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Conference	UACES annual conference: Exchanging ideas on Europe Cambridge, 5-7 September 2011
Panel	The European Commission and European Parliament as actors in processes of the construction of collective memory, perceptions and identity
Paper	<b>Are individualism, consumerism and corporatism key ingredients of EUropean identity? – Some lessons learnt from a critical semiotic analysis of the Commission’s publicity brochures</b>
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**DRAFT VERSION**

## **Abstract**

Identity construction has traditionally taken the form of invented traditions, narrative and ritualised forms of cultural expression often driven by politics of remembrance. However, this paper argues that other forms of political discourse and practice are equally important and the concept of 'political myth' (Flood 2002) enables the study of other 'constant reference points' (Lenschow and Sprungk 2010) that play a role in the construction of collective identity and explains the significance of narratives in the process. The increasing production of publicity brochures by European Union institutions, especially the Commission, suggests an (albeit implicit) awareness of these processes. Such publications lend themselves to the creation and dissemination of narratives that suggest certain 'patterns of thought-behaviour' (Freedon 1996) regarding what it means to be European. However, the messages communicated are ideologically contradictory at best, suggesting individualism, consumerism and corporatism as key ingredients of a European identity alongside discourses of solidarity, responsibility, and a political community-building project. At their worst, they seem to depoliticise rather than creating a distinct political identity, and it is highly questionable whether they can or do resonate with European publics beyond the aspirational dimension of corporate advertising. In view of this, the fact that the material also de facto claims to represent Europeans makes it highly contentious. The present paper analyses some of these brochures with particular emphasis on their visual contents. In identifying the processes at work and the patterns of thought-behaviour suggested in these texts, the aim is to deconstruct their communication dilemma as well as their politics and raise questions about the democratic character of representations of Europeaness.

## Introduction

On 14 July 2011, in the column 'Students Explain Their World', the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* published the following opinion by 22-year-old Hamburg-based student of Communication Studies, Jasmin Grünig:

I am a European. My cultural identity is anchored here and it is very important to me. Culture in the broadest sense refers to the sum of all that is man-made. It includes amongst others political institutions, economic networks, moral values and legal systems. European culture is much more than just the Euro. But it is the Euro which is currently used as its measuring stick. As a German who identifies even more as a European, I consider this rage to denounce excessive. The debt crisis in Greece and other European countries is a crisis. But it is not one caused by the Euro. The Euro is a community project and all parties involved need to work towards its secure implementation. Europe is worth it for me to overcome my fears and take on that responsibility. (Author's own translation)

This statement as well as its publication in one of Germany's most highly respected newspapers seems to suggest that questions of identity, though largely side-lined by issues that are considered more substantive problems in contemporary public discourse on the state of affairs and future of the European Union, still hold salience for some.

However, this opinion piece is also indicative of a vagueness common amongst 'ordinary citizens' as well as European Union officials and scholars vis-à-vis the exact referent of identity projects and forms or processes of identification on the European level. The commonness of such a lack of clarity necessitates, in this paper, the inclusion of the qualifier 'so-called' in order to draw attention to instances of vagueness when it comes to the referent Europe. Furthermore, the paper aims to be quite clear about what kind of so-called European identity is being talked about; are they about being European in the broadest and most inclusive sense of referring to countries located on and cultures rooted in the European continent (if such a thing exists)? Or are they about belonging to the EU, i.e. about being 'EU-ropean'? Or are they, again different and most important, about projecting an image or understanding of what it means to be European that coincides with the European Union's interpretation or image of itself? It is this latter version – what this paper refers to as 'EUropean' identity – that is at the focus of attention here.

The present paper first offers a brief summary of a number of ways in which national and political identity have been conceptualised, leading up to a discursive constructionist understanding that goes beyond the now classical accounts of 'imagined community' or 'invented tradition'. Arguing for the salience of discursive practices in and of themselves, it introduces the concept of political myth

and discusses its role in the construction of communities and, with that, political and (quasi-)national identities. These insights are then applied to the practices of discursive identity construction of this kind in the context of the European Union. A particular focus is on the public relations brochures of the Commission, which will be used as illustrative material. Beyond the tenets that are professed in the text of these brochures, a semiotic analysis of the visual material and strategies used in them will be offered. The paper concludes that the Union's institutions', especially the Commission's, efforts at political communication and marketing offer insights into power structures of in- and exclusion and the promotion of a specific type of European identity which arises both from the text and out of conflicting form and content of the brochures. These raise questions both about the representativeness of this particular understanding of so-called European identity and the political nature of it.

### **Identity construction in national and other political entities, including the EU**

Famously transcending primordialist understandings of national identity in terms of shared unchanging ethnic or cultural ties (e.g. Smith 1991), Anderson (1983) points to the socially constructed character of national identities.<sup>1</sup> In his discussion of 'imagined communities', he outlines both the fundamental arbitrariness of such communities and the effect of exclusion of out-groups in the construction and inclusion of the in-group by reference to the common references points of, say, ethnicity or history. Focusing on the historical dimension and including cultural practices, Hobsbawm (1983), explains that a sense of community identity also arises out of 'the invention of tradition'. Like Anderson, he does not claim that such traditions, and with them the communities they give rise to, are illusionary. Both authors acknowledge the real effects of these communities. However, they draw attention to the processes of social construction that form their foundation, and it is the project of this paper to go into more detail of such processes.

Despite the above-mentioned seminal works, so-called European identity is still often conceived of in terms of rather simplistic quantitative measurement of questionable indicators of European identity (cf. any of the Eurobarometer surveys and studies drawing on their results) and not

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<sup>1</sup> Although this idea is conventionally attributed to Anderson, it should be pointed out here that a similar idea, namely that of ethnic 'Gemeinsamkeitsglaube' or belief in commonalities (author's own translation) can be found in the much earlier work of Max Weber (1980).

discussed in detailed analyses of the social processes that give rise to it.<sup>2</sup> Instead, so-called European identity is mostly perceived through the lens of either methodological nationalism or the *sui generis* assumption about the EU. With the former emphasising the relevance and dominance of the nationally defined member states in hindering the emergence of a unified European identity, and the latter stressing the EU's uniqueness and incommensurability with other political entities, these discourses leave an important gap to be explored. This gap involves the fact that a supranational entity – as the term suggests – may still be influenced by quasi-national political structures, processes and practices; including those of identity and community construction. And it is due to this gap, that some commentators on questions of so-called European identity rightly lament that the term often lacks analytical utility (e.g. Delanty 1995, Checkel 2001). However, while often true within the field of European Studies, it is possible to find a variety of useful definitions if one looks further afield.

Brubaker (2004) summarises its features as follows: firstly, following the mathematical use of the term identical, identity refers to exact sameness of one or more characteristics of a group, which enables collective identification, often including a sense of solidarity, of an in-group. Simultaneously, this process leads to the construction of an out-group, because if difference is understood to pertain to what is seen as a core aspect of identity, it signifies as 'other'. When these processes are mobilised in the political context, the result is often a form of 'identity politics' (cf. Malesevic 2006), i.e. the assertion of particularistic demands of groups based on a particularistic rather than universalistic self-understanding. Beyond this specific case, this conception of identity illustrates the fundamentally bifurcated character of the term as continuously defined against the dual referents of same and other. It also points to the dialectic of particularistic and universalistic social position of agents, which, in practice, enable social, including political, action. But not only does identity facilitate social interaction, but social interaction also facilitates identity; in the sense that forms or patterns of identity are produced in individuals' actions, identity can be understood as performance (Butler 1999). Lastly, and often neglected in the political realm, identity is understood by postmodernist writers as 'unstable, multiple, fluctuating and fragmented' (Brubaker 2004: 35). While for the social interactions of everyday life this understanding is easier to appreciate, political discourse often still clings to the idea of its fixity and singularity. More fully understood in studies of cultural rather than national identities, identity has been identified as a process of negotiation, re-affirmation, change and hybridity (Bhabha 1998, 2002). The notion of identity as a performance,

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<sup>2</sup> The laudable exception are anthropological approaches such as that of Shore (2000), which identifies the quasi-nationalist practices of the European Union in attempts of identity construction, but unfortunately does not take debates further on the conceptual level.

mentioned above, is helpful here, too; it explains how both change and re-enactment of certain traits or behaviours work in the construction of identity. And, because of this very process it is also helpful to understand, following Stavrakakis (2005: 70) that, while 'political subjectivity (both at the individual and the collective levels) depends on identification ... identification never results in the production of full [and stable] identity'. It is because of this understanding that the term identification is used here alongside identity: highlighting its nature as a process rather than a state or characteristic qua possession, it acknowledges the 'impossibility of identity' (ibid) and carries the intended constructivist rather than an overly essentialist connotation.

In addition to these points, and in line with the constructionist argument above, it is important to take note of the discursive or quasi-discursive nature of a large part of the social interactions that construct identities. This has been identified, in the context of European Union studies, by Delanty and Rumford (2005), when they explain that despite identities' multiple, fluid or even fragmented character, individuals perceive of themselves in terms of wholeness, coherence and continuity. By constructing narratives about themselves as individuals or collectives, people are able to bridge gaps or incoherencies and discursively construct an identity. One could rephrase: identities are – amongst other practices – the stories that people tell or accept to have told about themselves. This also applies, when these stories are not actually told, but people's behaviour would lend itself to a story that they would accept. Furthermore, the telling and re-telling of shared stories about the social group or collective does not only give rise to an abstract identity as portrayed in the content of the narrative. Even when the cognitive identification with the story is limited, it also constitutes a social practice or mutually responsive transaction that expresses a sense of belonging to the collective or allows it to emerge. Recent engagement with identity in the context of migration rather than European studies has identified this double process. Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2004) make a distinction between 'ways of belonging' and 'ways of being' that together constitute identity. By the former they refer to what identity is most commonly understood as: abstract, (self-)conscious identification that implies awareness of and a sense of belonging to a collective. By the latter, they refer to practices that express identification, yet are not necessarily consciously connected to its cognitive and affective form.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Conceptually weaker yet one of few attempts so far to introduce new, similar, ideas to European Studies, Caporaso and Kim (2009) have proposed the distinction between 'subjective awareness' and 'coherence' in order to differentiate between the purely cognitive and mostly individualistic dimension of identity on the one hand, and the role it plays in the social context when put into practice, namely constructing or contributing to the coherence of a social entity, on the other. The use of the term 'awareness' can be criticised for its implication of (possible) sense of distance and lack of the affective notion of belonging, which, as will become clearer below, cannot be excluded from processes of identification. The term 'coherence', too, is problematic; it seems to shift the focus away from identification towards the community or society as the sole unit of

More traditional discussions of so-called European identity, e.g. the commonly referred to concept of 'demos', while not overlooking the role of discursive and other social practices of the construction of meaning and identification completely, gloss over the complexities and nuances of the individual cognitive and collective practical dimension outlined above. Engagement with the existence or possibility of a European demos have nevertheless enabled some insights, especially as their usual connection to the concept of the European public sphere (analogous to Habermas's (1991) originally nationally conceived concept) highlighted discourse as a social practice of relevance to questions of identity. However, some revision in the understanding of what levels of political engagement and knowledge constitute such a community along the lines of Levitt's aforementioned distinction of 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' might be necessary. With regard to the notion of the public sphere, originally developed for the conceptualisation of the top-down mechanisms that supported the emergence of nationalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is argued that it is excessively elitist for successful application in the context of the EU and needs to be replaced by that of a so-called 'European communication space' (Eder 2007, author's own translation). Applying the transactionalist communicative theory about the foundation of nationalism in shared and mutually responsive communication proposed by Deutsch (1953) to European integration, Eder's concept is based on the understanding that communication density regardless of the direction communicative action takes in social hierarchies is a factor that contributes to collective identification. While again utilising the dichotomy of us versus them or in-group versus out-group that was explained above, this theory of the group identity-endowing function of communication should not be misunderstood in terms of a simplistic 'those who communicate with each other versus those with whom they do not', i.e. as purely relying on direct communication and the density thereof. In contrast, the communication space also includes the sharing in communication, in the same or similar terms, about the same topics – in the language of later theorists: shared 'discourses' (Foucault 1977). Such a process is assumed to suggest shared concerns and interests, which, in turn, allow the assumption of a shared identity based on belonging to the same 'epistemic community' (Foucault 1970). As before, with the concepts of demos and public sphere, the communication space also contains two constitutive aspects. However, it understands the relations of these constitutive parts and the way they function in the production and expression of identification differently. The former approach assigns the identity-endowing function to the organisational level of the demos while understanding

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analysis, which in the context of a constructionist analysis that relies on both individual and social dimension seems unhelpful. It also seems to imply a normative agenda. Nevertheless, Caporaso and Kim's is an instructive attempt at getting to grips with some of the nuances of processes of identification.

the public sphere, the level of activity or practice, as the expression of identity. In the understanding of the communication space, instead, the identity-endowing function is assigned to the level of activity, namely communication processes, while the society in which it takes place, i.e. the organisational level, is understood as its expression or product.

Regarding the degree or quality that such forms of identification take, another approach to a somewhat nuanced understanding of identification that has figured more largely in debates about Europe and the EU (but also questions of cosmopolitan democracy) draws on terms such as 'dry' versus 'sticky', 'thin' versus 'thick' or 'procedural' versus 'substantive' forms of identification. This debate revolves around the question of the possibility of a supranational identity being built on identification with the normative or ideological assumptions and practical outcomes of justice and equality springing from a shared legal code. It is the debate about the potential of 'constitutional patriotism' (Habermas 1992), which is often implicitly understood as concerning citizens, although, strictly speaking, there is nothing to suggest that it may not also concern residents who do not hold citizenship. What the descriptive terms listed above seem to refer to in a rather round-about way is the question of the depth and permanence of forms of identification that may replace national ones. With most of the scholars engaged in these discussions adopting a post-Enlightenment privileging of rationality, this language seems to be designed to avoid the direct mention of the role of affect in processes of identification and politics. However, avoiding to address it directly cannot decrease the importance of the affective dimension, which will be shown to be of great relevance in the projection of the EU's understanding of Europeanness as a tool to generate identification. Mouffe (1998: 13) has rightly pointed to the danger of downplaying the role of 'passions' and the 'primary reality of strife in social life', including its natural reflection in politics, whose fundamental role and function is to address the latter. She explains that such downplaying of the affective dimension deprives people of the opportunity to express their political passions in a mainstream environment. While her main point in the article is a different one<sup>4</sup>, the aspect of her argument relevant here is that popular political disenchantment and apathy, often understood as a lack of identification, seem to be the effect of de-politicising or de-ideologising politics. It is because of this important connection that it is crucial to take the ideological and affective dimension of politics into account.

### **Political myth**

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<sup>4</sup> Mouffe's main object in this article is to account for the rise of right-wing populism in various European countries.

A helpful conceptual tool that allows researchers to do just that in the discussion and analysis of political (quasi-)national identity is 'political myth'. The defining features, according to Flood (2002), are, firstly, that political myths are narratives that carry ideological beliefs; secondly, that they present themselves as and are held to be true and, often, sacred or sacrosanct and, thus, insulated from critique; thirdly, they may appear in regional or diachronic variations and synchronic analogies. All these characteristics are accepted here, including the premise of the first one on a structural understanding of ideology. The one adopted here is that described by Freedman (1996) of ideologies as 'patterns of thought-behaviour' or clusters of concepts that give meaning to the world in empirical and normative terms and, thus, enable individual and, more importantly, collective identification and action. However, a fourth defining characteristic proposed by Flood (2002), namely that myths display, in their narrative, a sequence of connected past, present and, possibly, future events, is considered as unnecessarily limiting in its insistence in a temporal or historical reference point. It is, therefore, replaced by Lenschow and Sprungk's (2010) understanding that a constant reference point is needed around which a narrative is constructed. Apart from, say, antagonistic relations with an 'other' or 'out-group', or normative ideals, this can – and often, though not always, does – take the shape of a historical event. In this guise, myths are similar to so-called historical memories of the past, which is the reason that the latter have received so much attention in the context of studies of national or quasi-national identities (Hobsbawm 1983, Eder 2007). A further similarity lies in the fact that the original source of the story is often unidentifiable and not considered of particular importance to assessments of its relevance and importance. But in common parlance myth is often understood as referring to a story untrue even if it is more or less widely believed. Such an understanding of necessary inaccuracy as a defining feature, however, is considered mistaken here, for it has no bearing on the identity-endowing function of a mythopoeic narrative discourse.

In their combination, these criteria carry a variety of important points. It has already been stated that they enable collective action, but it is worthwhile to look at this in detail. Relating ideological content by means of narratives, myths provide inspiration and justification that can form the basis of any kind of human action; they can express a will to act or condone inaction and quietism. As such, MacNeill (1986: 23) explains,

[m]yth lies at the basis of human society. That is because myths are general statements about the world and its parts, and in particular about nations and other human in-groups, that are believed to be true and then acted on whenever circumstances suggest or require common response. This is mankind's substitute for instinct. It is the unique and characteristic human way of acting together. A people without a full quiver of relevant agreed-upon statements, accepted in advance through education or less formalized

acculturation, soon finds itself in deep trouble, for, in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain.

While not specifically concerned with political myth, this assessment already suggests the political function of mythical narratives in general. More politically oriented analyses have identified myth as the 'ideologically marked' (Flood 2002) or 'value-impregnated beliefs and notions that men [sic]... live by and live for' (MacIver 1947: 4). They 'turn valuations into propositions about the nature of things' (ibid: 39) and without the direction they provide no political action could be taken. As the above analogy to instinct suggests, in their narrative form, myths work beyond and, thus, defy rational argument as the dominant form of political expression (Sorel 1999, Bottici 2007). However, the study of political myth does not imply an analytically unhelpful endorsement of (alleged) irrationality. Rather, it intends to draw attention to role of the affective dimension in communication, identification and politics in general.

### **Political communication of the EU**

This understanding opens up new opportunities for making sense of processes of identification, how they come and can be brought about. Bourdieu's (1991) work is instructive here, because the communication space constitutes a social field. In it, actors act by means of their social and symbolic capital, firstly, to define the structures of the discourse of their communication space and then, secondly, for its closure. The former consists in employing of resources that particular actors have, such as education, status, position, etc., that give them authority to shape the interest of and networks in the given society, for instance by processes of in- or exclusion of alternative options, e.g. regarding collective memory of events defined as constitutive of the collective. The latter, i.e. the closure of discourse, works by parts of or an entire discourse's removal from contestability. This means the closure of opportunity to question and debate the former. It is exercised by actors who are able to draw on symbolic capital, i.e. their ability to claim authority in expressing will and views that transcend their particular individual ones. Clearly, not all actors have the ability to shape or close discourses to the same degree, as not all actors have the same amount of such social and symbolic capital. Some actors, thus, aim, by use of their superior resources to shape and close discourses in their own terms. They are, to put it plainly, the ones who make up the elite.

For the reason that they are holding privileged means to shape and determine the meaning of discourses of so-called European identity, it is the communications of the European Union's elite

actors, represented by its institutions, and identity endowing contents and functions in their political myths that are the focus here. It has already been indicated that one function of myth as a form of political communication is that it works beyond the realm of rational argument. In contrast to other forms of political communication that explicitly aim at persuasion in the form of a eureka experience through which the citizen adapts his or her position as a result of more or less accurate factual content and convincing logical reasoning (e.g. as theorised by Jowett and O'Donnell 1992), myths operate by means of affective narratives. These narratives obscure the process of persuasion through the naturalisation of a normative position. They do so by following a logic of inevitability different from rational argument, for instance chronology, binary opposition, and the use of stereo- or archetypal figures. The affective dimension plays out in the contextualisation of a narrative position with ideologically marked descriptions of the political world, a political issue and ways to approach it. In addition to these features, it is helpful to note that most textual manifestations of such narratives, including those around the issue of so-called European identity, are incomplete. Hajer's (2005) concept of 'story lines' captures the fact that political narratives (from mundane technical policy discourses to more explicit projects of identity construction) are usually exchanged in condensed form. The process of condensation occurs by means of a combination of metaphors, ellipses and intertextual links that are based on the assumption that the hearer will know what the teller refers to; it is assumed that the hearer will, despite a certain amount of vagueness of and gaps within the story, understand it and read it in the same way it was intended. While this is a feature of communication more generally as it is impractical to the highest degree to attempt to outline every detail and nuance of the intended meaning in every discursive exchange, this assumption of mutual understanding is mistaken (which accounts for the malleability of meanings). However, it is important to note that this is in some respects of little relevance. Very often communication can be effective and constructive despite the fact that people speak at cross-purposes to a greater or lesser degree. The very fact of vagueness and incompleteness both of text and understanding can be instrumental in creating a sense of community that forms the basis of shared identification as well as collective political action.

The increasing efforts at 'narrative building' by high-ranking officials and politicians such as former President of the European Parliament, Pat Cox, and former Vice President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Communication, Margot Wallström,<sup>5</sup> and the production of publicity brochures by European Union institutions, especially the Commission, suggests an (albeit implicit) awareness of the potential of shared discourses. Not only does the EU website bring

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<sup>5</sup> Both indicated by a Commission official in personal communication with the author in Brussels in April 2010.

together a wealth of information about the institutions and their work, and provide a centralised 'Bookshop' function from where citizens can access, via download or mail order, old and new publications, the institutions of the EU are producing an ever-increasing number of public relations brochures that outline their make-up and remit as well as the decisions taken and programmes and policies implemented by the EU. Such publications lend themselves to the creation and dissemination of narratives that suggest certain 'patterns of thought-behaviour' (Freedon 1996) regarding what it means to be European. Moreover, not only the quantitative dimension of such brochures suggests increased efforts at political 'communicative discourses' with citizens in addition to 'coordinative' ones within and between the institutions (Schmidt 2006). Their qualitative dimension is also indicative of a political entity that, like others, seeks its citizens' attachment (theorised by Shore (2000) and clearly discernable in EU, especially Commission, officials' discursive engagement with publics<sup>6</sup>). Firstly, efforts to cover the breadth of the EU's activities in information leaflets and booklets aiming at more transparency and, with it, accountability and legitimacy can certainly be identified as one qualitative aspect. Secondly, another qualitative aspect indicating that the EU aims for affective identification is the discursive construction, i.e. portrayal or representation, of 'the European' in those brochures that takes place at the same time as the provision of information. This aspect will be explored in the next section of this paper. Thirdly, changes – some may say improvements – in the design of these publications also poses an interesting qualitative development. However, what some may perceive to be an increase in professionalism and visual appeal of these publications may prove to be a mixed blessing. It is argued further on in this paper, that they lead to contradictory political messages vis-à-vis some of their content and, as a result of that, to a political communicative dilemma. This claim, as all of the analysis presented in the remainder of this paper, is based on the discursive and semiotic analysis of three so-called basic, i.e. general introductory, publications<sup>7</sup> produced by the European Commission, complemented with a large random sample of triangulation material published by various EU institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> To name but one example, at the Federal Trust conference 'Citizenship and the Lisbon Treaty – Can the British ever be European citizens?' in London on 20th January 2011 Commission officials outlining a new programme to support intra-EU migration and facilitate easier settlement of EU citizens in EU countries other than their original one made very explicit that the institution was quite desperately seeking to gain citizens' approval and attachment.

<sup>7</sup> This is the term used, as ascertained by the author, by officials in charge of the distribution of public relations materials in the Commission representations in the UK, Germany, Austria in personal communication with the author. It is likely that the term is used across all EU countries. The publications referred to in this way are 'How the European Union works – Your Guide to the EU Institutions', 'Europe in 12 Lessons', and 'Panorama of the European Union'.

## Some findings of a semiotic analysis of EU publicity brochures<sup>8</sup>

Semiotic analysis aims at studying texts such as the ones mentioned above – and many more – for the purpose of identifying the conventional meanings that exist within a cultural context and the nature and patterns of semantic distinctions and relations that give rise to them (cf. e.g. Chandler 2007). It is, thus, well-suited to complement the discourse analytical approach as well as critique<sup>9</sup> aimed for in the present paper, for it enables researchers to overcome the assumption that reality is something out there, independent of human construction and interpretation. Furthermore, it can be used to tackle a variety of aspects of the mythopoeic narratives in question: it allows for the analysis of narrative structures and figures as well as the identification of the underlying ideological content; it enables the study of power structures that give rise to specific meanings; it also enables the researcher to integrate analysis of written as well as visual text. As the present paper does not provide sufficient space for a detailed description of the publications studied, the reader is advised to access them via the EU Bookshop (cf. footnote 7).

Two types of mythopoeic discourses contributing to representations of so-called Europeaness can be identified in the EU's brochures. One type that gives meaning to the idea of Europeaness establishes exclusive boundaries by constructing an 'other' or non-European. Two variants exist depending on the discursive context. On the one hand there is the outsider who is and firmly remains outside the EU, such as presented in discourses of external relations such as aid and development as well as security and defence policy. On the other hand there is the demonised 'other' who threatens to enter (mostly perceived of in terms of illegitimate attempts to enjoy the fruits of superior European society or cultural infiltration). In these terms, discourses on (im)migration treat the idea of a transitional state from outsider to insider with abhorrence. The other type of identity-endowing European political myth establishes patterns of meaning that signify inclusion in this category. Here, too, two variants exist. Firstly, in the context of enlargement, the transition from exclusion to inclusion is not only seen as unproblematic; it is welcomed. Secondly, inclusion can take the shape of outright inclusion, addressing or portraying so-called European citizens (i.e. citizens of the EU's member states); for instance in discourses on citizenship, so-called

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<sup>8</sup> Due to document size, these brochures could not be attached here. However, they can be accessed easily through the EU Bookshop on <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/home/>.

<sup>9</sup> Note here, that 'critique' does not refer to criticism but, following scholarship inspired by the works of Marx (Marx and Engels 1970), to the aim of illuminating the structures and exercise of power that underlie constructions of so-called European identity.

European values and aspirations (including environmental policy, consumer protection policy, etc.) and the EU's omnipresent<sup>10</sup> political myth of presenting itself as the bringer of peace and prosperity.

While the reference to peace is grounded in the historical myth of the EU's emergence after World War II, the reference to prosperity betrays an important aspect of the Union's ideological outlook particularly well. This can be illustrated best by means of deconstruction; for instance, the hippie movement of the 1970s would have paired the concepts love and peace rather than peace and prosperity. This simple example effectively exposes the arbitrariness as well as the capitalist/consumerist focus<sup>11</sup> of the set of values propagated by the EU, for prosperity is mainly portrayed as individual wealth and illustrated by the omnipresent representation of practices of consumption (mainly shopping and eating as well as tourism) or in situations of casual association with apparently unlimited economic wealth and leisure. Leisure time activities rather than work are presented as defining individuals (rather than groups), and the rare references to work or productive activities are presented exclusively in terms of sanitised and euphemised white-collar activities<sup>12</sup> or – contradictorily – acts of individual responsibility vis-à-vis the community. The capitalist/consumerist focus is also mirrored, on the level of presentation, in the quasi-corporatist design of the EU's marketing brochures, including its heavy use of branding, the strategy of the incomplete proposition that encourages the citizen to identify, e.g. as conductor of a great European orchestra, and a practice of ethnic political correctness (combined with invariable socio-economic advantage) that is reminiscent of the corporate catalogues of, say, IKEA or the advertising campaigns of companies like Benetton, and appears, beyond the addition of exotic appeal along the lines of hooks (2004) concept of 'eating the other', to be devoid of any meaning.

Not only do the EU's brochures communicate, by these means, a strong ideological commitment to capitalism, consumerism and corporatism. They also reproduce the emphasis on the individual that goes with these ideologies. Many acts of consumption are portrayed as individualistic pleasures, and even those portrayed as communal experience seem to serve the purpose of individual identity

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<sup>10</sup> This story is not only omnipresent in EU public relations material but has achieved closure and dissemination of its discourse to such a degree that it is also commonly found in academic engagement with so-called European integration, usually by means of a conveniently naturalised introductory narrative.

<sup>11</sup> Such a focus also takes shape in the commodified nature of several Union citizenship rights. For instance, the right to freedom of movement is inextricably tied up with labour and labour-related activities – even when it is mainly portrayed in terms of travel for the purpose of tourism or study with both old and young people shown as happy consumers.

<sup>12</sup> Even the Common Agricultural Policy is represented by a photograph not of a farmer engaged in hard manual labour but of a well-groomed cow, which is apparently judged to be more appealing to an audience situated within a culture that congratulates itself not only on its concern for animal welfare but also cultivates a strong emotional attachment to animals.

construction. Clearly, many of the EU's policies betray a strong methodological individualism, e.g. its focus on consumer protection or the assumption that citizens' engagement is based on the question – reproduced in various forms in various publications – of what is in it (i.e. the EU) for them. This forms a harsh contrast to one of the values that the EU seems to be propagating the most forcefully in the texts of publications: community based on solidarity and a sense that Europe is inherently unified. This myth is variously presented in terms of European reunification or the European family. Both metaphors can be challenged as to their historical and cultural accuracy; both tend to ignore the diverse influences, traits, developments and experiences that different parts of Europe have gone through in the past (e.g. Spanish Africanism, the presence of, say, Islam within the EU or the emergence of Communism from within 'Europe' rather than its being an imposition from outside) and seem to aim at assimilation of all European Union member states into a sanitised mainstream Europeanness that consists mostly of uncontroversial aspects of Western Central Europeanness. These exclusions falsify the form of Europeanness offered, despite the fact that, in direct contrast to them, a broad notion of the so-called European family aimed for. Furthermore, representations of family in the biological rather than metaphorical sense, too, tend to emphasise individualism rather than solidarity by focusing on the nuclear family at most – often in the most conservative terms of established gender roles and heteronormativity that clash with other, progressive, messages about equality, liberalism, and individualist freedom of choice.<sup>13</sup> Returning to the broad conception of the European family, the Union's publications draw on the method of stereotypical depiction of the non-European as 'other' reminiscent of Orientalist discourses in order to give more coherence to the concept of Europe. While exhortations to show a sense of responsibility to those 'others' presented as victims (of their own backwardness) confuse the reader's sense of solidarity – otherwise instructed to be directed firmly at fellow Europeans – the portrayal of the other archetypical understanding of 'otherness' as a threat, e.g. in the shape of the ethnically and culturally essentialised non-European immigrant, unmistakably re-establishes the boundaries of solidarity.

Even from such a very short, cursory summary of findings, it can be seen that the European Union's public relations brochures and the mythopoeic narratives presented in them seem to propagate contradictory ideological tenets. This may not necessarily pose a problem in terms of perceived coherence and citizens' identification as contradictory ideological beliefs can exist alongside each other in political contexts as long as their contradiction is not the most salient relation in the identification they establish. Yet, challenges may be possible on the level of the brochures content in more than one way. The question of the exercise of power through these discourses, the question of

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<sup>13</sup> That is, if family is not portrayed in the shape other common format of a childless couple characterised by markers of affluence and consumerism.

power imbalances in the articulation thereof, and with it of the representativeness of such discourses, raise themselves and may necessitate a change in the EU's communication policy. In addition, these publications also propagate a strong focus on individualist, capitalist/consumerist and corporatist ideology which are economic rather than political in nature. This – as will be discussed in more detail in the next section which focuses on the format of the EU's brochures as well as their content – may pose a more substantial problem to the EU.

### **Attempts to market the EU: a political dilemma arises**

Looking at the communication format rather than the nature of its content, one classical political communications concept that is helpful in the study of EU myths disseminated in public relations brochures is that of political marketing. The study of political marketing aims to provide insight into a political practice inspired by academic theories and practical business strategies of marketing (Lees-Marshment 2008: 30). Most studies of political marketing are limited to an analysis of political parties' or specific candidates' efforts (e.g. Lilleker and Lees-Marshment 2005, and O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg (eds) 2002). And while some have rightly criticised this focus as too limited in that it either studies and recounts in detail campaign strategies adopted or exhorts 'how politics should be marketed and how the process can be made more efficient' (Axford and Huggins's 2002: 196), the more important point is that such studies overlook and distract from other relevant objects of study. Extending the focus to include institutions as this study of institutional discourses of the EU does is an opportunity to contribute to the rectification of these shortcomings and limitations. Institutional marketing discourses and materials form part of what might be referred to as the institutions' campaign for legitimacy. And just like individual politicians' and parties' campaigns tend nowadays to be, the EU's marketing campaign is a permanent rather than periodical or temporary issue-specific one. Nevertheless, academic engagement with the EU's permanent political marketing practices is still limited in the field of so-called European studies.

This is despite the fact that, as Lees-Marshment (2008: 28) explains, '[p]olitical marketing is not just about communication, public relations or campaigning. It is much more than that. Parties [and, it is argued here, institutions] are acting like businesses, ... becoming market- (or voter- [or citizen-]) oriented...' This does not only involve the adoption of methods of market research to inform political discourses, it also involves marketing strategies regarding the presentation of such discourses and institutions' communicative output. The latter, especially, is a development that can be observed in

the publications of the EU, too. However, beyond the fallacy of applying the market logic of ultimate choice to a field which is constrained as to options and structures of engagement, one can question the benignancy and benevolence implied in such a conceptualisation. For instance Savigny (2008) points to the fact that even if political marketing has democratic effects such as improving transparency and accountability, and perhaps even engagement and participation, its ultimate object is to serve the interest of the politician or institution that uses it.<sup>14</sup> And the latter, it can be argued, necessarily clashes with the citizens' interests in so far as achieving or maintaining office and legitimacy is always their most pressing concern and any interests shared with citizens are of secondary priority at best. This certainly applies to institutions that produce publications that emulate marketing material in the same way that it applies to individual political candidates or parties.

Both these concerns apply to the European Union's efforts at political marketing as well. Leaving aside the criticism that an institution's efforts at political marketing are at least as much self-serving as they are motivated by democratic concerns as a fact of political life that cannot be helped, on the level of the EU as elsewhere, the more fundamental problem is that of ill-advisedly introducing market logics into the political realm. As was illustrated above, the EU's brochures already sometimes communicate somewhat contradictory messages in their content. These cause difficulties regarding the ideology or patterns of thought-behaviour that is intended to enable European identification. However, such problems are exacerbated by the ideological implications that the marketing inspired form in which political messages are communicated suggest. An over-reliance on stock photography and the adherence to design conventions originally found in corporate advertising communicate a strong emphasis on individualism, consumerism and corporatism rather than any of the so-called European values. Or any other political values for that matter. Furthermore, such an emphasis seems to depoliticise rather than creating a distinct political identity, and it is highly questionable whether they can or do resonate with European publics beyond the aspirational dimension of corporate advertising. The problem here, of course, is that politics follows a different logic than the commercial exchanges corporate advertising aims for. While aspirations in the latter may also be continuously disappointed, the solution is perpetually promised in further consumption as options and choice are portrayed as unlimited. Politics is unable to provide (even an illusion of) unlimited choice. Therefore, disappointed aspirations will inevitably lead to disaffection and disengagement. These are the exact opposite of the increased information and, based on it,

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<sup>14</sup> In that sense, it can be argued with Corner and Pels (2003: 7) that apparently wide-spread and, amongst politicians and some political scientists, widely lamented political apathy is 'often a legitimate lack of interest in the interests of political professionals'.

legitimacy that the EU is trying to achieve with its efforts at political marketing. In this respect, too, therefore, the EU may need to revise its communication strategy.

## **Conclusion**

By way of an overall conclusion, therefore, it has to be said that the EU's attempts at increasing identification and, with it, legitimacy, may be seriously hampered by the dilemma that arises out of the contradictory messages it sends out, both in the content of its PR brochures and in the relation between form and content with which it tries to achieve identification and legitimacy. Not only contradictions within its ideological messages and questions of the power relations implied in the content as well as articulation of the EU's mythopoeic discourses of what it means to be European make it vulnerable to criticism. More importantly, some of the central messages it communicates have the potential to depoliticise and disaffect its citizens. Therefore, not only for ideological but also pragmatic reasons it should ask itself the question of whether individualism, consumerism and corporatism are really key ingredients of European identity. If they are not, the EU must rethink and address the way it communicates with its citizens about what it means to be European.

This argument is grounded empirically in a critical discourse and semiotic analysis of the EU's three basic publications; its three main public relations brochures that are consistent in content and predominantly disseminated across all member states. On the theoretical level, the argument is grounded in detailed conceptual engagement with the formation of political and (quasi)national identity and political communication in the form of political myth, which are ideologically marked, affective narratives in which a political entity constructs meaning for its community to live by and for and, with that, identity. Bringing into such a political process an account and consideration of affective dimension may be heralded as a positive development in both political practice and academic research. However, on the political level of the EU it is lamentable that the affective dimension is directed away from political contents towards economic logics of capitalism/consumerism, corporatism and individualism that must lead to disappointment, disaffection and depoliticisation.

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