

Aleš Šteger: I, YOU, WE AND THEY

Almost exactly one hundred years ago the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber argued for a construction of the self based on the I-Thou dichotomy. The Thou, in Buber's sense, is not just a physical fellow human being, but a constitutive entity through which only an authentic self can exist. Individuality is created only in a truthful relation to the other, it does not exist as something separate from that relation. According to Buber, man is not capable of living in such a relationship continuously, because he burns out from it. That is why we are constantly oscillating between two forms of relationships, the one between I and thou, and between I and it. The I-Thou is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, it forms authentic communities and meaningful lives, while I-It is a relationship of separateness and detachment.

A decade ago I was visiting Brown University in the east of the USA. Brown is one of the so-called ivy league universities, and their creative writing course is considered one of the most exclusive in the country. You can perhaps imagine my astonishment when, in a circle of 15 or so students, the creme de la creme of what would become writers and editors, journalists and influencers in the creative sector, I was struck by the expectation, even the requirement, of the vast majority that I address them as 'they'. About two thirds used »they« instead of »I«, »he« or »she« in their texts and in life. So it wasn't »She goes to a party«, it was »They goes to a party«. It was no longer »He fell in love«, but »They fell in love«. Today, I am more familiar with the conceptual and political background to such a change in use of language. Of course, our sense of language use is influenced by the language we mostly speak, in my case Slovene, which does not allow changes in designations of selfhood or personal identities like we have in English, or they would sound grotesque.

The very term "identity" is paradoxical in itself. On the one hand, »identity« refers to the uniqueness of an individual person, to what distinguishes that person from all others. Here we must be aware that the denominators of the individual vary over time. "When the city of Aphrodisias«, writes Angelos Chaniotis in his paper »In Search of an Identity«, »decided to honor a prominent citizen with a public funeral (ca. 50 B.C.E.), the decree in his honor identified him in the following manner: Hermogenes, son of Hephaistion, the so-called Theodotos, one of the first and most illustrious citizens, a man who has as his ancestors among the greatest men and among those who built together the community and have lived in virtue, love of glory, many promises of benefactions, and the most beautiful deeds for the fatherland; a man who has been himself good and virtuous, a lover of the fatherland, a constructor, a benefactor of the polis, and a savior ..."

Initiated and organized by



Funded by



Today, we define individuality in terms of completely different parameters, and these parameters vary greatly in different parts of Europe. At the same time, the idea of identity refers to qualities of sameness, in that persons may be associated by others, with groups or categories, segments and institutions. Identity, which we consider to be just and only ours individually, is therefore determined by groups of people who share the same.

The word identity, which comes from Latin (identitatem, identitas) and means "the same« has only been used in the sense we know it today since the 1950s, so less than for a century. The same goes for many constructions with the word »identity«. For example, the term »identity crisis« was apparently first recorded in 1954. »Identity theft« attested from 1995. »Identity politics« is attested by 1987.

Before the Second World War »identity« was not used as a word to define who one is. Identity was a word designating the sameness of two items or that certain things or aspects of a thing remain unchanged over time. It was the aftermath of the horrors of war and development in modern psychology and anthropology that introduced the concept of »identity« as we know and use it today.

The very term "identity", paradoxical in itself, therefore addresses the fundamental dichotomy of our world, the relation of the self, the »I« or »they« to a community, to a "you", and »we«. It is through this paradox that we construct both, the individual and the communal.

You just need to go to a bookshop around Europe (except perhaps in Hungary) to see how deeply the **notion of identity and the issues related to it have become embedded in our everyday lives.**

Already in the children's literature section, one will notice an enormous increase in children's books that deal programmatically with the question of identity. In fact, most of the time, it is rather a question of difference. Whether it's a crocodile growing up among ducks, a black girl among white people, a boy who likes flowers or a girl who falls in love with a girl and doesn't like wearing a burqa: all these books are based on the belief that »Children's books about identity, whether about race, religion, gender and culture, support positive self-esteem and confidence. Reading about characters similar to themselves and facing the same challenges sends a message that they are not alone in their struggles and emotions.« Such descriptions are, of course, rooted first and foremost in the belief that every form of identity is constructed and individualised.

Anthropologists and sociologists have until recently distinguished between the »individuated self« as typically representative of Western cultures, and the »relational-self« with the non-Western world. In this respect, there have been important developments in recent years, and there is a growing understanding

Initiated and organized by



Funded by



that the rhetorics of individuality and relationality coexist everywhere, both of which make us in the West, and others elsewhere in the world, less exceptional, and much more similar to each other. Today, if we search for the meaning of »European Identity« on the net, the first thing we get are hundreds of hits inviting us to »The European Identity and Cloud Conference«, recently held again in Berlin. **The modern use of identity is computing identity, a prolonged hand of state cyber security, not the values of identity but the computing behind them.**

It should be remembered that, **from the perspective of state security mechanisms, state surveillance and citizenship policies, the introduction of identity cards has been ground-breaking in many ways.** One precursor to national ID cards emerged in 19th century France. Napoleon sought to streamline the central government in France after the revolutionary period between 1789 and 1799 and introduced a system of internal ID documents for workers in 1803-1804. The Napoleonic reforms prompted other countries to implement more comprehensive ID systems. Starting in 1839, Sultan Mahmud II introduced national ID cards to the Ottoman empire in 1844. It is obvious that early identity cards were adopted to consolidate state institutions. Yet few countries would adopt national ID cards until the shock of World War II. Once again we see the impact of wars on our understanding and management of identities.

When it comes to European identity, the classical view is as follows: **European identity is defined by two main layers: on one hand we understand Europe as a cultural community of shared values which shape our cultural identity; on the other hand we understand Europe as a political community of shared democratic practices which shape our political identity.** EU values are supposed to be such as human dignity, democracy, freedom of movement, equality, rule of law, human rights, but we see that with any kind of state of exception even the strongholds of these values tend to forget overnight about them if needed.

As Chantiotis summons the believe of many European citizens: "Unlike ancient paradigms, typical features of a collective identity are absent in contemporary Europe: a common European citizenship, a common language (other than bad English), a common religion, common historical experiences, a common mythology, and a common system of social values.

Initiated and organized by



Funded by



The Europeans have never experienced history together; they have never won (or lost) a war that they have fought together. The images on the reverse of the euro highlight particularities and local patriotisms. The attempts of Europeans (conservative) to found European identity on the alleged superiority of its culture have been rightly criticised and rejected, and European economic supremacy proved ephemeral. There is no such thing as a homogeneous European culture, with which the Bosnian Muslims, the third-generation Turks in Germany, the Greeks, the Roma, the French Jews, the Basques, and the Laps--not to mention the Indians and Pakistanis living in London--can identify themselves. Not the belief in the superiority of a "European culture" will allow the Europeans, both in the continent and in the diaspora, to develop a distinct identity, but the belief in the superiority of joint values: democracy, sensitivity towards human rights and civil liberties, tolerance of diversity, commitment to unprejudiced advance in knowledge, and protection of the environment."

I can only agree: we Europeans are not defined by a common European identity. To be honest, we are not entirely defined by common values either. Not yet. But something nevertheless binds us together and in my personal view it is precisely the relationship of how we, as individuals and communities, try to find a connecting moment, to build ourselves anew through our relationships to the other, the less known or even completely unknown Europe. In other words, **my identity understanding of Europe is based on trust that once there could be something like a common, shared European identity and my readiness to work on it together with all of you.**

I do not believe in a vision of Europe that is structurally radically different from other parts of the world. **It is our permanent readiness to create**, alongside the existing points of common sense, **new and different constructs of identities that may differentiate us from others.** There are more than enough differences among communities in Europe. They need to be respected and nurtured, but at the same time, **new narratives need to be produced, narratives that will be shared by as many people as possible and regardless of if they think about themselves as »he«, »she« or »they«.** But in order to go down this path, we need, with Buber, to embark on a very difficult path described in his »The Way of Man« (Der Weg des Menschen) of asking profound and probably very hurtful questions to ourselves. I think it is a common feature that we in Europe, regardless of nation or region, tend to overhear the truly hurtful questions in Europe. And we cannot expect to embark on something new, if we first don't clear the ground for our endeavour.

Initiated and organized by



Funded by



Or in Buber's words: »Each one is a new thing in the world, and he is to make his virtues perfect in this world.« All Europeans don't share a nationality, language, history, religions or traditions. But a firm intention to build an inclusive European society of the future, a society where every individual could develop his, her, their unique and therefore exceptional virtues, could possibly be a common ground for a European identity.

Initiated and organized by



Funded by

