THE CONSTRUCTION OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Statement prepared for the European Presidency of the European Union

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Preliminary remarks

This is not a research paper. It is a policy oriented document prepared at the request of the Portuguese presidency of the European Union in the first semester of 2000. It does rely on a number of materials, information, and analyses, most of which can be found in my trilogy "The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture" (Oxford: Blackwell, revised edition, 2000). In this context, I will not try to demonstrate my points. This is written in statement mode, to suggest ideas and directions for discussion, with the purpose of advancing in the construction of European identity. I will not be dealing here with major strategic issues, such as economic policy, technological development, and the restructuring of the welfare state, without whose proper treatment, discussions about identity become an empty ideological exercise. I am aware of other papers, included in the same volume, prepared for the Portuguese presidency of the European Union on these matters. They are excellent papers, I agree with them in their main lines, and I will avoid being redundant with their contribution. I will start with one previous question: is European identity a relevant matter in the construction of the European Union?

1. Why European Identity is important

After the creation of the euro, and the constitution of the European Central Bank, the European Union is, for all practical matters, one economy – waiting for the full integration of UK and Sweden to consolidate the union. Any reversal in the process of integration in the coming years would have catastrophic consequences for European economies, and for the global economy. Besides the economic dimension, European Union countries are now intertwined in a web of institutional, social and political relationships which will grow in size and complexity in the coming years, as new countries become associated with the EU, and as the European institutions extend their realm of activity. Thus, we are too far in the process of European integration (with considerable benefits for everybody, to this point) to think the unthinkable: the future breakup of the European Union. And yet, the European ground may be shakier than we believe.

This is, first of all, because the global economy is, and will be characterized, by recurrent crises, in the financial markets, in trade arrangements, and in the integration of social, national, cultural, and environmental demands from people around the world – as WTO's fiasco in Seattle has shown. We were lucky in the 1997-99 crises in Asia, Russia, and Brazil, that financial turbulences were contained within emergent markets. But as core markets become electronically entangled worldwide, and as the dynamism of the new economy is coupled with high doses of risk and unpredictability, we cannot bet on a smooth transition to full-fledged globalization. Besides, the transition to a new technological paradigm, and to a new economy, that is only now picking up speed in Europe, is bringing substantial disruption to important segments of the population, in many regions, and is affecting the interests of social actors and political institutions which were rooted in a very different economy and society. If we add to this, the increasing multi-ethnic character of most European countries, and the emergence of new kinds of geopolitical dangers (nationalism and fundamentalism from the excluded and marginalized from the new economy), I think it is fair to say that we are heading toward a very stormy period – in spite of its extraordinary potential as an age of creativity, prosperity, and institutional reform. It can go both ways depending on what Europeans do. The "Europeans" is of course the tricky part of the equation. Because, who are they?

As long as the European Union is a positive sum game, in which everybody wins (some in economic terms, some in political terms, others in technological terms, still others in social terms), without sacrificing too much of national identity and of political sovereignty, crises of transition are absorbed by countries themselves. Yes, the European Commission is not very popular, and its pitiful performance in 1997-99 has made things worse, although the first months of the Prodi regime have reinvigorated the Commission and given some hope for its future. But, in spite of their distrust of the Commission, people around Europe did not feel (rightly) that the Eurocrats had real power over their lives. Things are changing. Regardless of how much real power Brussels has or will have, the European Union as such, and other supra-national institutions (such as NATO, WTO or IMF), have taken away substantial areas of sovereignty from the European states. Not that nation-states are not disappearing. But they have become nodes, albeit decisive, in a broader network of political institutions: national, regional, local, non-governmental, co-national, and international. Europe is already governed by a network state of shared sovereignty and multiple levels and instances of negotiated decision-making.

Thus, on the one hand, we are heading towards a complex process of economic/technological/cultural transition that will create innumerable problems and resistances – along with new opportunities and wealth. On the other hand, the political system in charge of managing the transition is increasingly disjointed from the social and cultural roots on which European societies are based. In other words: the technology is new; the economy is global; the state is a European network, in negotiation with other international actors; while people's

identity is national, or even local and regional in certain cases. In a democratic society, this kind of structural, cognitive disonance may be unsustainable. While integrating Europe without sharing an European identity is a workable proposition when everything goes well, any major crisis, in Europe or in a given country, may trigger an European implosion of unpredictable consequences. Because the construction of identity is a long term process, we are in a race against the clock between the time horizon of transitional, social/economic crises and the emergence of an European identity on whose behalf citizens around Europe could be ready to share problems and build common solutions. Instead of blaming the neighbor, and de-legitimizing their governments, potentially suspect of eurocracy.

2. **What is European Identity**

For the sake of clarity, identity is a set of values that provide symbolic meaning to people's life by enhancing their individuation (or self-definition) and their feeling of belonging. Or course people may have various identities, according to different spheres of their existence: one can feel Portuguese, socialist, catholic, woman, and all these identities can overlap without major contradiction. Which one is dominant depends on the moment of life and on the realm of activity.

European identity would be the set of values that would provide shared meaning to most European citizens by making possible for them to feel that they belong to a distinctive European culture and institutional system that appeals to them as legitimate and worthwhile. Which could be the sources of such an identity?

It is essential to know, first, what is **not** European identity. It is not a "civilization" based on religion, past history, or a set of supposedly superior "Western values" (a la Hungtinton). European countries have spent centuries (and particularly the last one) killing each other, so the notion of a shared history has a sinister connotation. Religion (meaning Christianity) is an unthinkable source of identity once we have established the separation between the church and the state, and in the historical moment when non-Christian religions (e.g. Islam) are growing fast in the European Union, both among ethnic minorities, and in future member countries (Turkey). Language, one of the most important sources of cultural identity, is, of course, excluded as a common source of European identity, although I will argue that a certain approach to language is essential in constructing identity. National identity as European identity is also impossible, by definition. Nations, and nation-states are not going to fade away. In fact, they are going to grow and become important sources of collective identity, more than ever, as new, formerly oppressed nations, come into the open (Catalunya, Euzkadi, Galicia, Scotland, Wales, Wallonie, Flanders etc), and as strong nationalist movements assert their rights in the public opinion against the submission of the nation to the European state. I start from the assumption that in the foreseeable future, Europe will not be a federal construction similar to the United States. There will be no unified European state, superseding and

cancelling current nation-states. Identification to a political construction, such as the state, cannot be a source of identity, thus eliminating the option of "European nationalism" equivalent to "American nationalism". American national identity emerged from a multi-cultural, immigrant nation. But it was because it was an immigrant nation in an empty continent (or forcefully emptied from its native inhabitants when necessary) that America could combine strong cultural and ethnic identities with an equally strong American identity. Such is not, and will not be, the case of Europe.

So, it is in the realm of values, of new values where we could find the seeds of an European identity. On the basis of surveys of attitudes, and a review of the literature, in my book "End of millennium" (2000) I identified some elements of what I called an "European identity project". Not what I propose, but what appears empirically that would carry a broad cultural consensus throughout Europe, besides the values of political democracy (which is a widely shared value, but not distinctively European). These elements can be identified as shared feelings concerning the need for universal social protection of living conditions; social solidarity; stable employment; workers rights; universal human rights; concern about poor people around the world; extension of democracy to regional and local levels, with a renewed emphasis in citizen participation; the defense of historically rooted cultures, often expressed in linguistic terms; for women, and for some men, gender equality. If European institutions would be able to promote these values, and to accord life and policy with these promises for all Europeans, probably this "project identity" would grow. But the problem is precisely that some of these aspirations will have to be rethought and adapted in the new historical context, for instance in what concerns the welfare state or stable employment. Moreover, the mere enumeration of these values shows that while they are a reasonable wish list, it may not be easy to combine them in a coherent set, beyond their popularity in the public opinion. So, these elements of an European project, while they must be materials to work with, cannot be asserted as a finished model to be imposed top down as, for instance, the French revolution did with its political ideals, to construct, at the same time, the universal citizen and the French nation, as necessary and sufficient conditions of the civilized state and society. This extraordinary accomplishment could be carried on only through military and political domination, and under the conditions of restrictive democracy (without women's voting rights, and without the tolerance of historic cultures beyond the Ile-de-France). In a fully democratic, multicultural, multiethnic Europe, exposed to global flows of communication and information, no project can be imposed from the state. Thus, European identity does not exist, and there is no model that could be taught and diffused from the European institutions, and national governments.

And yet, the problems I raised are still relevant. While national and local identities will continue to be strong and instrumental, if there is no development of a compatible European identity, a purely instrumental Europe will remain a very

fragile construction, whose possible, future wrecking would trigger major crises in European societies.

But if there is no European identity model, there still can be an identity in the making, that is a process of social production of identity. In other words, it is not possible to create, artificially, a European identity, from a "concours d'idees" in the same way that, at one point, the Yeltsin government was trying to find a new Russian identity. However, European institutions could help the development of a series of mechanisms that, in their own dynamics, would configure the embryos of this shared system of values throughout Europe. European governments should also set up a system of observation capable to detect the birth and development of these new values, and to ensure their diffusion, and interaction, while avoiding to transform them in a new ideology, the ideology of pan-europeanism in this case. It is by engaging in social experimentation, by letting society evolve by itself, but helping to constitute an European civil society, that we could see the emergence of a new European identity in a few years from now. The description of some of the potential processes that could induce such identity will help to make this discussion a matter of concrete policy.

3. Questions of method: Building identity by making society

First, who are the actors of this identity construction process? Let me be clear. In the current state of affairs they are mainly the European national governments, acting through the council of ministers of the European Union. The Commission can only be a relatively autonomous manager of shared political decision making. Any attempt to make the Commission the center of power and sponsor of new identity will ultimately provoke the revolt of national and local identities, thus jeopardizing the European Union. The European Union is not, and will not be, a classical federal state. It is a new form of state. And in this new form of state the connection to societies rests on the various nodes that assume direct political representation. The construction of European identity, if it ever happens, will be the fact of European societies, under the strategic impulse of the Council of Ministers, reflecting a common project shared across the political spectrum by the countries participating in it. To say so is to say that there cannot be an agreement on the content of European identity (for instance, between conservatives and socialists, between ultra-nationalists and greens etc.) **But a consensus could be built on the method**, on the mobilization of societies towards new, shared values that would be widely diffused throughout Europe, so that every party, interest group, or ideology, would hope to win in the process: it is similar to sharing democracy as a method, without having to agree on the substance of politics. Democracy, besides being a principle, is, in practical terms, a method, a method of political representation and governance.

What could be the method of identity building in a shared consensus between countries and political forces throughout Europe? Here is where this paper must

dare to become speculative and prospective, since these are entirely uncharted waters.

4. <u>Social and institutional processes of European identity building</u>

Remember: all processes of production of identity are based on a common methodology. Identity is built by sharing cultural and social practices throughout Europe, letting the outcome of this sharing emerge from the experience. In other words, we do not know what this European identity will be, but we could create the material possibilities for its emergence from society, then reinforcing and communicating emerging embryos with the help of European institutions. I certainly know that some of the elements of the mechanisms proposed are already in practice in Europe. I am simply emphasizing them, and adding other proposals which are less diffused or non existent.

The first, and most obvious, of such mechanisms is **education**. There must be introduced in all levels of the education system of every country, some common elements, including the history, and culture, and language of other countries in the programs of all schools. Hopefully larger proportions of teachers and students will spend periods of their school activity in other countries, along the lines pioneered by the Erasmus program for university students. Yet, a true interpenetration of education systems requires a serious effort, and a concerted policy of European countries in this direction. Equivalence of pedagogic systems and programs (which does not mean the uniformization of all programs, quite the contrary) will allow passages from one system to another, and will make possible to use the degrees obtained in one country in the entire European market, in real terms (current possibility is only on paper, since in most cases, qualifications and language skills are not really equivalent, from the perspective of employers. Indeed: less than 3% of European Union citizens work in an EU country different from their own country)

The second mechanism, still to be explored, is the widespread diffusion and use of **Internet** in the population at large. Internet is a privileged tool of communication and access to information. It is not just a technology, it's the economic, cultural, and political backbone of the information age. An Internet-literacy campaign, aimed mainly at the adult population (the children will have it at school) would provide the communication bridge among Europeans, and would bring all societies on the same technological level. The model experience of Finland in this sense could be an example from where to build.

The third mechanism is a **pan-European linguistic policy**, aiming at the cross-cultural diffusion of all languages in all countries, through the education system at all levels, via Internet, by cultural programs etc. I am always chagrined when I see how in American leading universities students can learn not only major languages, such as Portuguese or French, but also Catalan, Finnish, or Swahili. True, most American students do not learn languages. But, with cultural and

educational incentives, European students would. And this multi-linguistic web could be a source of true multiculturalism.

Fourth, we need a **paneuropean media policy**. The coming of multimedia may be dominated by Hollywood and San Francisco and New York multimedia designers, and by global mega-conglomerates such as the one prefigurated by AOL/Time-Warner. The European reaction is nationalistic, defensive, and ultimately doomed in a market economy. In the age of Internet and satellite communication is not by imposing quotas that we will bring people to alternative sources of culture and communication, different from the ones currently dominating in the business world. Europe should not subsidize private groups just because they are European, but European governments should allow their merger and strengthening, or they will not be competitive. European governments should also act is in favoring the development of high-quality, competitive, publicly subsidized, multimedia groups operating independently under a charter. Modelled upon the performance of the BBC, an independent, high-quality, globally competitive, multi-media group, a network of joint ventures among public European TVs and studios should be able to develop. It should also open up, from the beginning to private Internet Service Providers, to position European cultural senders in the coming process of technological convergence in the media system. A paneuropean media system, both public and private, will be the corner stone of an emergent European culture.

Not everything is culture: **geographical mobility of labor** is essential to build a common European experience. The conditions under which Southern Europeans emigrated to Northern Europe must not be repeated. The integration of a labor market would require access to housing and social services, equivalent professional qualifications, and equal rights. If people truly can work everywhere in Europe, not only the economy will reap extraordinary benefits, and unemployment may be reabsorbed, but people will experience in real terms other life styles, other cultures. If this is accomplished in conditions of equality and non discrimination, the Europe that works together will learn to live together.

On the condition that we tackle up front **the issue of multiethnicity and multiculturalism**. Europe is fast becoming a continent of ethnic minorities. The proportion of foreign born population in Germany is already almost the same than the African-American population in the US, at about 12%. And, as for African-Americans, most people from ethnic minorities concentrate in the largest metropolitan areas, thus increasing their visibility. Because of the differential birth rate vis a vis native populations, the coming two decades will bring an spectacular increase of multiethnicity throughout Europe. If we add the future integration of Eastern European and Turks in the European Union, Europe must design from now on specific policies of cultural integration, based on equal rights, and respect of differences, that should be applied throughout the continent. In addition, Europe needs a new immigration policy that, could attract the necessary talent that exists around the world, and would be open to genuine political

refugees, but, at the same time should clamp down on illegal immigration, and particularly on the mafias that are bringing into Europe about half a million undocumented immigrants every year. In addition, policies of easy naturalization for lawful residents should be designed, and applied in similar terms in all countries. The building of an European identity can only proceed on the basis of the acceptance of its multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural character, and this acceptance needs a material basis in immigration and naturalization policies, in multiculturalism in the education system, and in the openness of the media, and of cultural institutions to the diversity of cultural expressions.

Building bridges in Europe means also building **bridges between European cities and between European regions.** There are already a number of dynamic networks and dynamic institutions, including the Committee of Regions, an advisory body to the European Commission. National governments should accept, and encourage the initiative of sub-national governments to establish their own European networks. A defensive attitude from national governments in this matter will lead to endless internal conflicts, while cities from different countries will be competitors rather than cooperators. Inter-municipal, and inter-regional European networks are essential sources of reconstructing culture, besides yielding considerable economic benefits.

Similar **pan-European networks exist among business organizations, labor organizations, cultural associations (such as European artists), and citizen groups**. With or without governmental support, the creation of this European network of social actors is another layer of identity construction, as they are the embryos of an European civil society.

More complex is the issue **of political identity**. It cannot be built through allegiancy to an unlikely European federal state. In this sense, the European democratic deficit does not come from the powerlessness of the European Parliament. The strengthening of the Parliament would lead to true supranationality and federalism, something that most public opinions, and most political parties would not tolerate. The European commission does not have to be submitted to the European Parliament, but to the European governments, to the Council of Ministers. The key democratic issue is the transparency for citizens of what the Council of Ministers does, and the explicit inclusion of European policies in the political platforms of parties in the national, regional, and local elections. **European democracy is not accomplished by removing institutions from their roots of representation, but by bringing European institutions down to where citizens live and feel**. However, increasing the activity and role of the European parliament, and connecting it more explicitly to a European constituency, is one element, among others, in the building of a shared identity.

And last but not least, **European identity will be built around a common international policy, which includes a common defense policy**. Only if

citizens realize that by being Europeans they can act upon global issues in terms of their own values and interests, will they realize how important it is. Under current conditions, European international policy is confused, non existent, or powerless. And, among other things, it is powerless because it is entirely subordinated to NATO in terms of defense. Europe needs an independent European armed forces, with full technological and operational capability, working in close cooperation with NATO and with the United States. But to be able to assert this independence, Europe needs to invest in technology, to increase its military budget, and to train a multinational, professional armed forces. It is hypocritical to resent "American hegemony", and then call upon the United States each time there is a serious security crisis, letting the U.S. foot the bill in resources, and personnel. If Europe wants autonomy, it has to assume its fair share of the Western defense burden. The recently created Rapid Deployment Force is a good beginning, but too modest and without the actual military capability for acting independently. To assert itself in the international arena, as a unit, would clarify for Europeans the values and strategic goals for which Europe stands. But for this not to be empty rhetoric, and then being able to permeate down the consciousness of citizens, European governments would need to set up a common system of international representation, coordinating their presence in international institutions, and provide Europe with the financial and military means to back up its positions. Only then could emerge, truly, an European political identity, as one of the dimensions of European identity.

Finally, since all these mechanisms are very indirect approaches to the building of an European identity, European institutions should be able to monitor their development, and to identify the actual elements of European identity as they emerge from practice in society. So an **European Identity Observatory** should be constituted, based on a network of observers and analysts, with a very light infrastructure, very economical means, no power, and as independent as possible. It should report on an annual basis on the level of development of European identity, and on the substantive elements that appear to configurate the emerging model. European institutions could start modelling themselves according to the cultural expressions and organizational forms emerging from civil societies throughout Europe. Maybe then new forms of democracy could emerge, as states learn to follow and adapt to the evolution of society.