

Europe and Its Interior Other(s)

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*Edited by Helge Vidar Holm,
Sissel Lægreid and Torgeir Skorgen*

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Introduction: European Notions of Identity and Otherness in Times of Crisis – Present and Past

Helge Vidar Holm, Sissel Lægreid and Torgeir Skorgen

“Is there a European Identity? Is there a Europe?” These questions posed by Václav Havel (2000), have been asked time and again by European politicians and researchers in order to find ways of dealing with the ever increasing problems of integration within an expanding European Union currently facing its biggest financial and political crisis since its foundation. Though the answers to the question of European identity vary, the importance and relevance of both asking the question and realizing its impact seem in essence to have been summed up by Václav Havel (2000), who more than a decade ago stated:

By inquiring about it; thinking about it; by trying to grasp its essence, we contribute to our own self-awareness. This is immensely important –especially because we find ourselves in a multi-cultural, multi-polar world in which recognizing one’s identity is a prerequisite for co-existence with other identities.

Since 2007 the European crisis referred to above, has not only driven the younger generation of Southern Europe into collective agony about its own future in terms of work, an independent existence, and the possibility of raising a family. It has also led to a large scale political, economic and cultural polarization along a south-north axis, which appears both new and old at the same time, appealing to certain Protestant stereotypes of the economically backward, lazy and morally irresponsible Southerners, as expressed in the debate about the 2013 financial crisis of the Cypriot bank system.

Northern European clichés about the ‘lazy Greeks’ and the ‘criminal Russians’ only lead to new hostility towards the financial EU elites, recently in particular towards Germany, the financially and politically most powerful member of the EU, now held responsible for the harshly prescribed medicine for members facing the current crisis, like Greece, Italy or Spain. In these countries anti-German attitudes represent a new trend, since parts of the older generation of these countries spent many years of their lives working in the German industry during the prosperous post-war German economic miracle

(*Wirtschaftswunder*). As so-called guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*), immigrants from South-Eastern Europe, earned good money. This in turn was invested in new establishments in their native countries.

In the wake of the international oil crisis in 1973, German authorities had declared that Germany was no immigration country, a statement which was repeated and confirmed both in the 80s as well as in the 90s. In the present situation, however, German authorities have had to invent a new and more inclusive terminology for the new generation of guest workers from Southern Europe, as Germany finds itself quite desperately in need of new skilled employees.

What is required in the current situation of crisis in Europe, is a new mind-set, realizing that many guest workers have developed and will develop a feeling of belonging to their European immigration country. They are therefore planning to stay in the new country and bring their families along. This leads to a new demographic situation in many European countries: In Germany for instance, today more than 11 million Germans are immigrants or children of immigrants. Nevertheless, many employers, and even some authorities, continue to refer to them as guest workers, who like visitors, would soon be leaving to return to their native countries.

In this sense both the German term *Gastarbeiter* and the Norwegian *fremmedkulturell*, the term mostly used to describe non-European immigrants and refugees to Norway of foreign cultural origin, are symptomatic indications of the kind of ambivalence, which the resident population throughout history has felt towards people coming from countries far away. As strangers looking, talking and behaving differently, they were and still are generally thought of as individuals or groups not really belonging, but as people only being here today and (perhaps) gone tomorrow. However, since they tend to stay on in their new country, they become interior other(s), who are still rooted in their old countries and as such at the same time asymmetrically defined as ‘out-groups’ by the dominating, and more or less, resident ‘in-groups’ in their new country (Koselleck 1989).

The complex relation between the stranger and the local community was addressed by the German-Jewish sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918). In a short essay in his book *Soziologie* called “Exkurs über den Fremden” (1908), he presented the stranger as a unique sociological category. Since then, Simmel’s *Fremde* has become a rather intriguing concept in modern sociology, through its emphasis on the paradoxical opposition between liberty to move on and fixation to a limited space:

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If wandering is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conception opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the stranger presents the unity, as it were, of these two characteristics (Simmel 1996: 37).

Different both from the ‘outsider’, who is not related to a specific group, and from the ‘wanderer’ who comes one day and leaves the next, the stranger is a member of the group in which he lives and participates and yet remains distant from native members of the group:

The stranger is thus being discussed here, not in the sense often touched upon in the past, as the wanderer who comes today and leaves tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going (Simmel 1996: 37).

Unlike other forms of social distance and difference (such as class, gender, and even ethnicity), the specificity of the stranger has to do with his origins. The stranger is regarded as extraneous to the group even though he is in a more or less constant relation to other group members. Often his distance is more emphasized than his nearness, and his situation is characterized as being simultaneously close and far away. Since he once came from afar, there is always a possibility that he might be leaving again at some point. Therefore a kind of inherent mobility and fluctuation seems to stick to him as a distinctive mark.

On the other hand, because the stranger is considered not to be committed to the kind of life-long community constituted by work and permanent residents, he may approach it with some kind of objectivity. And due to his contact on a daily basis with a number of individuals living in the local community, he also participates in it. But since they see him as not really belonging and therefore expect him to be leaving sooner or later, the locals tend to tell him their innermost secrets. Being conceived as a visitor whom they might not see again at all, he would have no particular interest in misusing them. Their secrets, they think, could only be misused by others who are more organically connected to the community and its particular interests. Paradoxically it is the same quality of mobility and distance which makes the stranger suspicious to the resident population. For the same reason, the stranger is considered an objective observer watching the local community from a kind of bird’s-eye perspective.

However, his position makes the stranger vulnerable to hatred and to the local population’s need for a scapegoat, in case a misfortune should occur. In this sense, despite the freedom of the position of the stranger, his position is a