Constructing Identity and Embracing Boredom in United Europe

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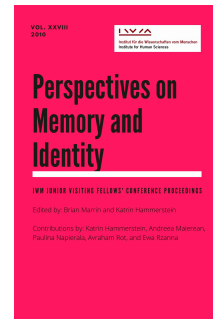
Much intellectual and institutional effort is invested in the attempt at understanding and bridging the gap between the European Union and its citizens. Numerous studies and projects have been set up with this aim and dedicated to the task of discovering or defining the meaning of European identity in postwar and post-wall Europe. [1] The sought after identity should be strong enough to bring a sense of shared fate into European consciousness, motivate civic involvement and engagement in EU-level politics, nourish a vital European public sphere and reinforce Europe-wide solidarity. It should be strong enough to make up for the Union's infamous democratic deficit, neutralize explosive national antagonisms and promote further integration in controversial policy fields, such as welfare, migration, security and foreign affairs, in order to alleviate internal socio-economic disparities, prevent "negative spillovers" from without the EU and for the EU to gain a say as a global power. Moreover, the possibility or actuality of such an identity has sparked off the imagination of many who believe that the EU heralds the emergence of an innovative, postmodern, post-Westphalian or even neo-medieval sort of political identity beyond the longstanding political order of nation states. [2] Much is at stake and much is written and said, yet reality seems to stagnate as far as it has to do with popular involvement and identification with politics at the European level. A stubborn obstacle separates European politics from its citizens. Straightforwardly put, this obstacle and much more which is essential and systematic to the European integration project can be encapsulated in the notion of boredom.

The EU-*demos* interface problem, or what is more commonly known as "the democratic deficit", is often explained as a consequence of the Union's highly complex, bureaucratized and detached institutional structure, technocratic staff, abstract iconography and faceless leaders, which render politics at the European level inaccessible to the wider public. At a deeper level one can dig out the more systematic causes of the insipidness of European politics in the shape of the orientation toward compromise and consensus and the focus on the more technical and economic policy fields rather than on

the political and controversial ones. The weakness of the European Parliament – the only institution of the EU which is directly elected by the citizens – in the decision making processes is, of course, another important contributor to the overall democratic deficit and popular disinterest. The many attempts at fostering an all-embracing European identity cannot evade the ultimate comparison to the national experience: Instead of the heavily fought-over geopolitical borders, charismatic leaders, racial hierarchies, national narratives and heroic histories, the citizens of Europe are presented with diffuse free-trade areas, rationalized administration, hackneyed universal values, worn out political slogans and fading, anti-heroic collective memories as sources for political orientation and identification. To discuss and analyse any one of these aspects of the democratic deficit would run the risk of producing research as tiresome as its subject. But if we call a spade a spade and name "boredom" as that which blocks the EU-demos interface, not only will we gain access to the core of the problem, which is initially and ultimately a problem of emotional involvement, but we will also be in a position to draw insights from the individual experience of boredom, the type of reflection it invites and its constant reevaluation in the overall context of the modern and postmodern conditions; these insights may enable us to better understand how such experience, reflection and reevaluation occur when it comes to collective and institutionalized confrontation with the vanity of ideology, futility of utopia, disenchantment of nostalgia and meaninglessness of self-identity.

At first glance the notion of boredom may be conceived both as too simplistic and too elusive and subjective for a theoretical examination of subtle and complex issues such as political identity and civic engagement. It is commonly from the mouths of children and adolescents that we hear the word 'boring' uttered, usually as a complaint addressed to the responsible adult around. Nagging my mother about feeling bored, I used to get the reiterative reply: "It is OK honey; no one dies out of boredom." Often too there is a childish or youthful air to grownups when they employ this word. Its attribution to a certain person, event or object would usually be meant as an unsophisticated and straightforward expression of disregard or poor opinion toward that thing. We are likely to find the word in the newspaper columns with regard to something which is supposed to supply entertainment (e.g. a play, film, novel, football match etc.) but falls short of delivering. With relation to politics, however, although it too is prone to accusations of boredom inducement, such charges seem to be essentially irrelevant since it is assumed that politics' purpose is not to amuse or entertain; politics is a serious business.

Yet seriousness, in spite of the semantic proximity, does not necessarily imply boredom; political dramas have always drawn much popular attention, especially at crucial historical moments (as in times of war) but also in times of tranquility or even stagnation (then it would usually be in the shape of political scandals or gossip). Nor is boredom a matter to be offhandedly dismissed as unserious. Granted, no one dies as a direct consequence of boredom, but much irrational behavior, such as gambling, drug abuse, sexual abuse, murder and suicide is explainable in terms of boredom. [3] Boredom is often also understood as a cause for non-harmful or even positive irrational behavior, as in the case of behavior that seems nonsensical, extravagant or ridiculous, or activity we might call "artistic". On top of the explanatory value commonly ascribed to boredom, it

has much expressive value too: Through the notion of boredom we can articulate our discontent or uneasiness with something with which we fail to engage and which, therefore, appears to us as meaningless – whether it is a book, a lecture, a party, our relationship or our life. Much more can be said about boredom but for the moment this short illustration of the linguistic functions of the notion of boredom should already hint at the significance of its psychological and social functions (or rather dysfunctions).

Although often overlooked, boredom is surely a matter for serious consideration as it was indeed taken to be by profound thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Simmel, Benjamin and Heidegger – to mention but a few. And in spite of the comparative marginality of the notion of boredom in theoretical discourse, a substantial amount of literature which is dedicated to its investigation on its psychological, sociological, philosophical, historical and aesthetic aspects has accumulated over the years. [4] Paradoxically enough, boredom appears to be everything but boring when it comes to reflecting over it and trying to understand it in depth. It unfolds as integral to the very foundations of the experience of modernity: secularism, urbanism, industrialism and technology. And, correspondingly, it shares a conceptual field with basic sociological notions such as alienation, anomie, automatization, standardization, bureaucratization and routinization. Yet none of these notions has the expressive value that boredom has. None of them is as prevalent in informal discourse and colloquially used to describe the frustration – but not only the frustration – that we experience in our daily encounters with the bars of the golden cages by which we are enclosed as students, employees, spouses, customers, artists, researchers or citizens. This is why boredom might have appeared as too simplistic or banal a notion to work with in the field of political identity at first glance. And this is partly why it is all the more powerful and worthy of closer examination.

As mentioned above, the word "boredom" is commonly employed in the context of complaining and criticizing. And indeed it supplies a reference point to much criticism of European politics: An article in the British, Eurosceptic newsletter *Eurofacts*, whose title reads "Boredom is the Europhiles' Secret Weapon", explains how the EU avoids critical examination and real public debates by maintaining itself in a "state of ennui". [5] A post by a British blogger, entitled "The EU: Boring People into Servitude", explains how "a cabal of unelected politicians siphon off powers from the sovereign states of europe [sic]" by breaking down policy goals "into 1000's of individual regulations" thereby rendering "their day to day operations so monumentally tedius that it is hard with a casual glance for any european [sic] to see". [6] In the context of the NO vote to the Lisbon Treaty in the first referendum in Ireland, political scientist Ivan Krastev has said that "European Union's leaders' strategy in dealing with crisis [...] could [...] be described as one of 'evasion by trivialisation'", and further explained that "European citizens are bored to death with their leaders" and that this weakness is very much an outcome of the "very strength of the European project – its focus on piecemeal engineering and institutional reforms". [7] According to these critics, boredom is not just an unfortunate byproduct of European politics; it is systematic and intentional; it has a political function which is undemocratic in essence.

By others, however, this very boredom is celebrated as a virtue rather than condemned as a manipulating mechanism. Historian Timothy Garton Ash, for instance, claims that, to a large extent, Europe being "nice, boring and irrelevant" is "a great achievement". [8] European Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy, Margot Wallstroem, writes, on the occasion of Europe Day, an article entitled "So who says the EU is boring?", in which she admits that not many people may be enthusiastic about this event or too much concerned about the EU altogether but that she, in fact, considers this situation as possibly the "greatest success" of the Union. Wallstroem further writes: "The EU doesn't really do passion. If you tried to market the EU as an aphrodisiac, it would rate up there with a nice pair of socks. If anything, the EU flag stands for boring reason over passion [sic]". [9] Likewise, European Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, has expressed his wish that, with the help of European involvement, the Balkans will become "normal, prosperous and boring". [10] "B oredom", so it appears, is by no means considered as a swear word by EU officials and other supporters of the integration project; it is a desirable state of affairs. Once again, we are confirmed that boredom is systematic to the EU, or as publicist Isolde Charim has incisively put it, "the European Union is a pathos-annihilating machine" (*Pathosvernichtungsmaschine*). [11]

But how are we to understand the Union's ambition to foster a European identity when even the person in charge of its communication strategy so readily announces that, at bottom, all that can be communicated is sheer boredom. Or is boredom a part of the communication strategy itself? Do passion and reason stand in essential contrast when it comes to politics? And if this is indeed the case, what about the undemocratic nature of boring politics? Is an ideal-typical rational-legal authority such as the EU bound to be emotionally detached from the public and, therefore, undemocratic in essence?

At this point a deeper look into the nature of boredom is instructive. In his lectures on the basic concepts of metaphysics delivered in the late 1920s, Heidegger has paid much attention to the 'ground mood' (*Grundstimmung*) of boredom (*Langeweile*). Several of his observations are highly relevant to our current investigation but for the moment we shall mention only one, namely that "boredom is at all possible because each thing [...] has its own time". [12] This observation stems closely from the Heideggerian morphological methodology and the fact that the German word for boredom, *Langeweile*, literally means a "long while". Nevertheless it applies to the English case as well. For instance, we can also find this idea, that boredom is an outcome of some sort of rhythm discrepancy, in the writings of the American sociologist Orrin Klapp, who has dealt extensively with boredom in the context of the information society and explained it as a "lag in which the slow horse of meaning is unable to keep up with the fast horse of mere information". [13] According to Giddens' structuration theory, every individual is simultaneously "positioned" in two different durations: the duration of daily life and the "*longue durée* of institutions". [14] Considering all this, we may conclude that boredom lurks in every encounter of the individual with institutions; it strikes when there is an attunement failure, i.e. when the individual-institutional temporal gap is not bridged over.

But what does it mean that each thing has its own time? And how can such temporal gaps be bridged? Generally speaking, we can say that not only institutions and individuals have different life spans and rhythms of change, but also celestial bodies, generations and public transportation systems. Having to wait for a train – which is Heidegger's example of the first and least profound form of boredom – can be described as a synchronization procedure, in which the individual's time merges with the time of the machine through empty and boring postponement. Likewise all other queuing and waiting in public space may also induce this feeling of impatience due to the interruption of the time flux of the self in its daily activity. These are all situational examples of temporal alignment. When it comes to the self and its life as a unified whole, becoming synchronized with the social structures is a matter of the faculty that vouches for the diachronic consistency of the self, namely the faculty of memory. Institutions are custodians of social memory, which is encrypted in their sets of rules and laws and embodied in their structures through the events of history. The individual becomes attuned to these longer-wave frequencies of historical change by the means of processes which were conceptualized by the sociologist of time, Eviatar Zerubavel, as "mnemonic synchronization" and "mnemonic socialization". [15] Through these processes, which take place in rituals, ceremonies, family gatherings, media events, museums, education systems and other apparatuses and mechanisms whereby societies generate and dissipate meaning, the individual becomes synchronized with the *longue durée* of institutions and becomes capable of imagining herself as part of a greater 'we' of which these institutions are representatives. Complementary to this temporally imagined, or collectively remembered, "we", is, of course, the long lasting, still "alive and kicking", spatially imagined communities of nation states. But geopolitics is never boring because it is basically synchronic and, as such, does not involve temporal discrepancies. Memory politics, on the other hand, is prone to frazzle and decay in meaning, since it is subject to entropy, the natural disintegrating effect of time.

As for the time being, the institutions of the European Union exhibit outstanding flexibility as far as it has to do with territorial demarcation. The Union's *modus operandi*, so it seems, is biased towards inclusion and its legal structure is formed in a diffusible way. Its geopolitical representability is somewhat misleading since it is the Member State's borders that are actually being represented. As Jacque Delors famously said, "the EU is an unidentifiable political object". Indeed, the European integration project is not an entity: it is a process, and, as such, it is demarcated within time, not within space. The ultimate other of the Union is its history of war and disunity. [16] Thus, the importance of mnemonic socialization as a precondition for civic engagement with European politics becomes clear. The European Union is a monument of the Second World War; it is a site of memory, but it was not designed to be communicative of its history; it is fascinating as a historical reaction and when posed against the *longue durée* historical background of Europe, but its time does not correspond with the time of daily life.

However, its extreme technocratic appearance, which is perceived as boring, is, paradoxically, the aesthetical interface through which the elusive meaning of post-national Europe can be grasped. Political boredom is the unavoidable outcome of conflict management mechanisms which operate in security communities such as the EU. Like

insurance companies, they systematically eradicate contingency and colonize the future, rendering subjectivity and personhood, to a certain extent, meaningless. This difficulty of defining meaning is registered as boredom. But boredom (as opposed to ennui) is not a static condition; it is rather a *drive* that constantly pushes the individual toward innovative sources of meaning. [17] The fear of getting bored nourishes the entertainment industries which allegedly shift popular awareness and involvement away from politics. When private consumption exhausts its effectiveness, however, the meaninglessness of ephemerality (to paraphrase Hirschman's "Shifting Involvements" thesis) brings us back to the public sphere where we give voice to our frustration with the golden cage of rationalized politics and try to channel collective action toward new horizons of meaningful engagement, such as the protection of the environment and remotely fought wars. [18]

Boredom is not the essence of being but, as it facilitates Heidegger's investigation into the temporality of being-in-the-world, it allows us a glimpse into the temporality of being in society. Such existential terminology seems appropriate when we hear about projects with names such as "A Soul for Europe" being initiated in the European public sphere. [19] It also seems appropriate to accommodate the Habermasian vision of Europe establishing itself as distinguishably secular. As was acknowledged by existentialist thinkers, the individual's experience of boredom is important in the constitution of the modern and secular self, which is devoid of transcendental solace. On a similar note we can say that a collective experience of boredom is essential for the constitution of postmodern society, which is deprived of the idols and ideologies of nationalism, authoritarianism and communism.

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Notes:

[1] It should be noted that this discourse on European identity has grown intensive mainly since the 1990s whereas, in the first decades of European integration, the intellectual debate on the EC (commonly known under the label neo-functionalism versus intergovernmentalism) revolved mainly around issues of legitimacy and authority (Thomas Risse, "Neofunctionalism, European Identity and the Puzzles of European Integration," *Journal of European Public Policy* 12, no. 2 [2005]: 294). As Ute Frevert remarks, during most of the years of integration questions of European tradition and values were largely ignored, and only lately has this 'dramatic' shift of interest occurred ("Braucht Europa eine kulturelle Identität? Zehn kritische Anmerkungen". *Transit*, 28 (2004/5): 111). However, historical landmarks heralding this shift can be traced back to 1973, when the European Council, meeting in the configuration of the nine Foreign Ministers of the Community, declared that "time has come to draw up a document on the European Identity [sic]" (Document on European Identity Published by the Nine Foreign Ministers on 14 December 1973, in Copenhagen. Available: http://www.ena.lu). The same year also saw the launching of the "Eurobarometer" public-opinion survey instrument (however, it was only since 1992 that questions about identity have been polled [Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "Europe's Blues: Theoretical Soul-Searching after the Rejection of the European Constitution," *Political Science and Politics* 39 (2006) 247]). In 1979, first direct elections to the European Parliament took place. In the 1980s, the problem of the "democratic deficit" started to gain wide attention and the symbols of flag and hymn were decided upon. Still the real shift took place in the 1990s, when the strong civic symbols of citizenship and, later on, currency were incorporated into the Union's legal

structure. The establishment of the "Convention on the future of Europe" and the attempts at a constitution in the past decade are another expression of these efforts of the Union "to get closer to the people". The recently ratified Lisbon Treaty is another such expression; however, its success in "giving Europe a face", simplifying the Union's legal and institutional structure and giving more substantive power to the Parliament are debatable. Currently several offices, think tanks and agencies focus on "bridging the gap between the EU and its citizens". Noteworthy are the European Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy; the "European Citizen and Action Service"; "Euroactive"; and "Friends of Europe". The numerous projects and studies on European identity cannot be detailed here but I trust the informed reader to be aware of their prevalence.

[2] E.g. Alexander Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable," *European Journal of International Relations* 9 (2003); John Gerard Ruggie, "Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations", *International Relations* 47, no.1 (1993); Friedrich Kartochwil, "Of Systems, Boundaries and Territoriality: An Inquiry into the Formation of the State System", *World Politics* 39, no. 1 (1986).

[3] For studies making the link between boredom and criminalities see Tibor Scitovsky, "Boredom: An Overlooked Disease?" *Challenges* 42, no. 5 (1999); Jeff Ferrell, "Boredom, Crime, and Criminology," *Theoretical Criminology* 8, no. 3 (2004); Colin Wilson, *Order of Assassins: The Psychology of Murder* (London: Hart Davis, 1972); and Alex Blaszczynski, Neil McConaghy and Anna Frankova, "Boredom Proneness in Pathological Gambling," *Psychological Reports* 67, no. 1 (1990).

[4] In the field of the history of literature see Reinhard Kuhn *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) and Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); in psychology see Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco and London: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1975). The most comprehensive sociological account is by Orrin Klapp, *Overload and Boredom: Essay on the Quality of Life in the Information Society* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1986). Some insightful chapters can be found in the sociological study by Anton C. Zijderveld *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979). For a philosophical account see Lars Svendsen *A Psychology of Boredom* Trans. John Iron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[5] Unknown author, "Boredom is the Europhiles' Secret Weapon", *Eurofacts: The Reality behind Europe*, April 27, 2007.

[6] 'Tequila Jong-il' (moniker), "The EU: Boring People into Servitude", *RAPMUSIC.COM*, posted on May 12, 2007, http://board.rapmusic.com/introspectrum/1072716-eu-boring-people-into-servitude.html .

[7] Ivan Krastev, "Europe's Trance of Unreality". *Open Democracy,* http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/europe-s-trance-of-unreality , posted on June 6, 2008.

[8] Timothy Garton Ash "Europe Must Decide if it Wants to be more than Greater Switzerland", Guardian.co.uk, September 30, 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/sep/30/german-election-lisbon-treaty-referendum .

[9] Margot Wallstrom "So Who Says the EU is Boring? Where are Europe's Dictators? They are Gone, Hopefully for Good", *The Independent,* May 8, 2009, http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/margot-wallstrom-so-who-says-the-eu-is-boring-1681015.html .

[10] European Parliament's Press Release, "EU Wants 'a Boring Western Balkans'", April 3, 2008, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=EN&type=IM-PRESS&reference=20080403IPR25654 .

[11] Isolde Charim, "Es lebe die Pathosvernichtungsmaschine", *Taz.de*, posted June 3, 2009, http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/print-archiv/printressorts/digi-artikel/?ressort=ku&dig=2009%2F06%2F03%2Fa0066&cHash=fb0e384ba0 .

[12] Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt – Einheit – Einsamkeit* in *Gesamtausgabe, II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923-1944, Band 29/30* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 159, 191.

[13] Orrin Klapp, *Inflation of Symbols: Loss of Values in American Culture* (Transaction Publishers, 1991), 173.

[14] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986) xxiv.

[15] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4–5.

[16] This argument was elaborated by several authors, e.g. Thomas Diez, "Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2004); Stefan Seidendorf, "Defining Europe against its Past? – Memory Politics and the Sanctions against Austria in France and Germany," *German Law Journal* 6, no. 2 (2005); Thomas Risse and Daniela Engelmann-Martin, "Identity Politics and European Integration: The Case of Germany," in *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, ed. A. Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Juan Diez Medrano *Framing Europe: Attitudes toward European Integration in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[17] Jack M. Barbalet, "Boredom and Social Meaning" *British Journal of Sociology* 50, no. 4 (1999).

[18] Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[19] I refer here to the project "A soul for Europe" ("Europa eine Seele geben"), which was initiated in Berlin in 2003. Originally, this slogan was taken from a speech delivered by Delors in 1992, in which he expressed his view that the "semi-automatic" process of integration had culminated with the completion of the free market, which is marked by the Maastricht Treaty. From then on, so he claimed, the task was to construct the meaning of Europe – to give it a soul – lest the all enterprise would turn out to be a sheer "waste of time". Parts of this speech, which was delivered to an audience of Christian leaders, can be found in a book that uses the same slogan as its title: Erhard Busek, *Eine Seele für Europa – Aufgaben für einen Kontinent* (Wien: Verlag Kremayr & Scheriau KG, 2008).