Oriane Calligaro, Negotiating Europe. EU Promotion of Europeanness since the 1950s


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The connection between European integration and European identity has been extensively discussed and researched in the past few decades. The usual view on the topic has been from the top: from the ways in which the European Union has sought to legitimise its existence and further development with political interventions over identity aimed at injecting a European consciousness into the masses.

A notable example of this approach is Cris Shore, who in his book Building Europe has highlighted the instrumental nature of EU actions in the field. According to Shore, the EU has sought to repeat earlier successes of the nation-states with similar top-down, elite-driven programmes seeking to educate and inform Europeans about their European identity. Doing this, it has tried to emulate the nation-states’ use of their symbolic and cultural power to foster national identities and a sense of belonging among their populations.

The results have been mixed. In addition to the concrete actions on the EU level, scholars have therefore explored the possibility and the meaning of European identity. Contrasting European identity with national level identities, these studies have either led to highlighting the difficulties in creating a European identity similar to or competing with the national ones, or to the centralising of Euro-nationalist tendencies through the EU’s symbolic and cultural policies.

Oriane Calligaro’s well researched and original book takes a different view on the topic. Instead of dwelling on the possibility or the impossibility of a European identity she looks at the way in which notions of Europeanness are constructed, understood and negotiated in a number of concrete cases and settings. The cases range from the Commission’s university information policy and the promotion of the writing of a particular form of European integration history to the debates and actions regarding Europe’s common cultural heritage and the symbolism and iconography of Europe’s common currency, the euro.

Using her cases as evidence, she parts company with Cris Shore and argues that the EU’s “promotion of Europeanness does not constitute the kind of overarching identity policy that imposes a homogenous interpretation of European identity” (p. 1). Furthermore, even in EU actions in the field we rarely see the top-down, one-dimensional processes described by Shore and others. Instead, she argues that
“promoting Europeanness is a process of negotiation in which entrepreneurs of Europeanness within the EU institutions involve noninstitutional actors and charge them to invent and communicate representations of Europe.” (p. 2.) This means that Europeanness is constantly made on various levels and by different institutional and other actors. Instead of representing implementation of policies established by institutional actors, the process of constructing Europeanness has been more about dialogue and negotiation.

To question further a monolithic understanding of EU actions in the symbolic and cultural fields, Calligaro speaks about “entrepreneurs of Europeanness within the EU institutions” (p. 2), instead of EU institutions as such as actors in the area. The entrepreneurs are to a certain extent the usual suspects: commission officials, members of the European Parliament and national level politicians, who have been active in instilling union level initiatives to foster Europeanness among the Europeans.

Where these dynamic processes have often ended up has been different from the original intentions of the specific actors setting the programmes in motion. What has happened is that other, what Calligaro calls ‘noninstitutional’ actors have been able to introduce their own agendas and preferences in the formation of policies and concrete actions. Hence we have the rather complex process of identifying and canonising European cultural achievements under the headline of common European cultural heritage, where diverse actors ranging from active citizens and their groups to individual politicians have been able to introduce manifold events, physical sites or historical achievements to represent Europe’s heritage in all its diversity. A very interesting part of Calligaro’s study looks at the way in which darker aspects of Europe’s past, such as the holocaust and the persecution of minorities, have been incorporated into the understanding of European cultural heritage.

The inclusion of Auschwitz and the Parthenon under the same banner of European cultural heritage is an illustrative point of another conceptual distinction applied in Calligaro’s book. Instead of speaking about the EU promotion of a ‘European identity’ she applies a looser, a less fixed concept ‘Europeanness’. While the former has an essentialist air around it, Europeanness denotes a less fixed and a looser relationship to Europe. This can be seen in the way in which the entrepreneurs have not themselves aspired to define what Europeanness means. Instead they have left the field wide open for noninstitutional actors to come up with their own understanding of it.

It comes hardly as a surprise that the contexts in which this negotiation of Europeanness has happened has had a distinct impact on the understanding of Europeanness. The fluid nature of this negotiation may be seen, for example, in the discussions in the 1990s and 2000s about the incorporation of Nazi crimes against humanity, but also Stalinist terror or even ordinary German’s suffering in the bombings of Dresden under the umbrella of European cultural heritage. A top-down formation of a ‘European identity’ or ‘negotiating Europeanness’ may therefore both be just as political endeavours with the main difference being not in the aims or the outcomes but in the nature of the process and the range and the roles of the actors involved. The outcomes of both ways of raising cultural or identity political issues on to the European political agenda may not necessarily be that different, but Calligaro’s argument about the contingent and undetermined nature of this process
provides a valuable insight into the workings of the EU’s symbolic and cultural dimension.

At times the entrepreneurs have been confronted with other entrepreneurs: national institutional actors and their preferences. A good example of this is the decision to put national symbols on the obverse side of the eurocoins, as demanded by the national authorities of the eurozone countries. The whole design and decision-making process leading to the adoption of the nationally ‘neutral’ euronotes and the nationally imaged eurocoins is a good illustration of the negotiated coexistence of the European and national imagery and symbolism in the EU promotion of Europeanness.

The book is divided into three main parts, each of which consists of a separate case study. The first deals with the European Commission’s actions to promote a particular understanding of European integration. The focus is on the origins and execution of the Jean Monnet programme to institutionalise the teaching of European integration in the universities, which over time has proved remarkably successful in extending the EU’s soft power within the union and beyond. Calligaro traces the development of the Jean Monnet action all the way back to the 1950s and 1960s and to the initiatives taken then by key individuals to establish a Commission university information policy. As Commission actions in the field of academic research, not to speak of education, were firmly outside the remit of the Commission’s competences, the entrepreneurs and their collaborators in the European Parliament proved skillful in devising means to promote European studies by stretching the limits of what many thought the Commission’s primary tasks were and should have been at the time. The section ends with an analysis of the final institutionalisation of the Jean Monnet programme in the 1990s following earlier information actions.

The first part also discusses initiatives by the Commission to foster cooperation among European historians so as to facilitate the writing of a particular type of European history to show the uniqueness and finality of the European project. What was rather openly called for by the entrepreneurs was a teleological history of Europe, with its logical end in today’s integrated community of Europe. As it happened, academic actors often proved quite resilient with their own approaches, questions and methods. However, it is noticeable how some of the goals of the Commission entrepreneurs were eventually realised in the form of a particular brand of European historiography, such as the fabled history of Europe –project by Frederic Delouche and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, which provided a suitably teleological vision of European history to fit the needs of the entrepreneurs of Europeanness in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The second case study looks at how the concept of cultural heritage was introduced on the European agenda in the 1970s and subsequently institutionalised in the form of heritage policies and programmes on the EU level. There, as well as in the preceding case study, it becomes apparent how the outcomes have been the result of an interplay between centralising and decentralising forces that shape and give meaning to Europe’s common cultural heritage. Of particular interest has been the role of the European Parliament and individual MPs in the promotion of cultural heritage on the agenda of the EU’s cultural policy.

While the supranational level has been significant, this has also allowed a regionalisation of heritage policies by giving room to noninstitutional actors on the subnational level. The same applies also to the negative aspects of European heritage
that have found their place in European heritage policy. However, as the relative absence of the memory of colonialism from the European cultural heritage agenda indicates, it has been easier to introduce the memory and the consequences of the Second World War into the EU cultural policy than other aspects of Europe’s darker past. This is probably explained by the way in which the memory of the Second World War already inhabits a special place in the understanding of what the EU is and what it does, and also against what it stands. Had Robert Schuman taken a stand on May 9, 1950 against slavery and colonialism and not only against the horrors of war and in favour of the ‘development of the African continent’, subsequent developments at the EU level might also have looked different in this area.

The third case involves an aspect of Europeanness that most Europeans quite concretely wear close to their hearts and in their pockets: the design and appearance of the euro notes and coins. The section is also highly interesting and also the first thorough study of how and why the euro ended up looking the way it does. In contrast to the previous cases, and despite the grass root civic activism of Sylvia Bourdon and her ‘graphic ecu competition’ to give the European citizens a voice in the design of the common currency, the main players in this case were institutional actors. Both the European Central Bank, and its organisational predecessors, as well as the national monetary authorities played a decisive role in determining the most appropriate designs for the currency. Perhaps not surprisingly, the ECB’s preference was to erase all national symbols and imagery from the notes. National actors, who had the final say on the coins, preferred the opposite.

On the whole, Calligaro’s book is persuasively argued and thoroughly researched. The three thematic case studies have added up to a challenging, but admirably well mastered research design. Besides different analytical tools such as process tracing, analyses of discourses and visual imagery, she has utilised a variety of documentary sources ranging from archival and other textual materials to a rather extensive use of interviews as well as visual sources.

As it appears that the Commission action directed towards European historians involved a rather small group of individual academics, the current reviewer would have liked the author to contextualise the first case study somewhat more thoroughly with main trends of history writing in Europe at the time. Whereas the teleological interpretation of the EU’s history faced heavy criticism early on, the transnational turn in historical studies that later emerged has in many ways helped to overcome the national parochialism of much of traditional historiography in Europe. Awareness of a subfield of history such as ‘European integration history’ may have helped this trend to come out. Also the discussions of the deep roots, that is, the long structural and cultural continuities and interdependencies behind the European construct seemed to have resonated well with the post-war French school of international and diplomatic history established by Pierre Renouvin and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and their emphasis on history’s forces profondes.

The section on European cultural heritage could easily have been expanded and deepened both empirically and theoretically, and incorporated a more thorough discussion of the rather extensive existing literature on history, memory and heritage in other contexts. Moreover, the demarcation between entrepreneurs of Europeanness and noninstitutional actors appears at times fluid in the analysis, and could have been replaced with a categorisation on the one hand of EU institutional and national institutional actors (exemplified in the part discussing the imagery of the euronotes
and coins), and on the other hand of entrepreneurs on the various institutional settings and arenas, from the national to the trans- and supranational. She may disagree with Cris Shore on the dynamics of the creation of Europeanness or European identity, yet Calligaro’s key actors are also elite actors. While the negotiation processes are not top-down processes, they are nonetheless intraelite or interelite relationships. In this sense the creation and imagining of Europeanness has remained an elite project.

Oriane Calligaro has, on the other hand, wisely kept her focus tight and invested in the high quality of the empirical research and on conceptual innovation. Scholars of the EU from various disciplines, but also anyone interested in the uses of history, culture and symbols in European politics will find this book very valuable.