National Identity and Structural Incompatibilities:
On the Rise of Neo-nationalism in Europe

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, new waves of immigration to Western Europe, particularly from Eastern Europe and North Africa and the Middle East, associated with increased internal migration within European Union member states have created a pan-European and multi-ethnic reality which is challenging the 'pseudo-historical' conceptualization of national identity in many Western European nations. The change in the nature and definition of national identity has faced various degrees of social resistance which have been magnified by structural incompatibilities that may have, in turn, facilitated the rise of neo-nationalism in Europe. Neo-nationalist rhetoric attempts to define national identity along essentialist and seclusive lines. In strictly defining who has (and does not have) membership in a given national identity, some of the avowed goals of neo-nationalism are to advocate and protect a national ethnos based upon a fiction of purity and authenticity; to prevent immigrants from participating in national labor markets; and to limit their access to state sponsored social service provisioning. In the context of the literature on social identity formation and capability deprivation, I contend that Veblen's institutional perspective on nationalism can shed some light on the situation of cultural and structural incompatibilities that surrounded the rise of neo-nationalist parties in the 1990s and 2000s in the EU.

"Born in iniquity and conceived in sin, the spirit of nationalism has never ceased to bend human institutions to the service of dissension and distress. In its material effects, it is altogether the most sinister as well as the most imbecile of all those institutional incumbrances that have come down out of the old order. (Veblen 1923:38-39)"

Introduction

The past two decades have been marked by renewed intensification in nationalist sentiment (i.e. the ideology that one's personal identity is dependent upon one's social affiliation with a political community that is exactly contained within a national unit) and increased political visibility of neo-nationalist parties in Western Europe. In many instances the renewed nationalist fervor has created significant social, political and economic tensions. Among many factors, the rise of neo-nationalism can be linked in particular to two important phenomena: immigration to and within the European Union (EU) and EU integration (Gingrich and Banks 2005, Mammone 2009). The collapse of the Soviet system and increased inequality, political oppression and religious fundamentalism in certain developing nations fueled a new wave of immigration to Western Europe in the 1990s. This wave of immigration coincided with a time period during which Western European countries were experiencing chronic high rates of unemployment; were losing some of their symbols of national identity (such as their currency or the opacity of their national borders); were facing a weakening of the welfare-state model; and were transferring more of their national decision-making power to EU institutions through the implementation of the Euro zone and European integration and enlargement (Gingrich and Banks 2005, Mammone 2009).

During this time period what had previously been somewhat 'homogenous' definitions of national identity—based upon the creation of nation-states as imagined communities during the

19th century (Hobsbawm 1990, Anderson 1991)—began to be called into question among Western European nations as national identity boundaries were challenged to encompass a pan-European (Europeanness) and multi-cultural reality (resulting from such events as the migration of central and eastern European workers, the increased practice of non-Christian religions and/or traditions, etc). The change in the nature and definition of national identity has faced various degrees of social resistance in many Western European nations. It is argued here that the dualistic nature (or double-sided consciousness) of nationalism (i.e. solidarity vs. otherism) has been in fact increasingly polarized through quasi-schizophrenic policies in many European nations. This context has led to situations in which de-ethnicization policies, aimed at "ethnicity/culture-blind" assimilation, coexist with residency and citizenship compatibility tests which explicitly discriminate against specific 'ethnic' groups. This dichotomy is illustrative of the existence of structural incompatibilities which have created a chasm between the notion of citizenship (membership to a state) and that of nationality (membership to a nation). It is contended here that the rise of neo-nationalism in Europe has not only been facilitated by, but has also reinforced, these incompatibilities.

Neo-nationalist rhetoric attempts to define national identity along essentialist and seclusive lines, seeking to exclude certain groups, such as minorities or immigrants, from membership into nation *and* state. In strictly defining who has (and does not have) membership into a given national identity, some of the avowed goals of neo-nationalism are to advocate and protect a national ethnos based upon a fiction of purity and authenticity (Appadurai 2006); to prevent immigrants from participating in national labor markets; and to limit immigrants and minorities' access to state sponsored social service provisioning. Overall it is argued that neo-nationalist rhetoric has sought to distort the process of national (social) identity formation, in

order to take advantage of a structural rift so as to maintain politically beneficial situations of socio-cultural maladjustment (Veblen 1899, Sen 2004, Jackson 2005, Duroy 2010).

Within a social realist framework, this paper proposes to shed some light on the situation of structural and cultural incompatibilities that surrounded the rise of neo-nationalist parties in the 1990s and 2000s in the EU through a discussion of the process of social (national) identity affiliation, informed by Veblen's institutional perspective on nationalism. Accordingly, the first section situates the concept of national identity within a discussion of the notions of social and personal identity. In the second section specific emphasis is placed upon the double-sided nature of nationalism and upon the socio-economic consequences of membership in national identity. Finally the third section offers a discussion of neo-nationalism in the EU within the theoretical framework presented in the paper.

Social and Personal Identities

Social identities are social constructs based upon characteristics (including but not limited to: experiences, values, attitudes, beliefs, symbols, customs, practices, phenotypic traits, geographical location, place of birth, gender, ethnic background, professional or personal activities) which represent social roles that are shared by groups of individuals in society (Sen 2004, Duroy 2010; 2011). Sen argued that in the face of various socio-cultural constraints, individuals apply reasoning and self-scrutiny in the choice and prioritisation of multiple social identities to which they wish to commit.

An individual's personal identity refers to their "frame of reference, that is, the basic beliefs and commitments in terms of which they define themselves and locate themselves in the world (Parekh 2009b:289)." Personal identity is largely built upon a combination of social

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identities—a combination which is altered throughout one's life— in which an individual is born (such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality) and of social identities s/he commits to (through, for instance, education or employment). This combination of social identities can be argued to be located in the capability space "because it reflects the evaluative process of a person, who is endowed with certain functionings and who wants to achieve specific capabilities in order to change her functionings (Teschl and Derobert 2008:127)." Among a set of capabilities, "people select functionings that yield personal well-being and meet any external objectives. The final end is improved quality of life, including well-being and other relevant goals (Jackson 2005:104)."

Social identities are continually reconstructed in response to internal and external forces—for example changes within the group (e.g. changes in German national identity between 1997 and 2006 as over 1 million individuals from non-western European nations acquired German citizenship[1]) and changes outside of the group (e.g. changes to the meaning of membership to socialist parties in Europe in a post-communist, neoliberal world) (Coles 2002; Davis 2006; Duroy 2010). Thus social identities "need to be simultaneously explained in terms of invariance and change" (Davis 2006:382), for as Veblen (1899[1994]:119) observed "this adjustment [i.e. the process of social identity formation] is never definitely established since the 'outer relations' are subject to constant change as a consequence of the progressive change going on in the 'inner relations.'"

Changes in social identities can have significant social and economic consequences, in particular when membership in social identities such as national identity affects an individual's access to the production and distribution of economic resources and political power in a given country (Eisenstadt 1998). Membership in or socio-cultural exclusion from a given national

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[1] Data available at http://www.oecd.org/document/52/0,3343,en_2649_39023663_42274676_1_1_1_1,00.html accessed 28 September 2009.

identity do not guarantee the automatic provisioning, or lack thereof, of economic resources; however, it can facilitate or impede access to these resources (e.g. finding a job one is qualified for or being granted access to state-sponsored social services) and can thus affect the set of capabilities available to individuals and ultimately their life prospects.

National Identity in a Relational Society

The implicit or explicit exclusion from membership into national identity for minority groups by culturally-dominant groups could lead to situations of capability deprivation (such as difficult access to jobs one is qualified for because of 'socially condoned' labor discrimination against particular 'ethnic' groups or minorities).[2] Understanding how certain groups of individuals can be excluded from membership into national identity in the (hegemonic) nationalist discourse necessitates a discussion of the role of agency in socio-cultural reproduction and/or transformation. In what follows a social realist ontological notion of relational society is used to guide this discussion.

A relational conception of society signifies that "social structures and their mechanisms emerge from relations between people and relations between people and nature (Smith and Seward, 2009, p.224)." Social structures represent an objective reality that pre-exists and shapes human activity and that is in turn transformed or reproduced through human activities (agency). Social structures—e.g. social roles, institutions, stratification (race, class, gender, etc.)—and culture—e.g. constituents of the cultural system such as beliefs and values—are the results of past relations between structure, culture and agency. Thus structural conditions (such as the dominance of a particular religion in a given country) and cultural conditions (such as the impact

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[2] For an account of the exclusion of North African individuals from French national identity as construed by the Republican model of integration into French society see Duroy 2010.

of religion on the mode of behavior in a given country) shape the social reality in which individuals are born (Archer 1995). Through their socio-cultural interactions as social agents, individuals eventually reproduce and/or modify their structured reality. This sequence of structural (and cultural) conditioning, social (and cultural) interaction and structural (and cultural) elaboration is referred to as the morphogenetic approach (Archer 1995; 2000).

Relationships among social agents are also the product of past socio-cultural contexts. Thus, in a double morphogenetic process, not only are structure and culture modified (elaboration phase) via social interactions but relations among social agents are also altered (as new social roles/identities may become available or may be denied to individuals) as structure and culture are transformed. "The incidence of complementarities [at the structural and cultural level] serves to identify the potential loci of systemic reproduction and the occurrence of incompatibilities the potential loci of systemic transformation (Archer 1995:215)."

The incidence of complementarities and/or incompatibilities is conditioned by the relative power of interacting social groups (i.e. agential relations among vested interests). As long as the distribution of power is favorable to groups ('corporate agents') who desire to maintain the status quo systemic reproduction is likely to occur. Thus if corporate agents representing a cultural majority are defining their national identity around a sense of hard cultural homogeneity (for example, by arguing that the meaning of French identity or British identity is derived from ancient history or is jus sanguinis), and that their perspective is reinforced by existing institutions (through for instance the existence of compulsory integration courses teaching immigrants what it means to be French or British), situations of racism and discrimination leading to capability deprivation could ensue because by virtue of their 'foreignness' (im)migrants will never be 'true' nationals (Duroy 2010).

National Identity and Mental Models

Studies have shown that members sharing a social identity have a similar perception of what this identity is comprised of and of how it is related to their own personal identity (i.e. self-understanding of who they are) (see for instance Caulkins et al. 2000, Dressler and Bindon 2000, Hedges and Caulkins 2000, and Dressler et al. 2005). This holds especially true with regard to national identity as Tyrell argued (2007:516) that "nationals internalize the same national culture, whatever that might be, [and] they identify themselves and one another as part of the same national community."

Therefore, what these studies imply is that individuals have the ability to ascribe specific themes and content to social identity. This is most likely made possible through mental models shared between members of a group. Mental models are "internal representations that individual cognitive systems create to interpret the environment" (Denzau and North 1994: 4). While mental models are formed through individual experience, they are shaped by cultural conditioning[3] and reflect the social character of agency (Stanfield 2011). Thus shared mental models are, for a large part, derived from "the intergenerational transfer of unifying perceptions" (Denzau and North 1994:15).

The existence of unifying perceptions facilitates inclusion into a group as well as communication between the members of the group. However, the transfer of unifying perceptions is not an exact replica of a given and invariable set of perceptions of public representations. From one individual to another there are likely to be significant differences in the amount and elaboration of knowledge transferred as well as in personal experience (Dressler and Bindon 2000). In addition, contents, themes and boundaries of social identities are constantly

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[3] Shared mental models are acquired by interacting with others (this occurs in childrearing, in school, in the work place, in associations/group meetings, via the media, etc.).

renegotiated, thus the essentialist belief that all members of a group share the same mental models and the same sense of identity (i.e. hard cultural homogeneity) is at best erroneous.

In the process of societal change (i.e. structural and cultural transformation or morphogenesis), mental models are modified—through agential relations in the phase of cultural elaboration which eventually leads to new cultural conditioning—to adapt to new circumstances in order to provide mental representations of new public information.[4] As Veblen explained (1899[1994]:119): "The evolution of society is substantially a process of mental adaptation on the part of individuals under the stress of circumstances that no longer tolerate habits of thought formed under and conforming to a different set of circumstances in the past." However, the modification of shared mental models is argued to be constrained by human limited cognitive ability (i.e. limited ability to process new information) and ideological inertia (i.e. resistance to change by corporate agents) (Denzau and North 1994, Ostrom 2005).

These constraints were first articulated in Veblen (1899[1994]:119, emphasis added): "These institutions which have so been handed down, these habits of thought, points of view, mental attitudes and aptitudes, are therefore themselves a *conservative factor*." In addition, "the aversion to change is in large part an aversion to the bother of making the readjustment which any given change will necessitate; and this solidarity of any given culture or of any given people strengthens the *instinctive resistance* offered to any change in men's habits of thought (Veblen 1899[1994]:126, emphasis added)." The prevalence of instinctive resistance to change theorized by Veblen led him to point out, rightly, to a dialectical relationship between solidarity and "otherism" in the conceptualization of national identity (Habermas 2001). However, I would

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[4] For instance "the appearance of *Islamophobia* as a key term in European discourse (…) connotes an altogether new level of concern for the presence of Islam in Europe, linked, as it is, to unprecedented migratory movements (Bunzl 2005:535, italics in original)" While Islamophobia is largely imputable to the colonial era, its current interpretation in Europe is also influenced by recent terrorist acts that took place in the US, Spain and the UK (Allen 2010).

argue that ultimately Veblen overemphasized the divisive side of national identity to the detriment of the ability of nationalism to create a sense of solidarity among given (imagined) communities.

The Rise of Neo-Nationalism

National identity, as a specific type of social identity which reflects the membership of individuals into a given political community, is characterized by positive/inclusivist statements of what it is and negative/exclusivist statements of what it is not (often using other identities or communities as reference points) (Parekh 2000). When the exclusivist side of national identity is emphasized to the detriment of its inclusivist side, the unreasoned assertion that one's personal identity is solely based upon one's national identity (as their single social identity) can lead to social tension and conflict (Parekh 2009a, Sen 2009). In the context of the First World War, the "dark side" of national identity undoubtedly influenced Veblen's quote cited in the opening of the paper.

19th and early 20th century official/populist nationalisms in Europe constituted for Veblen (1923: 39) most unwelcome atavisms: "The national mob-mind of vanity, fear, hate, contempt, and servility continues to make the loyal citizen a convenient tool in the hands of the Adversary, whether these sentiments cluster about the anointed person of a sovereign or about the magic name of the Republic." He perceived state-building in the Middle Ages as a predatory enterprise between rival princes. Eventually, "[the] prince became a sovereign; that is to say, all men became subject and abjectly inferior to him, in the nature of things; and to him, for *no reasoned cause*, all men thereupon owed unquestioning and unqualified obedience and service in the divine nature of things (Veblen 1923:26)." Thus the concept of sovereignty was established and

in the transition to 'democratic systems' it was passed "intact to the Nation (Veblen 1923:26)."

According to Veblen, the logical interpretation of the development of nationalism was thus that

sovereign citizens owed unquestioning and unqualified allegiance to themselves. In the context

of World War I, Veblen (1923:25) argued that Western nations continued the "traffic of war and

politics" in the same way and using the same means as sovereign princes in medieval times.

While Veblen (1923:28) yearned for a democratic system divested from sovereignty and divine

right, in which "democratic commonwealths (…) [would be] neighborly fellowships of ungraded

masterless men given over to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' under the ancient and

altogether human rule of live and let live;" in the blind drift of habituation, patriotic fervor had

been elevated to the highest civic virtue.

While one is sympathetic with Veblen's account given the bloody legacy of the 20th

century, perhaps a slightly more nuanced approach to nationalism may be warranted in order to

provide some light to the current resurgence of neo-nationalism in Western Europe. Veblen

rightfully noted the shortcomings of the notion of official nationalism, highlighting that the

definition of national identity necessitates by nature the exclusion of the Other. This is especially

true when national identity is articulated around a sense of hard cultural homogeneity, for

membership of immigrants and minorities into national identity can occur only through strict

cultural assimilation. Because strict assimilation is, at the minimum, unrealistic (Tyrrell 2007),

this signifies that a fraction of the population will be excluded from the benefits of membership

to national identity. However, "[if] an overarching national identity can be established without

homogenization, national states and movements can afford to be more tolerant of cultural and

ethnic diversity within the national population (Tyrell 2007:517)."

Indeed, the social construction of national identity within the concept of nation-states as imagined communities also created a sense of solidarity among individuals who had previously been stranger to one another (Anderson 1991, Habermas 2001). Thus national identity is characterized by a dualism emphasizing both solidarity among strangers sharing an imagined community as well as exclusion of the 'Other'—a phenomenon which Habermas (2001) referred to as double-sided national consciousness. The creation of nation-states as imagined communities during the 19th century was based upon a fiction of ethnos constructed around the presumed existence of commonalities of descent, language and history among members of European nations (Habermas 2001)—a conceptualization of cultural homogeneity that is based upon a very narrow view of European history (Neverdeen Pieterse 1994b). In the presence of structural and cultural rifts, the impact of external forces (such as imperialism or globalization) and internal forces (e.g. political manipulation by vested interests) on this double-sided national consciousness has led, more often than not, to dissension, distress and violence against minority groups (Veblen 1923), as minorities are "often the carrier of unwanted memories of the acts of violence that produced existing states, of forced conscription, or of violent extrusion as new states were formed (Appadurai 2006:42)."

Nationalist politics (mostly championing an essentialist racial/ethnic definition of national identity) reached its apogee in Europe in the 1930s in the form of fascism (Italy, Spain, France, etc) and national socialism (Germany) which eventually precipitated a global conflict (World War II) (Hobsbawm 1990). In post World War II Europe, the fear of resurgence of fascism and dictatorship meant that nationalist parties became and remained marginalized throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (Mammone 2009). However, in the 1990s nationalist parties started gaining momentum anew as their rhetoric was fueled by economic and social

changes and tensions, e.g. high unemployment rates, immigration, and European integration (Mammone 2009).[5]

What distinguishes neo-nationalism from older forms of nationalism is that the former co-exists with the current political systems in Western Europe. Indeed "these movements mostly operate within the legal, parliamentary channels, and they use essentialised notions of local culture to mobilise against real and alleged threats to local identities of status, gender, religion, nationhood and ethnicity (Banks and Gingrich 2005:23)." Neo-nationalist parties in the EU became full-fledged parliamentary parties in many EU countries in the 1990s: France, Belgium, Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands (Gingrich and Banks 2005). Whereas 19th century nationalism was often organized around the issue of race, the discourse of neo-nationalism today is focused on cultural fundamentalism: i.e. on the promise to fight the threats to national culture and to restore familiar forms of national identity (such as whiteness, Christian traditions, national language, masculinity, etc.) (Banks and Gingrich 2005, Mammone 2009).

Neo-nationalism has exploited and reinforced structural and cultural contingent incompatibilities in many European nations. Indeed on the one hand, countries such as France, the UK and Germany have asserted their willingness to de-ethnicize their 'nation' through universal models of integration (such as the French Republican model), through new laws emphasizing jus soli over jus sanguinis (Germany) or by linking national identity to specific civic duties devoid of any cultural or ethnic dimension (UK) (Antonsich 2009, Duroy 2010). On the other hand, stricter immigration laws (France), citizenship/residency tests (the UK), potential expulsion of foreign residents and 1st generation citizens committing crimes (France) and mainstream political rhetoric denigrating specific 'ethnic' groups (such as individuals of Turkish descent in Germany) have also rendered membership into national identity more difficult in

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[5] The renewal of nationalism (in a populist form) is generally referred to as neo-nationalism.

those same countries (Antonsich 2009). This situation is characteristic of socio-cultural incompatibilities which result from 1) embracing the post-national multi-cultural EU project (solidarity) while at the same time 2) reacting to the pressure of neoliberal policies and globalization on the meaning and relevance of the nation-state (otherism).

Increasingly, in the context of a globalized world, 'Brussels' neoliberal policies' have led to the end of the welfare-state model, erased national borders and displaced decision-making power. In this context, "the nation-state has been steadily reduced to the fiction of its ethnos as the last cultural resource over which it may exercise full dominion (Appadurai 2006:23)." The two coexisting and competing sides of nationalism (solidarity vs. otherism) have led to what Appadurai has named the anxiety of incompleteness, which neo-nationalist parties have sought to exploit in Europe. The neo-nationalist rhetoric based upon "fantasies of purity, authenticity, borders, and security," is designed to legitimize old mental models reflecting a historically-challenged conceptualization of national identity in Europe. The objective of neo-nationalism is close the gap that structural incompatibilities have created between citizenship and nationality in order to exclude individuals who do not belong to the 'original' ethnos not only from the nation bus also from the state (Appadurai 2006:23). The attempt by mainstream political parties to co-opt neo-nationalist rhetoric (in France and Germany notably) has only served to legitimize neo-nationalist sentiment, the consequence of which has been the creation of situations of capability deprivation for individuals (citizen and immigrants alike) who are 'denied' membership in the nation (Duroy 2010). As long as current socio-cultural incompatibilities persist, neo-nationalist sentiment will continue to be legitimized and to create situations of capability deprivation by constraining certain individuals/minority groups' ability to attain their full set of capabilities.

Concluding Thoughts

Pan-Europeanization, neoliberalism and multi-cultural immigration are internal and external forces which have led to a renegotiation of the boundaries of national identity in Western European countries in recent times (Corresponding to socio-cultural interaction and elaboration phases of the morphogenetic cycle). Ensuring that solidarity in national and post-national contexts is emphasized in lieu of otherism and exclusion in the double-sided consciousness of national identity will necessitate that current socio-cultural incompatibilities be resolved so that European nations embrace their Europeanness and multiculturalism. This will be possible only if the social and political dimensions of the EU project can be explored further through the real democratic involvement of EU member states and EU accession candidates (i.e. ensuring that the EU does not remain solely an Elite project). On a more pragmatic level, the modification of mental models which legitimize the fiction of authenticity of national ethnos will necessitate a type of education which emphasizes globally oriented national citizenship by stressing responsibility and moral obligations towards "other" human beings (Parekh 2003). In particular this type of education should highlight the development of European nations as cultural hybrids:

> "Each of the celebrated stations of Europe – Greece, Rome, Christianity,
> Renaissance, Enlightenment – turns out to be a moment of cultural mixing:
> Greece, an outpost of Egyptian, Phoenician and Asian civilization; Rome,
> strongly indebted to Greece, Egypt, Carthage; Christianity, an Asian religion
> originally, whose non-European career with Byzantium, the Nestorians and
> Gnostics at times loomed larger than the career of European, i.e. Latin,
> Christendom; the Renaissance, a recovery of Hellenic civilization passed on
> through Arabic civilization and deeply engaged with non-European cultures; the

Enlightenment, another period wide open to non-European influences, from China

to Egypt…(Neverdeen Pieterse 1994b:146)"

Cultivating a sense that all cultures are hybrid should help reinforce the solidarity side of

national identity rather than its dark destructive side (Neverdeen Pieterse 1994a). Only a

deliberate, democratic personal and collective critical engagement (through education, social

movements, etc) with a nation's history and its place within Europe will ensure that individuals

do not fall victim to "that unreasoning habit of national conceit, fear, hate, contempt, and

servility (Veblen 1923:28)." The EU project was (partly) born of the democratic intention to

serve the common good. While it has yet to be fully realized, there are reasons to believe that this

objective is still achievable (Cerutti and Lucarelli 2008). Indeed in forging their personal

identities, humans act as evaluative beings who seek to make sense of their inner and outer world

facing the many forces that attempt to influence them (Archer 2000). It is this evaluative

character that makes it possible for individuals to make *reasoned choices* about who they are and

who they would like to be, and to appreciate their common bond with the rest of humanity.

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