

## Teaching Europe

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The question of European identity constantly surfaces in debates about European integration. Locating such an identity is expected to lend legitimacy to the project of a unified Europe with a viable 'demos' or people who feel that they share a common European citizenship.

A slightly different set of questions is: what kind of identity is already being built in European public spheres? How does this identity work in relation to other identities, national or other? Most importantly, what kind of an identity can Europe really afford?

They have an immediate relevance. Across the continent children are beginning to be taught about 'their' Europe.

### **Beyond the official versions**

Within the EU framework, education remained until recently untouched by supra-national policy making. Curricula development and content were jealously guarded by the member-states. Since the Maastricht Treaty, however, the Union has developed and funded several educational initiatives. Despite successive EU resolutions to insert 'a European dimension' into school curricula, the Commission's attempts to 'Europeanise' education remained largely ineffective, mostly confined to the recognition of diplomas, vocational education and the exchange of language-teaching programmes.

However, a closer look at the way 'Europe', 'nation' and 'citizenship' are being represented in school books and curricula, particularly in the disciplines of history and civics, uncovers another kind of 'Europeanisation' process – one that gives us a telling glimpse not only of the European identity which is likely to emerge, but also how it might be taught in Europe's schools. And this is so even though the process is happening through extremely active informal networks largely unmonitored by inter-governmental structures and formal EU institutions.

These textbooks reflect the official and codified versions of Europe. But precisely because education policy at the EU level is far less structured or formalised than, say, policy governing monetary, economic or security issues – an area of opportunity opens up which has been enthusiastically filled in recent years by the work of an increasingly effective network of diverse actors, meeting at the European level. Teachers' unions and associations, academics and scientific experts, advocacy groups and international organizations, including UNESCO and the Council of Europe are busy networking, convening numerous meetings and conferences on 'teaching Europe', reassessing controversial episodes and personalities in European history, promoting European education and ideals, and together developing tools and texts for educating future generations of Europeans.

### **The beautiful elusiveness of 'Europe'**

So what does Europe stand for when you look at current educational material? As projected both in the textbooks and in the debates around them, 'Europe' is first and foremost a really diffuse idea, contained in an equally diffuse discourse, with contingent boundaries which do not by any means always overlap with the territorial confines of the European Union. Its identity is a loose confection of civic ideals – such as democracy, equality, progress and human rights.

As such, 'European identity' differs considerably from the national type of identity: the kind we are most used to. National identities locate their legitimacy in deeply rooted histories, cultures or territories. But Europe is not past-oriented: it is future-oriented. True, history schoolbooks may glorify Europe's Roman Catholic or Greek origins as remarkable European achievements, citing them as elemental properties of 'Europeanness'. But these origins are less and less offered us within a religious or ethnic narrative, and increasingly in the more abstract form of the universal principles they contain.

The fact that these same universal principles can be said to have also inspired most of the conflicts in Europe's war-ridden past is conveniently forgotten. Look at recent schoolbooks, especially those of the 1990s, and Europe appears as a very peaceful continent. Yet we know that Europe emerged and was sustained more by conflict and division, than by consensus and peace.

However firmly peaceful civic ideals are propounded, a further challenge arises when the attempt is made to confine this identity either to Europe, or to its member states. At the end of the twentieth century – human rights, democracy, progress, equality are everyone's and every nation's modernity. Even when other nations organise their modernity differently – or fail to exercise it altogether – these are the principles which preside over that process.

This makes it impossible to define a territorially and culturally-bounded European identity. 'Europe' does not come into existence over and against other identities as national identities have done. In economic competition, Asia and America might become Europe's 'others': but they do not necessarily constitute cultural 'others'.

Regardless of attempts to the contrary – and they do exist – Europe fails to create its cultural and symbolic 'Other'. This means that we don't and can't have a very well-defined European identity. In my view, this is extremely fortunate.

### **The domestication of heroism**

Europe lacks originality, which is a condition of all successful nationhood. Nor does its identity appear as a challenge to national identities. Schoolbooks and curricula testify to the fact that the increasing space accorded the 'idea' of Europe has encroached very little on the substantial proportion of history teaching devoted to the nation, and national or local histories. However, it is the case that these books increasingly situate the nation and national identity within a European context. In that process, the nation is being re-interpreted and re-cast.

We might describe what is taking place as a 'normalisation' of national canons and unique national myths. By which I mean a standardising process which removes the unique, the extraordinary and the charismatic from its accounts of nationhood. Take the increasing celebration in history textbooks of the Vikings as part of the European heritage. The warrior forefathers have been replaced with spirited long-distance traders. Similarly, ancestral tribes – Germanic and Gallic, Normans, Franks, Celts – are all increasingly depicted, not in heroic but cultural terms, through such images as quaint village life, hospitality and artistic achievements.

Crusades, for example, are taught not only as holy wars and conquests, but as occasions for cultural exchange and learning, between Europeans and other civilisations. In English textbooks, we read that Christians learnt to use forks and table manners from more civilised Arabs during their attempts to capture the “holy lands”, (whereas growing up in Turkey, I always thought that table manners were Western!).

The same normalisation has been applied to national heroes as well. They are talked about in a matter-of-fact way far removed from mythical glorification. Jeanne D’Arc, Bismarck or Francis Drake are dealt with in a detached manner. Drake appears as a good sailor, but also a rather greedy man who stole from both the natives and the Spanish. His bravery and achievements against the Spaniards are balanced by an ameliorated picture of the Spaniards, his relationship with Elizabeth and his greed.

### **National narratives become European – and normal**

Of course, you can find significant differences in this process in different countries. In German history books, Europe and also the local regions figure prominently, while the nation disappears. This is certainly bound up with the difficulties of Germany’s specific history. But it also reflects a Germany that feels secure in its place within Europe. Moreover, the German education system and its textbook production is structured to allow close cooperation between the education authorities and other interest groupings: teachers’ associations and unions, parents’ associations, churches and universities. What emerges as a result, in terms of curricula, is a much more consensual outcome. Revisionist historical debates might attempt to legitimise anew the German nation and national identity. But these will not find resonance in educational curricula or schoolbooks. A prudent representation of the nation and its history prevails.

By contrast, educational policy in England has always been much more polarised along party lines. The introduction of the national curriculum, for example, in 1987, reflected the priorities of the Conservative government of the day in many ways. ‘Europe’ was certainly not amongst them. The emphasis was very much on British, if not English national history. Recent governments’ more European outlook has hardly altered things in this regard, partly because of reduced history teaching in secondary schools. But we do see a more outward-looking European emphasis in the newly-introduced subject, citizenship.

So ‘Europe’, as we find it narrated in educational spheres, increasingly hosts multiple geographies, multiple boundaries and multiple cultural references. It is fuzzy, not well-defined or precise enough to offer up a homogeneous, collective identity. Unlike the national identities and histories which were the passionate products of the nineteenth century state and nation-building projects, Europe cannot afford to develop its discriminating particularisms. As a result, Europe may never end up with a coherent narrative. But, by the same token, only within this kind of Europe (and the kind of identity it makes possible) can we expect diverse European backgrounds, beliefs, lifestyles, experiences and existences to find their place and play their part.

This ‘Europeanisation process’ is taking place through fragmented and informal institutional processes, not clearly connected in any way to the main decision-making structures. Wouldn’t it be a step forward to make this process more transparent, more participatory, and more democratic? A Europeanisation – or normalisation – of national narratives and histories is taking place. This is a common European history.

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