

Deconstructing European Identity: Exploring Identity through the Prism of Cosmopolitanism and Multiculturalism

Abstract: The issue of European identity as distinct from the national identity one possesses within European Union is a perplexing one, which goes beyond the usual understanding of the domains of the geographical frontiers or cultural ideas encompassing identity. As different approaches to understand European identity evolve, including the supranational thought of building a collective European identity, there are also strong nationalistic forces striving to maintain their respective national identities. However, with time, it appears that the national identities are being threatened, national borders are being eroded, and the changing dynamics of nation states are leading to the emergence of a newer kind of European identity, which is characterized by a state of 'a-identity'. This paper emphasizes the fluid state of European identity, which changes in accordance with context. The paper seeks to discuss the unstable nature of collective identity of an individual in Europe through Jacques Derrida's views on deconstruction. It aims at the construction of a perceptive paper based on the notion that the transient character of the contemporary European identity leads to a state of non-identity. The terms 'differance' and 'traces', propounded by Jacques Derrida are used to grasp the emergence of multiple identities, in the contemporary Europe. The paper explores the possibility of this process subsequently leading to a-identity: a state of absence of the essential identity itself as an identity, which is necessarily a state of fluidity of identity.

Keywords: Identity, Fluidity, a-Identity, Deconstruction, Multiple identities

The concept of European identity has been a matter of perplexity and confusion. The notion of a unified European identity and the challenges of such an identity formation in the postmodern world have derived a lot of attention of researchers and academicians. In a globalized era, where mobility is a key feature guiding the world, we observe that the notion of national identity is making way for newer kind of identities across the globe. Europe as a collection of diverse nations and the idea of a 'collective phenomenon' has certainly caught in the flux of identity formation in a major way. The member states have been caught in a tussle to maintain their national sovereignty as well as a struggle to attain a common collective European identity. The historical European consciousness continues to play a key role in the formation of a political, economic and cultural identity whereas



the shifting circumstances created by the forces of globalization are emerging as a major challenge in this process.

The identity of a 'European', as a member of the European Union, in a post- modern world today is evidently different from a European identity that was formed in the post-World War II. Europe faces the challenge of maintaining its true essence in a pluralized, transcending and mobilized world. As a consequence, the national identity and the collective European identity of an individual today are not stable or steady but are rather fluid. Efforts have been made to understand the changing notions of this identity through different perspectives such as supranational, cosmopolitan, multicultural and so on. This paper attempts to understand the emergence of European collective identity of an individual with the help of Jacques Derrida's (1982) concepts provided in the context of his theories on deconstruction. The application of linguistic concepts into the understanding of identity formation provides interesting insight into the contemporary predicament of European identity. The idea is to explore the impact of multiculturalism necessitated by the unparalleled mobility of the post-modern world on identity formation process in Europe. The paper tries to explore the idea that instead of moving towards a cosmopolitan identity, the collective identity of an individual in Europe has been shifted to a state of *a-identity*. In other words, it is about the ability of the contemporary European individual to continuously shift the identity in accordance with the context. The paper outlines the idea that collective identity of an individual in Europe lies in a continuous play of 'difference' and 'différance' as the meaning of a text in Derrida's analysis of language which makes the absence of an essential identity as the core of one's identity (Derrida, 1982). Overall, it is an effort to view the process of identity formation in Europe from outside and understand the subtleties involved in forming a collective identity of an individual in a space witnessing the interplay of flux and fixities caused by the global transition.

THE NOTIONS OF 'IDENTITY'

The concept of identity is a complex one which compels us to question who we are, how people view us, and what the factors which determine our identity are. Klaus (2009) defines the notion of



identity as follows, “Persons have an identity by positioning themselves relative to other persons and by giving to these relations a meaning that is fixed in time. An identity guarantees the being of a person in the flux of time. The same holds for groups: a group has an identity if it succeeds to define itself vis-à-vis to other groups by attributing meaning to itself that is stable over time. Identity as an analytical concept covers all these cases: identity emerges by linking past social relations with those in the present. In the historical move from subjects to individuals and from kingdoms to nations we observe a shift in the construction of identity. Identity is reconstructed since it refers to a different type of social relations. In such social relations identity becomes a particular preoccupation of ‘individuals’ or ‘nations’”.

The identities of an individual and the identities of a group are two extremes on one hand and interrelated on the other. The former is shaped by an individual’s perception of how others view him and the meaning he attaches to the social relations at a given point in time. Whereas the identities of a group are formed with the perception of the group how the other entities view it and the meaning it attaches to those social interactions. Yet an individual carries a group identity in his social interaction every time one asserts the individual identity. Further as pointed out by Klaus (2009), “As these creations of identity are transient, they result in social relations surpassing the boundaries of a mere individual or a nation, which is seen in the case of Europe’s struggle to establish a collective European identity”.

The concept of collective identity can be explained under the blanket of the social identity paradigm. Snow (2001), in his paper *Collective Identity and Expressive Forms*, provides the following ideas on identity: “There are at least three conceptually distinct types of identity: personal, social, and collective. Personal identities are the attributes and meanings attributed to oneself by the actor; they are self-designation and self-attributions regarded as personally distinctive. Social identities are the identities attributed or imputed to others in an attempt to situate them in social space. They are grounded typically in established social roles. Although there is no consensual definition of collective identity, discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences



among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of ‘other’.” The formation of this collective identity may curiously adapt a strategy where ‘we-ness’ is privileged over the ‘other’ and a representation of the ‘self’ is consciously created over a period of time. As pointed out by Said (1978) that the effect of this representation is the creation of binary opposition of the ‘self’ and ‘other’ which posits the former in the privileged position that permits one to define, describe and articulate the ‘other’ as one wishes, and the ‘other’ becomes everything that is not desired by the ‘self’. However, what is interesting to observe is the fact that the individual within this collective ‘we-ness’ may constantly redefine the ‘other’ with the changing notions of the ‘self’. It is this process that leads to the possibility of an individual obtaining multiple identities within the framework of a collective ‘we-ness’.

It is evident that human beings are capable of exhibiting multiple identities at the individual level and these identities have always been dynamic in nature. Shifting of identities as a result of mobility and interaction has always been a part of the historical progress. However, the changed economic and political circumstances of the European Union radically transformed the idea of identity for the member of a nation state within European Union. The new found opportunities that transcend the borders and unparalleled mobility across the globe have altered the definitions of clinging to a rooted identity. Tarrow (1998) observes that “the interaction of opportunities and mobilization is dynamic; opportunities can create mobilization, but mobilization can create opportunities, as well. In addition, opportunities are not static either; they can exist for brief periods of time, and then close again; or, the political changes because of the influence of mobilization can lead to demobilization.”

At the same time, the existence of a collective identity rooted in certain ideals both for the individual as well as the state has always been the necessity for progress. It is interesting to note as pointed out by Boll (2008) that “for such a collectivity to be established, a reference point is needed to distinguish the in-group from the out-group; that is to say that the definition of the other is the prerequisite for defining we-ness.” No doubt, the creation of this ‘we-ness’ as against the out group is a continuous process and is the result of a number of external and internal factors. Nevertheless a conscious effort by the state to create this collective identity is at the core of the idea of nation states.



VIEWS ON EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The idea of a common European identity clearly draws its stimulus from the notion of collective identities that underlined the principles of nation-states. It is important to note that the creation of Europe was a response to the effects that the World War II had left behind on the psyche of Europe. The primary idea of a unified Europe that emerged out of this was based on the anxiety to reduce the wars within and outside Europe. The crux of the modern pan European ideal lies in the effort to restore peace and mitigate the possibilities of internal conflicts among the member states. It is viewed as an effort to create a supranational structure that would guide the member states towards a better future (McLaren 2004).

However, the notion of this collective identity gets complicated by a series of factors that go into the making of European consciousness in general and modern European identity in particular. The belief in shared values is a feature that has stayed with Europe for centuries with a sense of historical heritage forming the core of old Europe. This sense primarily draws its inspiration from the ancient Greek and Roman civilization, in the faith in Christian value system, and in the ideals of Enlightenment. At the same time, the ideals of nationalism and the colonial history of Europe form an important part of the European experience. It is necessary to note that when European collective identity is recognizing itself as one community and taking into account the history of all the nations together, it involves respecting the diversity that exists across states and coming together of diverse groups under the umbrella of a collective supranational identity. However, it has been a herculean task to create a collective European identity because people are unwilling to give up on their national allegiances in support of a larger identity envisaged by the European Union. European Union's efforts to create a collective identity are met with ambivalent attitude by the citizens across the European nations. McLaren (2004) points out the varied nature of this attitude and observes that "integration seems to pose a threat to national identity by seeking to reduce nationalistic sentiment." Further, when a large part of Europe still finds it quite difficult to accept and accommodate what is traditionally a part of outside Europe, the advent of multiculturalism as a reality in almost every member states of European Union has added another dimension with its complications of the



accommodation process. The collective identity of Europe oscillates between the consciousness of Europe and the reality of the present. Any debate on the collective identity of an individual in Europe needs to be comprehended in the light of this confrontation. As such it becomes necessary to understand the major factors that constitute what could be termed as a collective European identity.

European Consciousness

It has always been a difficult task to define the boundaries of Europe in the geographical terms. It is essential to trace the historical consciousness of what constitute the idea of Europe to understand any attempt to form a collective 'European identity'.

The consciousness could be traced to the ancient Greek and Roman civilization. During the time of the Roman Empire, there were different theories proposed to understand the relationship between an individual and the physical environment. Pagden (2002) points out that the Northern parts of the world were perceived to be extremely uncivilized, cold and barbaric owing to the climatic conditions. Whereas the southern parts of the world were perceived to be lethargic and slow. In between these, the urban Europe which formed the 'centre' was held as the ideal world that was superior to the rest. These were distinctions that were considered even within the parts of Europe with certain parts marginalized in comparison to the prosperous centres. The notions of Europe being the 'civilized' community that values a just law as against the 'barbaric' rest which suffers from the absence of an egalitarian law formed the basis of European ideal and continues to hold its sway even to this day. The contemporary European ideal of a strong united force resulting out of the vision of European Union could be seen as a reflection of the European consciousness that viewed itself as a superior force as against the other.

The other major influence on the consciousness is the impact of Christianity. "A crucial historical moment in the identification of Europe with Christendom was the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453. It resulted in a clear separation between the Christian Europe and the Muslim Asia. An important contribution of Christianity to European unity has been given by the Catholic Church. Its aim was the creation of a community of independent states under the spiritual guidance



of the Pope” (Bekemans, 2010). The idea of a Christian world as the upholder of human values and dignity of life as against the barbaric world outside formed an important part of the European consciousness as pointed out by Pagden (2002) and this religious worldview subtly made way for the ideals of liberal Europe.

It is interesting to note that the idea of Europe as the centre of the world continued to dominate the psyche of the major states of Europe even when the religious fervor of Christendom made way for the ideals of Enlightenment. Bekemans (2010) points out that “History shows that the idea of Europe assumed many different connotations throughout the centuries according to political and cultural contexts. From the beginning of the 16th century Christianity gradually lost its central role in the conception of Europe..., Europeans believed in the universal value and superiority of their civilization. It was seen as a process leading towards a virtuous and ideal state and finally to eternal peace. The highest expression of civilization was represented by the nation-state which was to be legitimized in the context of ‘methodological nationalism.’ The idea of different and equally valuable forms of society was not taken into consideration so that other populations were labeled as ‘barbarians’ who needed to be civilized. This concept of civilization is thought to be the secular substitute of Christendom as the unifying element for the continent.” Further, a long lasting impression on the consciousness of Europe has been made by the ideals exhibited by Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that swept across Europe. Europe became a synonym for everything that is scientific and rational whereas the ‘other’ stood for everything that is irrational. It is important to note in all these processes that the idea of Europe emerged solely by a constant confrontation with the ‘other’.

National Identity

One of the major factors, which is both a contributing factor and an obstruction to the collective identity of Europe, is the notion of ‘national identity’. National identity is defined as "a set of institutionalized forms of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries (borders), its rule being sanctioned by law and direct control of the means of



internal and external violence" (Giddens, 1985). National and ethnic identities are perceived as the means to cope with the challenges that modernization poses. It is a mechanism to hold on to the national roots, in order to seek emotional security and stability. Haller Max and Ressler (2006) observes that "National identities are guided by a shared belief in the history and the origin of the nation, a common national law for the citizens of a nation, a common national culture and a unified system comprising the rights and duties of the national citizens."

According to New World Encyclopedia (2006), "The nation-state became the standard ideal in France during the French Revolution, and quickly the nationalist idea spread through Europe. There are two directions for the formation of a nation-state. The first and more peaceful way is for responsible people living in a territory to organize a common government for the nation-state they will create. The second, and more violent and oppressive method is for a ruler or army to conquer a territory and impose its will on the people it rules." Unfortunately, history has more frequently seen the latter method of nation-state formation. Wars were important events that played a vital role in forming the national identity of European nations. Though the memories of the war have been horrific and dark, they have acted as one of the forces which instilled nationalistic feelings amongst the Europeans. The result is the emergence of powerful nation states in Europe starting from the efforts of Napoleon in France in 1800 to the doings of Hitler in Germany in the twentieth century. The powerful European nations made every effort to create a sense of essential and homogenous culture belonging to particular states. It has been observed that most states in Europe still perceive themselves to be 'nation-states', and attempt to define and enforce a state-sponsored national identity.

Mobility and Transnational Identity

As a result of the globalization and the relaxation of trade, labour and service barriers, there has been transcending mobility within Europe. Today, Europe claims to have values which are far different from the conventional 'self' of Europe. It has always been the 'other' that has been shifting in the case of Europe whereas the 'self' somehow maintained its universal values. However, with the



advent of globalization and easier mobility of different nationals across Europe, the other could be the Americans, the orient, the east and the Asian in some context, and German, Italian or British in the another context within Europe. In other words, there has been no European self or the no defined 'We' in comparison to the 'Other'. There have been migration movements in Europe where other communities have made Europe their home. Some migrant communities have been able to assimilate while the others have not been able to. However, they have had an effect on Europe and the European values. Therefore, the present day Europe is way different from the traditional Europe for it has evolved in the past few decades in terms of the culture and composition.

The changes mainly in the field of communication and technology have resulted in a completely different set of circumstances. Giddens (1990) claims that "the contemporary globalization is historically unprecedented, reshaping modern societies, economies, governments, and the world order. This process has gone furthest within the European Union, where the future of sovereignty and autonomy within nation states has been most strongly challenged by European integration. The interdependence is evident. When the subprime mortgage market crumbles in the United States, stock markets sink in Tokyo, and the Northern Rock bank goes bankrupt in the UK". In other words, the world is no longer a place where the identities could be formed on the basis of geographical location. Giddens (1990) also points out the effect of such changes when he observes that "The world clearly is becoming more closely interconnected. Media reporting of these events provides information about globalization, and direct experience, such as international travel, tourism, and immigration across national borders, is also expected to broaden the mind, by exposing individuals to other life styles, unfamiliar practices, and alternative beliefs. Among the consequences, this process is expected to deepen cosmopolitan orientations, contributing to greater understanding of, and respect for, habits and customs found in other cultures, strengthening trust and tolerance of other peoples, weakening parochial feelings of nationalism, and encouraging trust and confidence in the major agencies of multilateral cooperation and global governance to overcome shared world challenges." While these developments are being viewed as positive consequences, it is necessary to note that the changes are creating fissures in the ideals of 'collective



identity'. The more the signs of global impact on the behaviour of people across the nations, the more is the chance of moving towards a culture that transcend 'nationalistic' flavor. The net result however is the movement towards the homogenization of cultures rather than the protection of heterogeneity. Hence, it is assumed by a set of pro-globalization group that the increasing mobility and ideas of globalization will push the diverse cultures towards the creation of a cosmopolitan culture.

However, the idea of moving towards a cosmopolitan culture that would result in a homogenization of life style is not received positively by all. According to Smith (1991), "we are witnessing the growth of regional blocs, where nation states remain the primary actors, rather than the emergence of a new world order that transcends states. The expanding role of the United Nations in development, peacekeeping and human rights has occurred without fundamentally eroding, indeed perhaps even strengthening deep rooted attitudes towards nationalism and the nation state". Smith (1991) further points out that, "We are still far from even mapping out the kind of global culture and cosmopolitan ideals that can truly supersede the world of nations." Evidently, there is a convincing belief that the process of homogenization of cultures through the forces of globalization will have a backlash at some point of time. The resistance to this process of globalization may not be direct but is bound to manifest itself in some form sooner than later.

The entire process of forming a collective identity for Europe needs to be understood within this framework of the movement towards a transnational identity. It must be analyzed on the context of how the forces of globalization evidenced in the increasing mobility within Europe creating a novel situation to the entire dynamics of identity politics. It is in the response to these forces of changes the collective identity of Europe recreates itself and manifests as what could be coined as *a-identity*.

MULTICULTURALISM AS A CHALLENGE TO EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The whole idea of responding to this transnational identity gets complicated by another associated major challenge that Europe faced in post globalized world: the rising number minorities within the member states. Therefore barring the issue of maintaining the national sovereignty, the issue of



existence and recognition of these minorities is another hurdle that stands before Europe. Europe is grappling with the multiculturalist challenge of giving them special rights versus integrating them in their societies. The difficulty lies in the complexity that the issue of minorities poses in the process of European integration. As Europe claims to possess some exclusive values, the presence of minorities and their lack of understanding and practicing of essentially European values posed yet another threat to the creation of the European identity. The migrant communities which arrived to Europe are of varied nature. They range from the Asian Muslims to migrants from Eastern Europe. However, what is common to all these migrant communities is their perceived difference from the European value system. Often, these communities are ascribed to have a set of values and beliefs which were not convergent with the European ideal of values and beliefs. In a number of instances, the minority issue offers a clash with the issue of human rights too. As Europe claims to respect the issue of human rights as also being mentioned as one of the four Copenhagen criteria, the issue of minorities goes beyond the mere sociological concerns of accommodating them but as well extends to the respecting them as a matter of human rights.

It is in this context of multiple factors leading to the formation of a collective European identity of an individual, the idea of the emergence of an altogether newer identity has significance. This newer identity is the result of all the varied factors working on each other and recognizing the need to present an acceptable form to the changed circumstances. The identity that emerges may be the result of a dissonance rather than of harmony, yet it demands a reckoning. The recognition of this identity is more perceptible in the case of an objective analysis of the identity formation process. The newer identity is a phenomenon of the post-modern world and needs to be understood through the ideas that tried to explain this world. It is precisely for this reason it would be worthwhile to apply the concepts of the Derrida (1982) which are primarily used in the field of language to appreciate the identity formation that is taking place in the contemporary Europe.



STRUCTURALISM AND VIEWS ON MEANING

It would be worthwhile to attempt an understanding of identity formation dynamics of Europe through the notions of Structuralism before the principles of deconstruction is applied to it. The ideas presented by theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure that led to the movement called Structuralism outlines how meaning is constructed in a given text or expression. Saussure's main argument is that language is a system of signification in which the basic unit of meaning is not the word but the sign. The sign, in turn, is comprised of a signifier and signified, which are related in an arbitrary fashion, and the meaning of a sign results from its difference from all the other signs in the system (Bevir, 2010). According to this view, each sign in the system of signs which makes up a language gets its meaning only because of its difference from every other sign. Quigley (2010) points out that, "According to Saussure's structuralist theory of language, the meaning of a particular term in a language is due to its relative difference from all other terms in the language. A signified, i.e. a concept or idea, is properly understood in terms of its position relative to the differences among a range of other signifiers (words with different positions in the network (langue) and, hence, different meanings." This idea of the structuralism explains the process of meaning formation in a text as the result of understanding the differences.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY VIEWED THROUGH STRUCTURALIST VIEW

The suggestion that language is a system of signification shifts attention away from things in themselves to relations among things, and suggests that what appears as identity depends in fact on relations of difference. Moreover, it implies that these relations of difference that condition or constitute identity are always arranged in an order where the presence of the self is understood in opposition to the absence of the other and vice versa.

In the context of the Structuralist analysis of the issue of identity, we observe that identity is understood in terms of the differences between the two signs. The two signs in consideration in the context are the European identity and the non-European identity, whilst the former is viewed as the 'Self' and the latter as the 'Other'. Therefore by creating the arbitrary binary opposites between the



two, it is easier to understand the notion of identity formation dynamics in Europe in the old Europe as well as in the Europe dominated by the sentiments of nation states.

This approach to meaning constructed on the basis of binary oppositions explains to a great deal the politics of the identity formation of Europe in terms of historical sense. The idea of Europe, being the 'centre' of the world with its advanced civilization starting from the Greco-Roman period to its adherence to scientific outlook to life in the modern period, has been consistently constructed in opposition to the 'uncivilized Other' that lied outside Europe. This was true in the case of Europe's view on Asia and Africa in the heydays of ancient civilizations of Greek and Rome as well as up to the time of colonial domination of Europe over other parts of the world. It is a deliberate privileging of the 'self' over the 'other' that strengthened the European ideal of the torch bearers of civilization to the darkest corners of the world.

The idea of 'self' and 'other' assumed a newer dimension within Europe with the gradual emergence of the concept of 'nation states'. The increasing belief in forming identity through one's allegiance to the 'nations' the overall European 'self' moved on to the process of fragmentation within and began to see the 'other' among the outsiders to the 'nation states'. Here again, the feelings of 'we-ness' is a conscious political process created by the nation states within Europe that provided a collective identity to the individuals as they began to recognize the 'otherness' in a different sense. This demarcation of 'self' and the 'other' could catch up the imagination of the masses with a comparative ease as it was based on certain concrete geographical, political and cultural factors.

What is significant in the above analysis is the fact that the whole process of collective identity formation in Europe since the beginning of the idea of Europe could be understood through the notions provided by structuralism. The differences between the 'self' and the 'other' facilitate our understanding of the European identity. The 'self' has always been understood in opposition to the other. It also must be noted that the 'self' has always been privileged over the other. Thus there takes place privileging of positions, where the 'self' is given the privileged position and the 'other' is relegated to the margin. Nevertheless, this process allowed the individuals to retain a sense of collective identity with a substantial degree of certainty.



However, the notion the identity formation in Europe after World War II is a post- modern phenomenon. The efforts to create a collective identity for Europe under the shield of a collective body named European Union thus belongs to a different world of identity formation dynamics. The emergence of ‘multiculturalism’ as a reality of every European state and the consequences of globalization are seriously impacting the nature of European ‘self’. The ‘self’ is no longer a static entity that is confronting the shifting ‘other’. Instead the self is increasingly assuming the paradoxical nature of being both ‘transient’ and ‘resolute’. We need to look beyond the ‘binary opposition’ of the structuralist view that conveniently explained the Europe in terms of the ‘self’ as against a remote and crude ‘other’ hitherto. It is in this context, the ideas of Derrida that aimed at explaining the post-modernism in the literary world are applied to understand the identity formation politics of the contemporary Europe.

POST- STRUCTURALISM AND THE VIEWS OF DERRIDA

Poststructuralist theory denies the distinction between signifier and signified. According to some versions of post structuralism, concepts are nothing more than words. Thus, signifiers are words that refer to other words and never reach out to material objects and their interrelations. To indicate this shift in theory, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1978) introduces the word "différance" to indicate the relation between signifiers as one of both difference and deferral.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1978) advanced the idea of ‘meaning’ constructed by the language to another level with his novel concepts such as ‘difference’ and ‘p priori’. Further his approach of deconstructing the meaning through the notions of shifting centres opened up new ways of exploring the meaning in a text.

Bevir (2010) observes that, “While giving credit to structuralism for conceiving of meaning in terms of difference rather than identity, Derrida argues that in reducing difference to a mere opposition between two terms (as if the meaning of a term were entirely contained in its opposition to another—e.g., white v. black), the Structuralist position is ultimately no less problematic than the tradition of Western philosophy it seeks to supersede”. As Derrida points out, even those binary



oppositions that appear neutral (e.g., good v. evil, day v. night) are in fact structured hierarchically, with one term being consistently privileged over the other.

The task of deconstruction therefore is to identify the hierarchical oppositions at work in a given text and overturn them by affirming the secondary term. Or more precisely, deconstruction does not simply identify and overturn these hierarchies (these are necessary but insufficient steps, since they would only put new hierarchies in their place), but serves ultimately to disrupt these hierarchies through the introduction of another term. It is in this framework, Derrida's concepts such as 'différance' and 'p priori' need to be understood.

The notions of 'différance' and 'traces'

Meaning or identity of a term or concept is never present to itself, argues Derrida (1982), but rather depends at the same time on both difference and deferral, something which Derrida famously tries to render with the notion of "différance."

If difference means anything, it is of course because of its difference from other terms in the French language: it is phonetically identical to the French noun *différence*, but its difference from *différence* becomes apparent in writing (such that the term silently undermines the phonocentrism of the Western philosophical tradition). Granted, to claim that the difference is "apparent" is misleading, since difference "itself" is never manifest; at most, what appears is the presence of the letter 'a' where one might have expected an 'e'. This ain turn evokes both the absent 'e' of difference and, at the same time (or rather, not quite at the same time), calls forth another meaning implicit in *différance*, by virtue of its resemblance to the French word *différent* (deferring). To put it simply, the meaning of *différance* is hard to grasp, and that is very much the point: it comes into view only gradually, as one recognizes its difference from and relation to other (absent) terms, in a process that takes time and reminds us that meaning is never simply present but depends rather on a process of both difference and deferral (Bevir, 2010).



The concepts are explained by Derrida as follows: “It is because of difference that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called ‘present’ element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself ... and it is this constitution of the present, as an ‘originary’ and irreducibly nonsimple synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions . . . that I propose to call *archi-writing*, *archi-trace*, or *différance*.”(Derrida, 1982)

The ideas are certainly complicated and difficult to grasp outside the realm of linguistics. However, the core views of Derrida have profound implications on the notions of ‘meaning formation’ which could be certainly applied to the politics of identity formation. In this context it is imperative to have an understanding of Derrida’s views in simple terms. The following explanation attempts to sum up what Derrida meant by the term ‘différance.’ and ‘trace’:

If a word’s meaning is solely the result of its difference from other words, then the meaning (the concept or signified) is not an additional thing "present" in the sign itself. On the contrary, "meaning" is the ever-moving play of difference from signifier to signifier; a slipping from word to word in which each word retains relations to ("traces" of) the words that differ from it. Thus, according to Derrida, the specification of meaning is an infinite and endless process! Meaning, to some extent, always escapes one's grasp—it is always just out of reach, ungrounded, with no origin in the intention of the speaker. Thus, "meaning" is the result of a play of *différance*—a movement which brings about both difference and deferral. The meaning of a word is not present in the word, but is the result of the absence and also the "traces" of its past meaning. Hence we can draw the following conclusions on the basis of views expressed by Derrida: meaning is never fully present in any one signifier, but is infinitely deferred or suspended, meaning is contextual as it is limited by



related words, and importantly here is always an excess of meaning. The excess is understood through the idea of trace. The trace is explained as both the mark of the future and the past in a present moment which is neither. The idea of our present (a meaning-full present) depends on this trace and the present itself becomes a part of the trace in terms of the future. According to Derrida (1982) it is evident that the concept of the trace is inseparable from the concept of difference.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY VIEWED THROUGH THE NOTIONS OF DERRIDA

In the globalized world, there is an increasing mobility across the world and this has resulted in the emergence of multiculturalism as a major issue of political life of majority of nation states. The increased mobility has certainly caused the shift between the self and the other, which is further caused by the changing contexts facilitated by the movement of people across the borders in the case of Europe. In general, multiculturalism refers to the idea of recognizing the diversity of the cultures in the society. The nation states within Europe adopted different policies to accommodate 'multiculturalism' as a reality. What is common to every European state in this regard, however, is the idea that diversity is to be respected and allowed to exist as a constructive sign of European identity. Ironically, this very diversity gets threatened with the increasing movement as a set of common values across the societies tend to become the norm of modernity. That is precisely where the ideas of cosmopolitanism set in. There is an intensifying belief among a set of theorist that the impact of globalization is steadily moving the Europe towards a state of cosmopolitanism which provides them a newer set of values necessitated by the modernity. These values would ultimately encourage the individual to shed the values of the past and move on with homogenous cultural values so that they can adapt to the changing circumstances. However, a critical analysis of the collective identity formation of an individual in Europe would suggest otherwise. It hints at the possibility of a resistance to this entire process of homogenization by a subtle subversion of the identity politics itself. It is this process of resistance is termed by this paper as the state of 'a-identity'.



The idea of changing notions of European identity caused by the increasing mobility could be understood through the ideas on 'centre' and 'periphery' as expounded by Derrida. Derrida suggests that the distinction between the 'self' and the 'other' is not so rigid, but they are in the state of fluidity. The self and the other are never static but rather keep changing. The position of those at the periphery can shift to the centre and the ones at the centre may shift to the periphery. Therefore the centre is also never the same, as it is ever changing. Viewed from this perspective, the conventional idea of the European 'self' being the centre no longer remains valid. The individual self of a European may play the role of both the 'self' and the 'other' in terms of a collective identity as he/she moves in and out of one's nation state.

Further, Derrida's term 'trace' is significant to the understanding of the collective identity. The identity has traces in it, past history and previous knowledge in it. Identity is not within itself. Identity in the present is the result of the past traces and the anticipation of the future, which ultimately results in what this paper terms as *a-identity*. In other words it means the identity in the present is the result of the past experiences and the expected experiences in the future. The real identity in present is therefore suspended and what is portrayed is a context related identity, which leads to a conscious 'depersonalization' of the identity. This *a-identity* is a state where a conscious absence of an essential identity itself becomes the identity of an individual so that it provides a space for a movement to the past and to the future simultaneously.

The entire dynamics of collective identity of an individual in Europe in the present context is viewed in terms of two major forces that are shaping the societies of the modern world: multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Multiculturalism is often viewed as a positive idea that would ensure recognition of the presence of diverse values and practices that are essential to different groups. Cosmopolitanism on the other hand is seen as a sweeping force that would transform the entire societies to accept a set of values which are not necessarily their own but would be beneficial to the 'self'. It is argued that the increasing mobility and the transnational identities would ultimately result in creating a cosmopolitan collective identity to the European self. However, this paper proposes to view it differently through the ideas of Derrida and perceives the existence of a newer kind of



identity: '*a-identity*'. It refers to an identity which evades the temptation of assuming a cosmopolitan identity by retaining the 'traces', and at the same time is capable enough to accommodate the changes required for the future by the act of assimilation. This new identity, in fact, lies in the absence of any essential identity in a given context. Here, it operates as Derrida explained in 'a play of différance': the meaning is continuously suspended in the present as it has traces of past and future both. The meaning is derived in the absence of the presence. Similarly, the identity lies in the absence of its presence so that it is allowed to have the identity both in terms of the roots and the future. It is in this act of evading any essential identity in the present, the collective identity of an individual resists the process of globalization that threatens to homogenize the identity. This *a-identity* enables the individual to both retain the past identity and assume the newer identity without being at one particular state at any given point of time.

CONCLUSION

Overall the collective European identity of an individual is a combination of a belief in a common heritage, a faith in a set of universal human values and a belief in a common identity which provides economic and political benefits. It constantly oscillates between the ideals of the past and the benefits of the future. In other words, it is the ability to retain the traces and adapt to the future. More importantly, it is an ability to mask an identity for the present as per requirement- that allows movement to either past or future.

Contrary to the view that the rising trend to move towards a cosmopolitan identity in the context of an increasingly globalized world, this paper proposes European identity may shift to newer dimension. The diversity and specificity of the Europe would not be wiped out by the changing forces completely. The collective identity of an individual in Europe would find a way of resisting the process of homogenization and assuming '*a-identity*' is an indication of this resistance.



Reference:

- Bekemans, Léonce 2010, *The Idea of Europe: Identity-building from a Historical Perspective* <http://unipd-centrodirittumani.it/public/docs/The_Idea_of_Europe_LBekemans_2.pdf> accessed on 10 April 2014
- Bevir Mark (ed.), 2010, *Difference Theories, Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, Sage Publications, <<http://www.rlwclarke.net/courses/LITS3304/2009-2010/09DerridaDifference.pdf>> accessed on 16 May, 2014
- Boll, Sebastian 2008, 'Unified in Diversity: Europe's Search for a Collective Identity', *The Interdisciplinary Journal of International Studies* No.1, Volume 5
- Derrida, Jacques 1978, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by A. Bass, Routledge, London
- Derrida, Jacques 1982, "*Différance*"- *Margins of Philosophy*, Trans. Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Giddens, Anthony 1985, *The Nation State and Violence: A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Giddens, Anthony 1990, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press: Cambridge
- Haller M and Ressler R, 2006, 'National and European Identity: A Study of Their Meanings and Interrelationships', *française de sociologie* Vol. 47, No. 4, Published by: Sciences Po University Press, Article Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20453416>>
- Klaus, Eder 2009, 'A Theory of Collective Identity Making Sense of the Debate on a European Identity', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 12.
- McLaren Lauren M 2004, 'Opposition to European integration and fear of loss of national identity: Debunking a basic assumption regarding hostility to the integration project', *European Journal of Political Research* vol. 43
- Pagden, Anthony (ed). 2002, *The Idea of Europe- From Antiquity to the European Union*, Cambridge University Press, New York
- Quigley Timothy, 2009, Structuralism and Post structuralism, <<http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/structuralism.pdf>> accessed on 28 April, 2014
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*, Penguin, New York.
- Smith Anthony D. 1991, *National Identity*, Penguin, London
- Snow, David 2001, 'Collective Identity and Expressive Forms', *e-Scholarship Repository* <<http://repositories.cdlib.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=csd>>.
- Tarrow. 1998. *Power in movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- <<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/nation-state>> accessed on 3 June 2014.

