

OUTLOOK ON EUROPE

THE ABDUCTION OF EUROPE: A PLEA FOR LESS 'UNIONISM' AND MORE EUROPE

FREERK BOEDELTIJE & HENK VAN HOUTUM

Nijmegen Centre for Border Research, Department of Geography, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. E-mails: f.boedeltje@fm.ru.nl; h.vanhoutum@fm.ru.nl

Received: January 2008

ABSTRACT

This article claims that the development of a European super-state is undesirable and unreal. Europe has never presented itself as a single bordered entity supported by a constitution and a clear definition of Europe and non-Europe. The contemporary forceful abduction by the European Union re-creates Europe as a bounded political entity institutionalised through treaties and acts. It is made a socio-political cultural construction embedded in its own created geography, history and culture. We will argue that European Union is not the same as Europe and that Europe is not a people. Europe is neither finite nor restrictive. The invention and fabrication of a bounded version of Europe leads to new forms of 'spatial containerisation' which carries the name of 'Europeanization'.

Key words: Europe, EU, abduction, 'Banal EU-ism', fabrication, identity-politics

EUROPEANISM AND NATIONALISM

The geo-political development of the European Union is at its crossroads. It currently faces a significant, yet uneasy split between two divergent policy directions. The first is a continuation of the classic policy since the 1950s of 'Europeanism', which involves a slow but steady prolonging of the building of a stronger and more representative and democratic European Union. The second is a renewed 'nationalist' policy agenda, which represents what can be called EU-*fatigue* and the fear of losing sovereignty, identity and territorial jurisdiction *vis-à-vis* the EU 'super state'. A significant case in point for this uneasy split over the last few years has been the Dutch position. After the rather unexpected rise of a political cocktail of populism, anti-immigrationism, anti-muslimism and anti-EU-ism after 9/11 and the murder of the popular politician Fortuyn

and the Dutch film-maker Van Gogh, which eventually led to a Dutch 'NO' in a referendum on the Constitution of Europe, Dutch politicians are increasingly struggling where the European Union is concerned. On the one hand Dutch politicians desire to build on the rich international political tradition of amoral urge for missionary and spirit of commerce by acting and thinking European in a voluntaristic way, on the other hand they wish to give account to, or take profit from, the renewed nationalistic climate in the Netherlands. Hence, the Netherlands seem to be trapped in a difficult split between the wish for more welfare and safety by means of European integration, but only with the preservation of national identity and sovereignty. It seems almost an impossible position. A very good example of this split was the recent debate around the refusal of the Dutch parliament to organise a new referendum on the new

European treaty in October 2007. According to the Dutch parliament a new referendum is not necessary since the treaty involves no renewed draft for a constitution but solely a formal alteration of the existing treaty. The parliament defended their argument by emphasising that the altered treaty serves the desires of the Dutch people that have been voiced in the rejection of the 2005 constitution.¹ Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende claimed that the Dutch had been given what they wanted, namely the non-introduction in the constitution of the European flag, the European anthem, the connotation 'European Constitution' and the appointment of a European supra-minister of foreign affairs. For Balkenende all these institutionalisations were an undesirable illustration of the construction of a supra-state (This point was made during a speech by Balkenende in the European Parliament at Strasbourg on 23 May 2007). Although in general we are not supporters of referenda, we think that the decision not to have a referendum in this case is inconsistent, because the central message of the treaty over which a referendum was organised the first time has not changed much. Moreover, we would not support the motive for bringing forward these claims on further institutionalisation of the EU, as they were largely and merely born out the wish to win back the nationalistic vote in the Netherlands. Yet, the emphasis that the Netherlands put on the fear for the emergence of a super-state does have our full support, not for nationalistic reasons, but precisely for opposite reasons. With the current geopolitical developments of which the new constitution is a direct consequence, the EU does injustice to its original reasons of existence. Our argument here is that once again in the mythical history of Europe, Europe is being abducted. This time however, the bull is not the mythical figure of Zeus, but the EU. And it is this undesirable abduction of Europe that we wish to focus on in this contribution. The claim will be that we want more Europe, but less European Union.

'BANAL EU-ISM'

The Dutch concern in this sense justifies that the examples of the flag and the anthem are precisely the invented traditions which are produced by the Member States on a national

level. Together with some critical political voices, we would indeed agree that the EU has increasingly received the contours of a state at the supranational level. In the past few decades the EU has developed policies to border and order its own (growing) entity. Moreover, it has 'othered' the non-EU by demarcating and bordering the Union, institutionalising the representations and meetings on a European level (European Commission, Parliament, Council, etc.), institutionalising a type of European science-making through EU subsidies and research programmes, displaying manifest symbolic geopolitics through the construction of an anthem, a flag, a Europe day, common EURO-notes with invented 'European-like' buildings and bridges, common EURO-coins (with, in the Greek case, even the purposeful reference to the abduction of Europe as a symbol), etc. It defined the 'neighbours' of the Union, magnified external differences ('non-Europe', 'a-modern', 'lagging behind', etc.) and invented a 'European' tradition, history, legacy and identity. As much as the nation is an 'imagined construct', a fabrication, the EU is also a creation, a fabrication. The EU has in her attempt to be relevant copied and fabricated the model of the nation-state in the creation of a flag, an anthem, a restrictive outer border, European history, European heroes, European administration, European identity, European citizenship and a European scientific programme. It is what with a clear blink to Michael Billig's term 'banal nationalism', who described the waving of national flags one of the most manifest examples of everyday, seemingly innocent nationalism, can for similar reasons now be named 'banal EU-ism'.

The term 'Europeanisation' is often used to indicate the invention of the EU and the consequent internalisation of its citizens, within the EU entity, a term which has become an equivalent of the formation of a nation on the European level. Within EU discourse 'Europeanisation' is presented as a normative process of preaching European norms and values through policies of conditionality and socialisation to its neighbours and candidate Member States. Conditionality is a classic deterministic rewarding system based on rational institutionalism, whereby the level of integration depends on the performances of the partner states. Socialisation

is also a deterministic procedure based on a system of social learning and assistance in the field of civil society, education, culture and governance and is reminiscent of classical missionary work in Africa (See the work of Emerson & Noutcheva 2005; Emerson *et al.* 2005). Over the years of its development, the European Union seems to have produced a similar close connection between 'EU' territory, EU citizenship and EU identity, as well as many instruments, policies and communications for a far reaching EU foreign policy towards the 'neighbours' of the EU which are all directly distilled from the ontological basis of the nation-state. Its weakening power towards the outer circles of its peripheries forced the 'old' centre to obtain an active agenda to expand its core-based model of 'Europeanisation'. The circles are constructed through a complex hierarchy of categorical procedures that define themselves in terms of 'old' and 'new' accession, pre-accession, candidate, non-candidate and non-Europe. They represent a conveniently arranged system of multilateral and bilateral relations and institutions in order to clarify what the European Union is.

COLONISATION OF EUROPE

The French philosopher Etienne Balibar (2004, p. 16) described the fabrication of the EU along the model of the nation-state as 'the impossibility we struggle against, the impossibility of inventing a new image of a European people because this invention has been reproduced throughout history'. It has been the State which has protected its universal acclaimed social practices, property and discourses through national belonging which led to borders of exclusion for those who threatened this belonging or for those who questioned this universality. This invention was resilient through the colonial era into the era of Cold War and post-Cold War Europe and it is again replicated in today's European Union with equally exclusive borders and discourse on belonging and practices of bordering and othering (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen 2002). The reproduction of the State which gives itself the title 'European Union', not only abducts Europe, but more importantly, it neglects what Europe has always been. Europe has never presented itself as being one single place, rather it has manifested itself as being an imagined

place, a philosophical place that incorporates several places, representing a fable-like emptiness which is open to manifold interpretations and expressions. Through the forceful bordering of Europe, disciplining and normalising it as if it were a nation-state, the European Union creates a rather limited vision of Europe. The supra-state and supra-identity politics is a form of bounded abduction of both those who are entitled as European citizens, whatever that may mean, and of those who are excluded. The EU disciplines, borders and appropriates Europeans according to its demands, as if it were a true nation. The Polish-born sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman addresses the EU in this particular context as an additional appearance of colonisation (Bauman 1990). The neo-colonial abduction of Europe by the European Union is moving against the necessary openness and multiplicity of continent Europe. What comes to play here concerns the actual *re-creation* of Europe. Europe is increasingly being *re-created* as a bounded political entity institutionalised through treaties and acts. It is made a socio-political cultural construction embedded in its own created geography, history and culture.

The idea of abduction builds on what political geographer John Agnew referred to as the distinction between Europe as 'idea' and Europe as 'project'. The first refers to the socio-political position of Europe in terms of an ontological geographical space whereas the latter refers to the creation of a European economic common space (EEC) inspired by Schumann and Monnet (Agnew 2005, p. 578). The intentions of the 'founding fathers' were in the first place to endorse economic reconstruction throughout the nation states of Europe and additionally to improve its competition position in the world. 'Project' Europe was primary not concerned with the annihilation and abduction of the 'idea' of Europe by drawing fixed borders around it (Agnew 2005, p. 578).

The mistaking of 'Europe' and the 'Union' is in this context increasingly problematic as the definition of idea and project has been removed from their intended meaning. The 'project' Europe has been presented as the ultimate materialisation of the 'idea' Europe since it pretends to act in the name of the idea. The abduction of the idea of Europe has resulted in particularly pathetic claims by the European

Union through a propagandistic process of rationalisation and interest. In doing so, Europe has become an abducted project re-invented and re-designed by its a new bull, the European Union.

The consequence of the reinvention of a real single place (project EU) of Europe out of no particular place (the idea Europe) is the creation of *grand* politics (Safranski 2005 pp. 299, 315). The task of politics is to defend the general liveability of a particular entity. 'Politics gives in to the urge to self-preservation.' (Safranski 2005, p. 318). In this context, the EU as political institution is concentrated around the empty centre of its proclamation, but in 'the impression that the origin contains the truth' (Safranski 2005, p. 340). But we must not forget that a project can solely rely on its beginning and its end, in other words, it can merely rely on its progress. A project materialises through its output in the sense of reports, presentations, paperwork. Its actions in the name of Europe are defined through its invented traditions (Brussels as capital of the EU, the flag, anthem, 'Europeans'), which are all meant to produce, define and narrate the real-single-place belonging to the people of the European Union. And it is this singularity that is centrally tied and continuously being reproduced in an ever-growing complex mode of central and all-encompassing bureaucratisation.

By deliberately mistaking 'Europe' and the 'Union' and thereby abducting Europe, the EU exposes itself as a system with the characteristics of a super-state since the institutionalised bureaucratic character of the EU will not allow any other meaning of Europe. Contemporary Europe is for a large part represented by a 'project' which consists in the words of Balibar (2003, p. 168) of several concentric circles. The dominant inner circle is an imaginatively 'true Europe' which is fully economically and politically integrated which is then often contrasted to the outer more periphery edges of Europe which still have to be 'Europeanised' in order to be fully integrated. This concentric circlism creates a politics of 'securitisation' and discourses of inclusion and exclusion that defines 'strangers' and 'outsiders' (Balibar 2004, p. 15).

The bordering of Europe has the destructive and inevitable outcome that we exclude something which is also Europe which makes it

impossible to defend the compromise that stands in service of the liveability of the single place Europe. But we provocatively ask, what is the tenability of this project if we disregard the being of Europe as soon as we put a regressive claim on it as a bounded project?

CONCLUSION

It is from the above-sketched perspective that we claim that the position in the European debate this time strongly defended by the Dutch that pleas for more European modesty and less forced identity-building procedures should be given more weight and attention. However, this should not result in an appeal for the turn/alternative which is essentially embedded in a call for more nationalism based on vague notions, as Dutch politicians have done. A sole internalised and anxious electoral nationalism is not the right route, for the same reasons as European identity-politics generates restrictions and excludes the world beyond Europe. Dutch politics should not chain itself in a European supra-state, but at the same time should not be bound in pleasing a selective, regressive nationalistic electorate. Every single representation of Europe is a lie, because we cannot ignore that Europe is inherently more than our determinations. In the words of Balibar: 'No European "identity" can be opposed to others in the world because there exist no absolute border lines between the historical and cultural territory of Europe and the surrounding spaces. There exists no border line because Europe as such is a "border line" (or "a borderland"). More precisely it is a super position of border lines, hence a superposition of heterogeneous relations to the other histories and cultures of the world, which are reproduced within its own history and culture' (Balibar 2003, p. 219). It is precisely for the intrinsic openness of the idea of Europe, without definite beginning or end, hence a superposition of border lines, that Europe cannot be imagined as finite or restricted. Europe is not a people. Europe is always more open and indeterminate than any bordering can do justice to. In this sense we must have the courage to be critical and reflexive, to desire both less banal EU-ism as well as less banal nationalism. Instead, we need more openness and inclusive internationalism.

Note

1. The argument of the parliament was voiced by secretary of European affairs Timmermans and Prime Minister Balkenende after the decision not to organise a new referendum.

REFERENCES

- AGNEW, J. (2005), Bounding the European Project. *Geopolitics* 10, pp. 575–579.
- BAUMAN, Z. (1990), Modernity and Ambivalence. In: M. FEATHERSTONE, ed., *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalisation and Modernity: A Theory, Culture & Society Special Issue*, pp. 143–169. London: Sage Publications.
- BALIBAR, E. (2004), Europe as Borderland, The Alexander von Humboldt Lecture in Human Geography, University of Nijmegen, 10 November 2004.
- BALIBAR, E. (2003), *We the People of Europe*. Paris: Éditions la Découverte.
- BILLIG, M. (1995), *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications.
- EMERSON, M. & G. NOUTCHEVA (2005), From Barcelona Process to Neighbourhood Policy, Assessments and Open Issues, CEPS Working Document, No. 220/March.
- EMERSON, M. & S. AYDIN (2005), The Reluctant Debutante, The European Union as Promotor of Democracy in its Neighbourhood, CEPS Working Document No. 223/July.
- HOUTUM, H. VAN & T. VAN NAERSEN (2002), Bordering, Ordering and Othering. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 93, pp. 125–136.
- SAFRANSKI, R. (2005), *Nietzsche, Een Biografie van zijn Denken*. Amsterdam: Olympus.