Applying Constructivism to the Absence of European Identity in the UK

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Abstract:

As the intricacies of European integration continue to develop as a field of extensive academic study, one relatively recent theoretical standpoint is gaining a substantial amount of recognition and application; namely constructivism. Many scholars are using constructivist arguments to examine the factors which influence integration from a different perspective, with the issues of identity and the seemingly antithetical nature of identifying with either Europe or the nation state standing out as a key feature. Nevertheless, the application of constructivist theory developed in relation to identification with Europe is yet to be applied in detail to certain specific member states. One such state whose citizens have consistently demonstrated low-levels of exhibiting a sense of European identity is the UK, a characteristic which makes them particularly suitable candidates for an analysis of the factors responsible for this. As such, this essay will apply a constructivist perspective to the relative absence of European identity in the UK, considering the extent to which its composite theoretical strands can explain British indifference. It begins with an overview of the general position of constructivism regarding European identity and integration, before continuing with a more detailed analysis of the UK itself, drawing on qualitative evidence from Eurobarometer surveys. A final section examines current trends and constructivist predictions for the future of European identity in the UK, in an attempt to reveal the underlying factors responsible for the aforementioned situation from a constructivist stance.

Introduction:

One of the numerous idiosyncrasies that place the European Union in the precarious categorisation of somewhere between nation state and international organisation, is the difficult question of European identity. The average of citizens who identify themselves as primarily European across member states has, according to the EU’s own Eurobarometer surveys, remained exceptionally consistent; equating to approximately ten percent.[1] Such a statistic poses a number of important questions. Firstly, it draws the legitimacy of the EU into question, as an entity exercising competences far above those of other international organisations yet enjoying only a small fraction of the support traditionally invested in nation states. However, an equally intriguing line of questioning challenges why this is the case. What factors motivate a sense of European identity amongst citizens? Do levels of European sentiment vary across the member states? Which changes have, or could, affect the degree to which European identity exists? It is the purpose of this essay to address such questions.

When undertaking an analysis of the feeling of identity amongst European citizens, constructivism presents itself as the most suitable investigative standpoint. Not only does this particular school of thought recognise the importance of the keys actors here – namely individuals and the communities they constitute – in its assumptions, but unlike its rival stances of intergovernmentalism and supranationalism it categorises identity as a key issue in the subject of European integration. As such, in order to analyse the situation of low levels of European identity amongst citizens, this essay will outline the primary theoretical assumptions of constructivism in this area, before applying them to the case of one-member state which often statistically appears particularly reluctant; namely the UK.
In order to begin examining the issue of identity in EU member states from a constructivist perspective, it is first of all necessary to offer a definition of constructivism itself and to identify more precisely the theoretical direction of this paper. While many definitions and theoretic strands are evoked in academic literature on the subject, Ruggie’s 1998 definition perhaps most concisely outlines the key features of this theoretical stance:

‘Constructivism concerns the issue of human consciousness […] Constructivists hold the view that the building blocks of international reality are ideational as well as material; that ideational factors have normative as well as instrumental dimensions; that they express not only individual but also collective intentionality; and that the meaning and significance of ideational factors are not independent of time and place’[2].

The above definition is doubtlessly rather broad and encompasses many of the key arguments and assumptions inherent in constructivism. This is, then, the definition that will be employed throughout this essay, since by adopting this broad classification of what the word entails it is possible to remove the requirement to subscribe exclusively to a particular school of thought within constructivism, thus allowing the application of any of its composite arguments in analysing European identity.

This paper is composed of three distinct sections, each of which dealing with a particular area of the subject at hand. The first introduces the elements of constructivism which are particularly pertinent to the study of European identity, considering key areas of discussion such as sociological institutionalism, socialisation, and the process of community building. The second section then applies the arguments and hypotheses derived from the previous section to the case of the UK, with the aim of revealing the root causes of the apparent British opposition to the adoption of European identity. A final section then considers the potential for a change in the sentiment of European citizens towards the concept of European identity from a constructivist perspective, before arriving at a conclusion as to the findings of constructivism when applied to the reluctance of British citizens to adopt a European identity.

Constructivism and identity:

Before undertaking an analysis of the issue of European identity from a constructivist standpoint, it is first of all important to establish the main components of constructivist theory on this issue. This is not only useful as a means of providing an overview of the theoretical background of such an examination, but also as an effective method of generating hypotheses relating to the study of European identity that can later be tested in the case study. As such, the aim of this first section is to examine constructivist ideas relating to the subject at hand, and to establish subsequent hypotheses about levels of European identity.

Identity and sociological institutionalism:

As previously stated, constructivism is of particular relevance to the study of identity, as it is the only theoretical approach to the study of European integration which categorises identity itself as a key issue, all the while recognising the importance of the collectively formed ideational structures. Indeed, as noted by Christensen, Jørgensen and Wiener (1999); ‘in studying a process in which the social ontologies are subject to change, research failing to problematize these ontologies has severe limitations’[3]. Thus, by favouring a social ontology, constructivism – although not a grand theory on integration as such – is able to incorporate
social ideas and discourse into its analysis more effectively than either supranationalist or intergovernmentalist approaches.

This approach therefore falls within the realms of the field of international relations known as sociological institutionalism, with the focus firmly on ideas as opposed to material structures. Identity forms a vital constitutive part of this theoretical viewpoint, and when applied to the theory of European integration we can see a number of hypotheses begin to develop. An important part of the description of identities in sociological institutionalism is the creation of an identity through the process of creating ‘in-groups’ and ‘out groups’, which are essentially groups divided up according to shared ideas. According to constructivism, the ideas in question which determine the distinct groups are both instrumental (relating to knowledge) and principled (based on shared values on norms).[4] The sense of togetherness within a group can be further accentuated by a ‘distinctiveness from other social groups,’[5] which essentially implies a greater sense of community produced by a contrast of the shared values against those of an out-group. Consequently, we can form a first hypothesis that the absence of European identity in the UK is caused in part by a contrast between shared British ideas and those of an out-group, thus leading to a stronger national rather than European identity.

The coincidence of principled and instrumental ideas within a group forms a culture, which can be defined as a community if existing to the extent where there is a ‘positive collective identity’ produced.[6] The constructivist argument considers European identity to fall into one of two categories. Either it is ‘thick’; meaning that individuals within the group view themselves as belonging to a perceived ethnic community with a shared history and culture, or it is ‘thin’; representing a coincidence of values and norms within the group (such as liberal democracy, diversity, and so forth).[7] This argument allows further hypotheses to be drawn; namely that the small percentage of British citizens identifying with a sense of European identity do so out of a sense of either thick or thin identity, while the majority who do not feel European do so due to a belief that they do not belong to such a group.

Socialisation:

As Marcussen et al. (1999) observe, ‘social psychology theory tells us that social identities are unlikely to change frequently’. [8] Nevertheless, a significant branch of constructivism does account for gradual ideational change in actors over time through the process of socialisation. The broader theory dictates that actors who are more frequently and intensely exposed to the outcomes of integration will be more willing to participate in it.[9] In reference to European integration specifically, Checkel (1999) explains that ‘norms, once they reach the national level, interact with and socialise agents’. [10] As a result we can expect, based on the contents of socialisation theory, that the sense of identity within groups can be influenced by changes in the member characteristics as defined by international organisations. Put simply, constructivism views the EU as having the potential to ‘not simply regulate state behaviour but to constitute state identities and interests’. [11]

In order to draw hypotheses relating to socialisation which are pertinent to the case of the UK, it is necessary to establish the ways in which the above-outlined process of social learning occurs. In works providing an overview on social construction and integration, Checkel (1999) and Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig (2013) identify the areas listed in italics below, each of which is accompanied by a hypothesis which relates more specifically to European identity the UK.
1. **Social learning is more likely where the group feels itself in a crisis or is faced with clear and incontrovertible evidence of policy failure.**[12] – The general lack of adopting a European identity in the UK has been assisted by the absence of a severe crisis or extreme policy failure.

2. **Social learning is more likely where a group meets repeatedly and there is a high density of interaction among participants.**[13] – The absence of European sentiment is symptomatic of a lack of interaction between UK citizens and those from other member states.

3. **Social learning is more likely where states are new, unconsolidated or in a process of restructuring.**[14] – The relative political stability of the UK has made it less open to socialisation.

4. **Social learning is more likely where states structures and institutions and conducive to supranational integration or multi-level governance.**[15] – A lack of familiarity with the multi-level governance of the EU is a factor behind the general absence of European identity in the UK.

5. **Social learning is more likely where states have policy rules that resonate with EU rules.**[16] – Imperfect ideational consensus between the UK and the EU is responsible for some of the unwillingness to adopt a European identity.

**Community building and differentiation:**

Before examining the above hypotheses regarding European identity in relation to the UK more closely, there are another two important areas which should be noted. As previously observed, constructivism predicts that strong ideational consensus between the members of a group should lead to the formation of communities with solid, shared identities. Socialisation theory argues that the ideas of groups can be changed over time, and as such it is theoretically possible for the EU –in its capacity as an important international organisation – to more actively engage in the process of community building. Integration and community building are viewed to ‘mutually influence and potentially reinforce one another.[17] and it is therefore of interest to this paper to consider whether any EU community-building strategies play a role in affecting levels of European identity in the UK.

While on one hand constructivism classifies shared ideas as the basis for the present (albeit limited) sense of community in the EU, on the other it views differentiation between member states as a consequence of the absence of ideational homogeneity. Therefore it can be hypothesised that British indifference to a sense of European identity is a consequence not only of conflict between national and European identity, but also of a more general lack of shared ideas with the rest of Europe. This produces the high levels of differentiation observed between member states not just in terms of policy, but also in the diverse levels of European identity amongst their citizens.

**European identity in the UK:**

This section of the paper aims to provide a more precise insight into the situation in the UK, through applying the constructivist hypotheses generated in the previous section to the British example. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to gain a fundamental understanding of the current situation by providing an overview of European identity in the UK. It is a well-established fact – both in academic literature and the media at large – that historically the political relationship between the UK and Europe has been far from perfect. Issues such as the drawn out process of British accession, the British budgetary question, and often unparalleled levels of euroscepticism attest to this fact. Marcussen et al. coin the term ‘Anglo-Saxon
exceptionalism’ to refer to the British refusal to adopt a European identity, describing a ‘nation state identity which […] has remained virtually the same since the 1950s’. [18]

The statistical evidence found in the EU’s Eurobarometer surveys certainly supports this position. A 2006 survey found that while the European average was a reasonably substantial 59%, only 33% of British citizens declared themselves to be ‘proud to be European’, the lowest response of all 25 member states at that time.[19] It should be noted that such a statistic far from implies an absolute absence of European sentiment in the UK, however it does throw into stark relief the unique lack of European identity present in the UK when compared to other member states. Through examining each of the constructivist hypotheses established in the previous chapter, this paper now aims to establish why this is the case.

The first hypothesis established in the previous section suggests that a conflict between national identity and European is instrumental in creating the present situation in the UK. Although this has been described as a ‘long-standing assumption’ in constructivist theory,[20] quantitative analysis conducted by Hooghe and Marks (2001) suggests the opposite, and that in actual fact a strong attachment to either a local, regional or national community is likely to mean a stronger attachment to another community (potentially a European one).[21] Nevertheless, it appears that the UK is a case generally exempt from this, as numerous pieces of statistical evidence demonstrate. In 1998, for example, 62% of British Eurobarometer respondents stated that they considered themselves only as a citizen of their own country, again representing the member state with the lowest level of ‘Europeanness’. [22] This was again the case in a later Eurobarometer survey on the same issue, the results of which are shown below:[23]

As can be clearly observed, the UK is once again the least ‘European’ member state in terms of its citizens’ identity, while the majority of respondents view themselves as exclusively belonging to their nation. Thus it seems evident that British identity does indeed form something of an ideological barrier, characterised by clear ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups for a majority of citizens. Popular public opinion in the UK sees itself as having an exclusively British identity, while Europe continues to constitute an ‘other’. [24]

The second constructivist hypothesis generated previously suggested that despite the small degree of European identity present in the UK, there is an overall lack of either a ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ identity amongst citizens. The fact that most British citizens do not feel a particularly strong cultural bond to Europe has been demonstrated above in the Eurobarometer data. Nevertheless, it may be argued that a certain ‘thin’ identity exists merely as a consequence of the civic identity established by European citizenship.[25] Such an argument is connected to the constructivist view that participation in international institutions such as the EU reflects shared ideas,[26] representing a coincidence of values and norms characteristic of a thin European identity. As such, a constructivist interpretation of the UK predicts a certain degree of thin identity. However, the strength of such an argument is challenged by the data from the 2006 Eurobarometer survey, which reveals higher levels of European identity in the (then) candidate countries of Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia.[27] Consequently it is clear that the creation of a sense of civic identity through EU citizenship is not absolute.

The final series of hypotheses to be considered are those relating to socialisation theory. The first point identified in constructivist literature is that social learning is more likely to occur in situations where the group – in this case British citizens – feels within a crisis. In the case of UK then, constructivism thus predicts that socialisation will be less effective, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the UK is a nation which has not been successfully invaded for almost a
millennium, and throughout this time its security has been generally matched by a high degree of political stability. For the same reason, the third hypothesis on more established, stable states being less open to socialisation also holds for the UK. Furthermore, although affected by the financial crisis in 2008, the British economy suffered less severe damage than much of the Eurozone, rendering the likelihood of the UK embracing a European identity even more unlikely.

The second socialisation-based hypothesis argues that a lack of interaction may be the cause of limited European identity in the UK. This follows from the theory originally developed by Karl Deutsch and furthered by constructivist scholars that ‘increased interactions between Europeans can lead to a common European identity’. However, there has been an increase in cross-border mobility across EU member states throughout its history through schemes such as the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice and the ERASMUS programme, and as Sigalas (2010) argues; ‘Europeans have more chances than ever to interact with each other and, in theory, to develop a common identity’. As such it would appear that this hypothesis does little to explain continued British indifference. However, it should be noted that the geography of Britain may play a part in restricting interaction due to the absence of border regions with other EU member states. Furthermore, it should be noted that, as previously stated, changes to identity tend through social learning are generally gradual, and as such the effect of increasing cross-border mobility may be seen to a greater extent in the future.

A further hypothesis relating to social learning is that experience of multi-level governance increases the likelihood of socialisation. The data from the 2006 Eurobarometer survey featured above supports this suggestion, since states with a system of multi-level governance such as multinational Spain and federal Germany both have levels of European identity above the EU average. The UK, a state whose experience of multi-level governance stretches only back as far as its membership of the EU, may thus be less inclined towards adopting a European identity due to a lack of familiarity with supranational authority and multi-level governance.

The final hypothesis to consider is that state socialisation is more likely to take place when states have policy rules that resonate with EU rules. In many ways it seems originally unlikely that such a suggestion could have any relevance in this case, when – as previously discussed – the UK shares many political norms and values with the EU. However, not all areas of EU policy meet with unanimous approval in the UK, and as such it may be argued that controversial issues such as immigration and the British refusal to join the European Monetary Union play a part in reducing the potential spread of European identity in the UK.

As such it seems clear that constructivist theories fare relatively well when it comes to explaining the absence of a strong European identity amongst British citizens. Evidence can be found to support each of the hypotheses generated in the first section, although it should be noted that the extent to which each is supported by evidence does vary. Eurobarometer data reveals that Britain’s reluctance to adopt a European identity has remained relatively consistent up to now, however the final area of study for this paper will address the potential for identity change in the UK as envisaged by constructivism.

**Constructivism’s predictions for potential identity change in the UK:**

In 1860 following the unification of Italy, the Italian statesman Massimo D’Azeglio announced ‘having made Italy, we must now make Italians’. In many ways this can be viewed as the same issue currently facing the European Union, since despite the host of supranational powers
it possesses there is a clear absence of a sense of identity amongst its citizens in various member states. Nevertheless, constructivism is open to the concept of gradual ideational and identity change. As such, this final section seeks to establish which predictions can be made regarding the potential future development of European identity in the UK from a constructivist perspective.

Since 1992, the question posed to European citizens in the Eurobarometer surveys has no longer been regarding the identity that they feel currently, but rather the identity they expect to feel ‘in the near future’. It has been suggested that this implies a degree of recognition amongst the Union’s institutions that the concept of developing a European identity within the EU is still an ongoing project. This also demonstrates a certain expectation that European identity may develop amongst citizens, perhaps as a result of some of the schemes introduced by the EU.

One such scheme is the development of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, which has unquestionably increased the opportunities for Europeans to interact. This is certainly true of the UK, which has subsequently become the target of a substantial degree of economic migration. This particular experience of increased interaction has perhaps not had the positive, identity-encouraging effect that constructivism predicts, however. When the option to impose limits on arrivals from new member states during the 2004-2007 enlargements was offered, the UK notably declined. As a result, the predicted 20,000 new arrivals were in fact matched by 450,000 applications for work permits from Eastern Europe between 2004 and 2006. The ideational consequences in the UK were the creation of negative stereotypes regarding economic migrants from continental Europe and a deepening of the ‘us and them’ division in identity between Britain and other member states. As such it should be noted that further integration – both vertical and horizontal – will not necessarily produce positive, identity-forming interactions in the UK.

A similar EU scheme that one would expect to have a more positive effect on fostering a sense of European identity in the UK is the ERASMUS programme. The potential for interaction of this kind producing a common identity is amplified in the UK by the fact that it is a particularly popular target for students undertaking study abroad under ERASMUS. However, while constructivism once again argues that increased interaction between European citizens should lead to a stronger sense of European identity, quantitative evidence to the contrary can be found. In a study conducted specifically on this issue, Sigalas (2010) finds that ‘the ERASMUS experience did not strengthen most students’ European identity over time. On the contrary, the European identity level of the incoming students deteriorated over the course of the sojourn’. Therefore it is unclear what effect a greater deal of interaction between Europeans as a result of future integration may have on citizens of the UK. All that can be said with any degree of certainty is that the constructivist prediction that this should help to foster a stronger sense of European identity is far from guaranteed.

Finally, since the issue at hand is an examination of the potential for change in European identity levels in the UK, it is important to consider once again the theory of socialisation. While the previous section revealed that at present there is an absence of the requisite conditions for socialisation to occur in the UK, a change in one or several of these areas could lead to a greater willingness amongst Britons to adopt a European identity. Whilst the form that such a hypothetical situation would take is unclear, the arrival of some kind of political crisis in the UK would theoretically make social learning more plausible and potentially prompt the UK to embrace the idea of ‘Europeanness’. Alternatively, and perhaps more probably, the simple state
of remaining a member state of the EU should familiarise citizens with the concept of multi-level governance, and potentially also increase the probability of embracing European identity.

**Conclusion:**

As such, it can be observed that constructivism is a uniquely relevant theoretical viewpoint for the study of British indifference to adopting European identity. Through underlining the importance of ideas and the concept of identity, a number of constructivist hypotheses can be drawn about both the present and future of European identity. When applied to the UK, it is generally possible to find clear evidence to support such hypotheses, and as such it would appear that the ideational factors which form the basis of constructivism do indeed play a substantial role in generating the current state of affairs regarding identity in Britain. In examining the present situation, for example, many of the theoretical arguments of constructivism can be applied effectively in order to explain the lack of a sense of European identity; ranging from a conflict of European with national identity and the creation of ideational ‘in and ‘out’ groups, to a lack of the requisite conditions for the socialisation of British citizens to occur.

The subsequent effectiveness of constructivism in explaining this situation may therefore suggest that the hypotheses generated in this paper on the factors needed for a potential shift in British identity regarding Europe should be considered as more legitimate. Therefore this paper can identify the general constructivist prediction that – in the absence of undisputed evidence to suggest that further interaction will foster warmer feelings amongst Britons towards European identity – a continued lack of the necessary conditions for socialisation will make the arrival of an overall acceptance of ‘Europeanness’ in the UK somewhat unlikely in the short-term.
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