

## Our Poor Individualism, or In Search of a National, Cultural or Religious Identity

“There is no end to the illusions of patriotism.”  
Jorge Luis Borges, *Our Poor Individualism*

*Recent discussions regarding the EU Coronavirus recovery fund temporarily reinstated at the heart of the European Union old stereotypes that had apparently been left behind, or so we thought. European citizens were astonished to see how the media (and European leaders) profusely resorted to old clichés, so-called “national identities”, to frame the negotiations: a group of North European countries self-defined as the “frugal North” set itself in opposition against the “irresponsible South” (Bialasiewicz 2020). However, does such a thing as identity, let alone a national, cultural or religious identity, actually exist?*

Queen Máxima provoked quite a bit of controversy in the Netherlands some years ago when she asserted: “The Dutchman does not exist”. In her address to the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy in 2007, Máxima defended her view that Dutch identity is too versatile to be reduced to a stereotype. To appease the Dutch audience – perhaps even to prevent criticism – she added that Argentinian identity did not exist either. This latter remark shows that, despite all the fuss her words caused, the queen was trying to frame her address in line with (at that time) current discussions regarding the very notion of identity, which had recently been contested. In the wake of philosophers such as Hume, Kant and Nietzsche, sociologists around the turn of the 21st century were reluctant to accept the concept, denouncing identity as not something which people can assert that they “are” or “have”, since there is only, in fact, a rather open-ended process of identification. Rather, people use the notion of identity as an excuse to justify their actions and opinions, and we should thus beware misuses of the notion, such as for the sake of strategies of exclusion.

Historians have also contested the existence of a notion of identity in the past, for example in ancient Rome. Not only was Roman citizenry the result of a multitude of identities merging together; the very idea of “Roman-ness” was much too ambiguous. While urban in origin, Roman identity ended up as an imperial notion. The term could either refer to a civic, regional or else transnational entity of the Roman Empire. This fluctuation only increased over time and, by late antiquity, it was also used to represent cultural, territorial, political, and ethnic undercurrents. Besides, Roman identity was so versatile and dynamic that *the Roman identity project* was never entirely accomplished. Up to the Augustan period, the formative process of Italic identity was characterised by advances and relapses, pauses and interruptions, until it reduced its intensity in the first years CE. In this sense, Andrea Giardina speaks of the Roman *identità incompiuta* or ‘incomplete identity’.

Something similar happened with the so-called Early Christian identity. Church Fathers such as Irenaeus did their best to forge a uniquely Christian profile, and rejected as external pollution anything that did not fit into it. Since the beginning of the 20th century we have known, however, that the view of a uniform and unique Christianity was a highly cherished ideal that contrasted with a rather different reality: in the main cities of the Roman Empire Christianity was in fact enormously diverse. During recent decades scholars have made increasingly clear that this was also the case in Rome: Christianity in second century Rome was amazingly diverse and was far from presenting the uniformity the bishop Irenaeus claimed. The variety of beliefs, writings, and rituals of Roman Christians attest to this diversity, which could hardly be beaten into the mould of a unique Christian identity shaped by Church Fathers. Migrants to the Eternal City, most Christians came from different regions of the Roman Empire and had rather diverse backgrounds. Christian immigrants not only tended to group together in certain areas of the city and form their own Christian communities; they also followed the guidelines laid down by the bishops of their hometowns, rather than Roman leaders, and brought with them their own collections of writings. Christian identity was as versatile and dynamic as modern Dutch or ancient Roman identity.

Our brief review of national, cultural or religious claims to identity shows that the notion is a precarious one. Admittedly, classification is central to human knowledge, and to classify we need first to identify. Identity as a generic notion, therefore, may help us to know who “we” and the “others” are and to determine our position in the world. However, caution is mandatory in order to avert misuses of the notion with essentialist claims: the hybridity of Europe’s population, the versatility of so-called national identities in a globalized world, and the ambiguity and dynamism of the notion of identity itself should prevent us from doing so.

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