EU space persistent signs of inequality emerge. One important distinction concerns *Western and Eastern* EU countries. It is true that the European process of integration has undoubtedly produced homogenization between the two areas. The pattern of migration from East to West, for example, seems to have changed considerably

nowadays, becoming increasingly similar to the West to West one, which is tending towards temporariness and reversibility, with aims to improve quality of life rather than to satisfy a basic need. Especially for the younger generations, mobility towards Western Europe often originates from a demand for self-realisation and search for identity as happens among young people in the West. Nor should we ignore that – as confirmed by our research – we are now witnessing a process in the opposite direction (West to East) due to the professional and entrepreneurial opportunities offered to Western European citizens by the economies of the Eastern countries. There is no doubt then that, as a result of the unification process, the distance between the two areas is diminishing. However, despite this, there is clearly a persistent stereotyped view that associates Eastern Europe with an image of inferiority and backwardness. Such views, present in a significant number of interviews, partially derive from people's perceptions and even self-perception, since often our Eastern European interviewees seem to be afflicted by a sense of inferiority. On the other hand, they have a very concrete basis: it is a fact that the citizens who move from East to West to get a job, generally find occupations well below their qualifications. In relation to this aspect one should not overlook the risk that the existence of a shared European framework could increase comparison between countries, and therefore amplify the feelings of inferiority not only of the East towards the West, but also – as we will see – of the South towards the North.

Also, along the *North-South* axis Europe is showing signs of persistent inequality. The big difference in job opportunities linked to different levels of economic development, as for Eastern EU countries, means that many people do not move because of a real choice, as generally happens in the case of mobility from West to East or North to South. In addition, with regard to the cultural sphere, the different level of modernization which is still separating the North and South of Europe (e.g., better gender equality, greater acceptance of diversity, the greater rights that the legislation of the countries of Northern Europe gives gay or unmarried couples, or in the field of bioethics) also contributes to reinforcing the image of backwardness of the South held by the citizens of Southern Europe who are more inclined to attribute negative characteristics to their country (scarce meritocracy, widespread corruption, institutional inefficiency, and so on). This promotes, among other things, the allocation of a symbolic value to their international experience (opening up to Europe as a kind of “antidote” to cultural backwardness) that unfortunately tends to devalue the image of the home country and to determine a kind of “obligation” to move to countries deemed to be more advanced. In this sense, both in the case of North-South and East-West

differences, a risk can be seen of a persistent disparity between those who move by choice and those who do so as a sort of “defensive strategy” (i.e., not to be left behind rather than to go ahead).

A final clear inequality evidently emerging from the research is that concerning the *Old and New Member States*. Especially in the case of farmers, it has been highlighted by the respondents from countries which have recently entered the United Europe, that they perceive that they have a lower influence on EU agricultural policies, and that there is a disparity in the amount of subsidies received under the CAP. They see themselves at a disadvantage, as well as having a weaker position in competition on the common European market. Regarding the farmers, and regardless of their country of origin, interviews show a further risk, concerning the great difficulties of small and medium-sized farms, which do not appear adequately equipped to face the challenge of modernization and professionalization (the introduction of new standards and new rules, intensification of competition) stemming from the unification process.

#### *Summary*

In conclusion, we could affirm that for many European citizens the United Europe is undoubtedly an open space, configured as a structure of opportunity, as a place of mutual understanding and recognition, where new forms of belonging are taking shape, where universalistic views are being established and where stereotypical visions of difference are being overcome. For many others, however, access to these new opportunities seems to be hampered, made difficult, or even prevented by the existence of unequal opportunities for participation in the “wealth of the united nations of Europe” and in its opportunity structures. In other words, the risk arises that “differences in mobility and access can create, or reinforce, social inequalities” [Gustafson, 2009: 26]. These inequalities arise not only from individual factors and characteristics, but also from the differences between Member States. From the people’s perspective, the E.U. appears as a structured space along the East-West and South-North geographical axes, and along the Old – New temporal axis.

The existing constraints on gaining access to Europe and its opportunities, while not jeopardising the essentially positive and successful nature of the unification process, can lead to a growing perception of difference and division between the more and less privileged groups and countries. From this perspective, the risk that the process of unification could generate new or reinforce old inequalities should represent a constant concern for European Institutions and policy makers.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The European unification process which has long been criticized for its political focus on economic regulations and neglect of the social and cultural spheres, seems to have activated a fuzzy logic of Europeanizing Europeans where least expected.

Beyond the truth about Euro-scepticism as represented in statistical findings and political elections, processed through a macro-sociological approach – a truth which recounts an ongoing crisis of European unification and scarce interest in Europe – another facet of the truth has been discovered in our findings, which is that of the people and their lives. It is a kind of truth that can be found only from data voicing people's own experience and perspectives, and analysed using non-standardized open interviews and interpretative methods.

This truth concerns the widening of geographical and symbolic room to manoeuvre through the use of the European opportunity structure which makes biographical trajectories less and less confined to national borders and cultural boundaries. Activities initiated by this opportunity structure involve learning how to communicate and negotiate in cross-cultural and cross-national social arenas and networks. They further involve practices of comparing different outlooks on life, recognizing and being attentive to varying sensitivities. In the long run, the individual may develop a routine of taking the perspectives of multiple others and explaining them to each other, ascertaining equal chances for participation in discourse, avoiding being patronizing, developing strategies for translating difference and a common code of ethics. In an ideal typical construction we could speak of activities securing a "democracy of perspectives" [Schütze, 2011]. From this point of view, one of the main results which emerge giving voice to the experiential world of individuals is the non-essentialist orientation system. Crossing different cultures, people seem to compare and reflect upon cultural differences and peculiarities, thus giving rise to a process – often unintentional – of overcoming the stereotypical views of "the stranger". Furthermore, their involvement in cross-cultural and cross-national arenas appears to promote a willingness to listen and a predisposition to accept others' views and practices which lead to overcoming preconceived positions and dogmatism.

In this sense, the European frame of reference could function as a third position, providing the individual with a "third (universalistic) position", of peace making, protecting the environment etc., the third position being the (imagined) position of a "third party" (or 'generalized other') overarching the difference between the positions of the ego and alter ego, and forming a synthesis of them

both. In other words, Europe would represent a universalistic superstructure in whose name the resolution of particularistic religious, ethnic or national conflicts and aggressions would adopt the meaning of a contribution to the greater task of establishing peace in Europe and to building Europe as a place where the belief in the rule of law and in the democratic procedures and rules holds sway [Habermas, 2006].

When we look at the concrete experiences of people moving in the European space, we discover that the differences in traditions, habits, and customs which characterize Europe do not seem to hamper the emergence of feelings of commonality [Brubaker and Cooper, 2000]. The sharing of some common features come true in the sense of “all being in the same boat” [Kantner, 2006] and/or in the sense of sharing a common *destiny* rather than a common *history*. In the light of these findings, the thesis of a monolithic European identity is unsustainable. Local, regional, national and supranational identification (European, or even global) seems to coexist, simultaneously rather than sequentially and without a hierarchy of significance [Jenkins 2008: 170], enriching people’s experiences and daily routines. In other words, rather than the space where “fixed identities” consolidate themselves, Europe takes shape as a space where people experience hybrid, fluid, “hyphenated” identification, and where “conflicting attachments are the rule rather than the exception” [Kolhi, 2000: 126]. And hybridity is a powerful antidote on the one hand to the risk that the process of European unification results in a conservative and prescriptive idea of Europe: an idea based on shared myths, memories and values [Ayhan, 2008: 176] according to a model that “encourages a conception of ‘Fortress Europe’ hostile to and defended against all those who do not share these ideals” [Bettin Lattes, 2005: 59]. On the other hand hybridity prevents the risk that Europeanization translates into a hegemonic homogenization process, where the affirmation of universalism can mean destroying all European differences [*ibidem*].

These new forms of identification, therefore, represent a crucial resource, particularly with reference to contemporary society, where the processes of globalization require the ability to adopt divergent points of view, the ability to combine more semantic repertoires, and the possibility of handling diverse universes of meaning and discourse [Bauman, 2000]. Indeed, because of its plasticity, this mode of collective identification might turn out to be more suitable for meeting the challenges of post-modernity – more suitable than the more consolidated modes of identification, which, while capable of promoting a sense of belonging, are also however more focused and therefore unfit for

contemporary society, where the push to mobility and the rhythm of social change make adaptability a crucial resource.

From a micro perspective, centered on the concrete lives of real people, we can therefore assert that European citizens are increasingly becoming “the Europeans”, building Europe and nurturing a European culture, centered on new types of belonging. On the other hand, the emergence of both new identities and collectivities, inclined to transnationalism and fluidity, should not lead us to think that we are in the presence of a linear process. In fact, more than one element suggests abandoning any kind of evolutionary or deterministic vision. Firstly, as clearly emerges from our data, identification is neither an easy nor a conscious process; it is rather a kind of biographical work which implies an internal discourse where individuals must call into question their knowledge and must be ready to review their cognitive certainties; it is a process which, as we have seen, entails considerable costs, and at each point can turn back, change direction or also be blocked as a result of both negative experiences and the lack of resources. Encountering with the other can be very painful, so “foreclosing identities in terms of boundaries and borders may be far easier than opening the self to include the other or facing those uncertainties that the other may stand for” [Bagnoli, 2009: 40]. Secondly, persisting inequalities, both at micro and macro level, can play a contrasting role, generating differences and divisions which can weaken emerging transnational/ multinational/supranational belonging: we could even say that top-down processes could counter the bottom-up Europeanization process visible in people’s daily lives.

Confidence in the rise of a shared European culture, in other words, should not blind us to the eventuality that the *resurgence of nationalism or localism* could occur at any moment. Indeed universalism, a crucial principle of European unification, “affirms the right to one’s own culture, in other words the right to be particularistic” [Kolhi, 2000: 129]. Moreover culture is not – as in an essentialist view – something external to the individuals, existing apart from them. It is, rather, the combined outcome of actions and interactions among individuals – who interpret, reproduce and transform it – and of institutional arrangements which constitute the framework (of both opportunities and constraints) of these actions and interactions. “Identities are not attributes that people ‘have’ or ‘are’, but resources that people ‘use’, something that they ‘do’” [Jamieson, 2003: 509, in Fuss and Grosser, 2006: 215]. Therefore, whether and to what extent giving life to Europeans as well as Europe will be possible, will also depend on what the institutions and policies will be able to do to support the process of “Europeanization from below” which is underway today.

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## OD EUROPY DO EUROPEJCZYKÓW I DALEJ. ZNACZENIA EUROPY W DOŚWIADCZENIACH BIOGRAFICZNYCH

(Streszczenie)

Artykuł przedstawia rezultaty projektu badawczego „Euroidentities – Tożsamości europejskie. Zastosowanie metod badań biograficznych w badaniach nad rozwojem tożsamości europejskiej” ([www.euroidentities.org](http://www.euroidentities.org)). Na podstawie wywiadów biograficzno narracyjnych zebranych w siedmiu krajach opisany został proces europeizacji w codziennych praktykach tych, którzy w różny sposób wykorzystują oferowane przez UE struktury możliwości w zintegrowanej Europie. Chociaż obecnie zaobserwować można kryzys lojalności w instytucjonalnym wymiarze aktywności UE, badania nad perspektywą „oddolną” (*bottom up*) pokazują istnienie „europejskiej mentalnej przestrzeni odniesienia” [Schütze 2011] jako wytworzonej ponad granicami i kulturami sfery komunikacji i kooperacji. Fenomen przestrzeni mentalnej zdefiniowany jest tu jako struktury możliwości dla mobilności, konfrontacji z różnorodnością kulturą, możliwości porównywania odmienności, budowania nowych identyfikacji kolektywnych i zmian poczucia przynależności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** europejska kolektywna przestrzeń mentalna, wrażliwość wobec innych, koszty i ryzyka biograficzne, poczucie przynależności do Europy w perspektywie biograficznej.