The current discussion of a future juridical structure for the European Union is turning into a quest for a new European political culture. Along with the discussion of the juridical structure an image of ‘European values’ is emerging, according to which the European continent comprises tolerant, democratic and peace-loving citizens. As well as being humane in their attitude towards others, these ‘new Europeans’ are more than simply interested in politics; they also know the function of and can influence the highly complex system of decision-making that is the EU.

The image of a new European political culture is, however, emerging alongside the promotion of collective values that are very hard to distinguish from those of a culture particular to Europe. It is, for example, considered a historically determined fact that democracy and human rights are values of which the merit would be immediately understandable to any European citizen. The European Commission publication *A New Idea for Europe* claims that The European Union derives its strength from common values of democracy and human rights, which rally its people, and has preserved the diversity of cultures and languages and the traditions which make it what it is.

The same publication also appears to suggest, further, that peace-loving European citizen represents a realization of the very nature of the European peoples. On the enlargement of the European Union one reads:

Could one have foreseen this immense desire for democracy and peace which ultimately brought down the Berlin Wall and put the responsibility for their destinies back into the hands of the people of central and eastern Europe …?

Moreover, EU bureaucrats and most influential European politicians rely on a fairly traditional liberal understanding of culture and the nature of cultural identities. The few Union documents on culture exhibit an Enlightenment understanding of culture in which culture promotes dialogue and cooperation between social actors, and advances social integration, democracy, peace and freedom of speech. An important reason for sustaining the traditional liberal image of culture as educational and immune to politics is the belief that in so doing it is also possible to avoid the fundamentalism determining the various nationalist criticisms of the European project. Indeed, nationalist tendencies are never mentioned when the EU deals with the issue of culture. Instead, any talk of cultural values in the EU rests on a positively formulated Enlightenment understanding of culture, tensely avoiding any discussion of the political fundamentalism which can develop in the relation between politics and culture. However, the general national scepticism towards the European project cannot simply be reduced to unimportant reactions from the borderline of the European populations. If the European project is to appeal to European populations, there is an urgent need for political engagement with both the structural and the practical problems related to questions of cultural identity.

**Habermas: from peoples to publics**

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is both the best and the most influential representative of the liberal democratic strand determining the understanding of culture in discussions of a future European politics. Habermas is also among those who think in optimistic terms about the possibilities offered by the European project. In the introduction to *The Post-national Constellation* he writes:

I see the only normatively satisfactory [political alternative to global competition] as a socially and economically effective European Union, constituted along federalist lines – an alternative that points to a future cosmopolitan order sensitive both to difference and to social equality. Only a Europe in...
which the domestication of violence engages each and every form of society and culture would be immune from the postcolonial relapse into Eurocentrism. And an intellectual discourse on human rights provides the terms in which a truly decentred perspective must prove itself.  

Habermas is an advocate of a European Union which is legally based on the federal constitution and the protection of human rights. He also recognizes the need for the further development of social integration if a European public sphere is to emerge. According to Habermas, social integration is necessary if European politics is to develop in and through a democratically justified legal framework.

But what are the implications of the federal constitution for the diversity of cultural identities? In a discussion with the German professor of law Dieter Grimm, Habermas argued that within the federal constitution cultural identities can be preserved, at the same time as the constitution would be the condition of possibility for the unified political culture necessary for a European public sphere to emerge. It would not, according to Habermas, threaten the cultural diversity of European ethnic and national identities if Europe were to become a federation of states. Rather, the federal constitution could and should be based on these human rights that protect the preservation of cultural identities.

The question of the preservation of national and ethnic identities in Europe also arises in discussions between pro-Europeans and Euro-sceptics. According to the Euro-sceptics, a democratic constitution should have the same legitimacy as the nation-state where the constitution provides a political framework for a population that understands itself as culturally homogenous. Euro-sceptics claim that a European public sphere cannot emerge without the collective consciousness of European ‘people’. Further European political integration can therefore never become democratically legitimate if the European peoples are not unified through the construction of a history common to all Europeans, and European cultural homogeneity would in turn threaten the cultural homogeneity of the nation-state.

To counter this argument, Habermas makes a distinction between the democratic legitimacy of the nation-state and the idea of a ‘people’. In ‘Why Europe Needs a Constitution’ Habermas claims that

A nation of citizens must not be confused with a community of fate shaped by common descent, language and history. This confusion fails to capture the voluntaristic character of a civic nation, the collective identity of which exists neither independent of nor prior to the democratic process from which it springs. The collective consciousness of the politically emancipated and reflective citizen capable of associating with fellow citizens has a different status for democratic politics than does the collective consciousness of a ‘people’, which is based on an idea of common descent, language and history. And because the collective consciousness of the citizen is an essential element in the already existent public spheres of the individual European states, a common European political culture can now develop in dialogue between the various national public spheres. A European political culture would therefore not rely upon the construction of a collective consciousness according to which all European citizens share a common European history.

Habermas unites the national constitution from the Romantic idea that a nation’s democratic legitimacy is its foundation in a population of common descent. Accordingly, even if it would be practically difficult to develop a European public sphere, the possibility already exists for a common political culture to emerge in Europe, a political culture, which could condition a more democratic European politics. Habermas also recognizes, however, that the Romantic idea of nationhood was an important element in the emergence of the public spheres in individual European nation-states. In the early modern European state the construction of the collective consciousness of a ‘people’ was a preliminary step for the population towards achievement of a consciousness of citizenhood. ‘Cultural identity’ thus had a privileged role to play in the process which enabled ‘subjects’ to recognize themselves as participants in public debate. Cultural identity helped bridge the gap between the self-understanding of those who were simply subjected to The Law and the self-understanding of citizens who knew they had the right to, and were capable of, interference with the law through political participation. In The Postnational Constellation Habermas writes:

Democratic self-determination can only come about if the population of a state is transformed into a nation of citizens who take their political destiny into their own hands. The political mobilization of ‘subjects’, however, depends on a prior cultural integration of what is initially a number of people who have been thrown together with each other.

It is important to recognize how, according to Habermas, cultural identity – and this includes the idea of shared national and ethnic belonging, which is historical and often also territorially determined – helps political mobilization. Cultural identity occu-
pies a space at the brink of the political, a space that opens the possibility for new participants to attain a voice in public debate. This proposition also grounds Habermas’s claim in The Postnational Constellation that

in general, demands for ‘national independence’ are legitimate only as a response to the repression of minorities whom the central government has deprived of equal rights, specifically rights to cultural equality.12

Despite, therefore, the significance of the concept of a ‘people’ in the political emancipation of a population, Habermas understands the concept to have become politically redundant where a population has become accommodated to a given political culture. He thus understands the cultural identity developed to legitimize national constitutions as necessary for a more general political awareness to have emerged in Europe, but this identity is not a necessary condition for the existence of a public sphere.

Habermas’s attempt to retain a role for cultural identity – including ethnic and national identities – in politics is the result of a double-headed attempt to delimit the political significance of culture. Habermas’s understanding of the concept of a people is symptomatic of a liberal understanding of culture, according to which cultural identities are both immune from and related to the public sphere. Cultural identity, that is, is taken to be a form of group identity, which can provide an opportunity for individuals to achieve the self-understanding of those who participate in public debate; at the same time, the cultural issue ought to be excluded from politics when it occurs in the form of political fundamentalism. When it founds a political fundamentalism cultural identity obstructs the possibility of engaging in dialogue – the dialogue which is, for Habermas, the necessary condition for participation in the public sphere.

Habermas defends his ambivalent understanding of the political significance of cultural identity by distinguishing between the accommodating political culture that includes cultural differences and the culturally determined political culture that assimilates and destroys them. But what happens when a national culture is represented, as it often is by European national populists, as a repressed cultural artefact being destroyed by the mobility of the global population? When exclusion is the criterion for the inclusion of issues of cultural identity into politics, how should it be decided when a particular cultural identity should be regarded as repressed, legitimizing cultural identity as a means of political emancipation? Deciding for or against the inclusion within politics of arguments based on cultural issues appears in liberal thought to be a decision that cannot be taken on logical grounds. A paradoxical relation between politics and cultural identity is situated right at the heart of liberal thought, which cannot, as a consequence, identify exactly how and why exclusion occurs. The question then arises: is this ambivalence embedded in the liberal understanding of culture itself?

**Becoming homogeneous**

One of the things responsible for the paradoxical place of cultural identity in liberal thought is, as mentioned above, the political status this form of identity is granted. Cultural identity works as, or in relation to, a form of reflective educational process leading the subject to realize him- or herself as citizen. Culture is thereby granted a relation to politics in so far as it provides a preliminary step for subjects to become committed participants in public debate. But, as Max Pensky points out, ‘In the context of multicultural democratic states, is it even possible to distinguish between cultural groups accommodating to a common political culture, as opposed to a cultural group being generated by modernisation processes themselves?’13 More precisely: if cultural identities are not only supportive of, but also constructed by the political structure of the modern state, then the question arises of the extent to which the construction of modern cultural identities is politically determined.

To understand the extent to which modern cultural identities develop in relation to political decisions and political administration it is necessary to determine more precisely the distinctive characteristics of the concept of a ‘people’. As a ‘people’, a cultural identity is, as Habermas reminds us in ‘Why Europe Needs a Constitution’,14 constructed in relation to the structure of modern democratic politics. A ‘people’ does not denote a natural substance determining ethical life. A ‘people’ is a construction based on the vocabulary of modern identity construction tied to the structuring of modern societies. The concept of the ‘people’ thus constitutes a bond between modern identity construction and modern political administration.

If liberal theorists and politicians want to change the European understanding of the relation between cultural identity and the political framework of the modern constitutional state, it will be necessary to recognize the cultural mechanisms associated with the occurrence of the early Western European democracies. For the change in the form of the European state from absolute monarchy to constitutional democracy
depended on the possibility for various state populations to associate with each other through national narratives constructed around aspects of history, language and territory. The concept of a ‘people’ developed in early attempts at legitimizing state administration through popular sovereignty, and it would be impossible to separate the concept completely from the political structure of the modern European state.

Moreover, the concept of a people supports popular sovereignty in that it facilitates the state-administration of a population. If a state population is not only represented as homogeneous but also represents itself in homogeneity, then the administration of the democratic state is significantly strengthened. Unity based on descent represents a form of solidarity without which the modern European state would probably not have developed successfully. And even at the points where a more plural picture occurs and the interests of different groups become more varied, the idea of cultural identity nevertheless represents a useful tool for the functioning of the modern state. This is not simply because of the idea of shared descent, language and history. More significantly, a cultural identity unites the individual with state institutions in so far as it is a form of representation that can unify a state population and can penetrate into the individual’s self-understanding.

The concept of the people thus supports the political structure of the modern European state, but another of its features simultaneously conflicts with the model of state administration. The concept of a ‘people’, that is, is a locus of solidarity for those excluded from the socially dominant classes. As well as naming the centre of power in the state governed by popular sovereignty, ‘the people’ also names the exact opposite: those groups in society without access to state power.15

Around the time of the French Revolution the understanding of ‘the people’ as those excluded from the centre of power was intimately related to the development of the modern idea of direct democracy. The concept of the people was mobilized in a process of emancipation according to which those excluded from political influence could be included within a given power structure. This specific understanding of the term was central to revolutionary discourse to the extent that the purpose and aim of the French Revolution was to bridge the gap between inclusion and exclusion16 (and ‘Enlightenment’ named the process through which those who were excluded from the power centre in the various European nation-states could be included within the dominant classes).

This second understanding of ‘the people’ returns us to what Habermas describes as the ‘constructive’ aspect of the concept. For Habermas this specific type of cultural identity refers to the processes of understanding through which the populations of the early European nation-states first became aware of themselves as not simply subjected to the Law in their respective states. Even in its later deployment, in complicity with a Romantic belief in the beauty of soil and descent, the concept of a people first referred to the sometimes violent process of enlightenment through
which more and more social groups became accepted and came to understand themselves as citizens in the various European nation-states.

Had it not been for the concept of the people there would be no democratic core to the modern constitutional state. However, the conceptual ambiguity of ‘the people’ reveals a paradox situated at the core of ideas of democracy and popular sovereignty. On the one hand, the existence of the collective consciousness of a people is a useful tool in the functioning of the democratic state as an administrative structure. The concept supports the hegemonization of individual differences within a state so as to make the state apparatus effective. On the other hand, ‘the people’ represent those who are immediately excluded from that same administrative structure supposed to include the state population. The people are those who do not have the power to decide for themselves, those who are always-already excluded from the decision making of the political administration.

Even when the concept of the people was developed to support a specific idea of how best to administer a population within the territorial state, the concept itself points to its own limitations. The concept expresses the impossibility of total inclusion of all differences within a given state administration. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, the concept ‘cannot be included in the whole in which it is a part and [it] cannot belong to the set in which it is already included…. It is what already is and yet must, nevertheless be realized; it is the pure source of every identity but must, however, continually be redefined and purified through exclusion, language, blood, and land.’ The awareness that parts of a state population are excluded from the centre of power may rightly generate concrete processes through which subjects are liberated politically. But it is more important to recognize that the conceptual status of ‘the people’ is such that processes of political emancipation cannot come to a halt in the state based on popular sovereignty. The paradox expressed in the concept of the people illustrates that the realization of popular sovereignty is a process of constant becoming.

**Integration as exclusion**

Conceptually, the idea of ‘the people’ expresses a tension between inclusion and exclusion which is situated in the relation between cultural identity and modern democratic politics. If European liberal politicians aim to make the European project a democratic project, they would do well to pay attention to the paradoxes involved in speaking of common European values. In modernity the unification of consciousness through cultural values inevitably expresses a paradox which complicates the ways in which such a consciousness could relate to a future European political structure.

In *Empire* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify yet another important feature in the construction of European cultural identity:

The more important of [the operations that contribute to the construction of the notion of a ‘people’] are the mechanisms of colonial racism that construct the identity of European peoples in a dialectical play of oppositions with their native Others. The concepts of nation, people, and race are never far apart."

Contrasting Habermas’s liberal understanding of cultural identity, where the people represent processes of enlightenment through which individual consciousness is shaped, Hardt and Negri understand the concept of a people exclusively in terms of mechanisms of exclusion. The two understandings are mutually exclusive; the mechanisms of exclusion Hardt and Negri identify eliminate the very possibility of the reflective processes of enlightenment. The mechanisms of exclusion are, in other words, the answer to the question as to why cultural identity construction may result in the political fundamentalism liberal thinkers want to avoid. In its relation to a state structure ‘the people’ is a form of cultural identity reliant on ‘an imaginary plane’ that hides or eliminates differences, and this corresponds ‘on the practical plane to racial subordination and social purification’.

It is, therefore, also an inherent element of the cultural identity of a people that it may develop into political fundamentalism. In its relation to popular sovereignty, the cultural identity of the people expresses the possibility of being *both* an active means for political emancipation and an active means for different forms of political fundamentalism: due to its paradoxical core of inclusion and exclusion, the concept of the people can turn *either way*. If the concept of the people is a recognized means for processes of political emancipation, it also has to be recognized that political emancipation and political fundamentalism are *both* fundamental elements in the concept that constitutes the core of popular sovereignty. It is therefore not sufficient simply to follow Habermas’s suggestion and distinguish between the accommodating political culture that includes cultural differences and the political culture that eliminates them.

According to the argument made here, the modern constitutional state cannot function without exclusion, either way. Without recognition of some who are
excluded from the centre of power there is, as already mentioned, no opening for the process of political emancipation, which is fundamental to the realization of popular sovereignty. When the EU administration and EU politicians refer to common European values the aim is obviously to set in motion reflective processes in which culturally diverse European populations may unite around a single set of political norms. There is, it is true, a logical possibility that the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy involved in the construction of such values may actually generate processes of enlightenment. In relation to potential processes of political emancipation, however, the problem is that the target of European integration has already been defined as the already realized universal values of peace, democracy and the protection of human rights. Because the process of integration is assigned this teleological structuring, where the integrating political norms must remain unquestioned, it cannot, in fact, be regarded as a process of political emancipation. In the process of European integration the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy that could set in motion processes of political emancipation has, it is presupposed, already been overcome. If the presupposition among liberal thinkers and EU politicians is that the European population consists of citizens who already have the right to participate in political debate, then the exclusion of parts of the European population from the centre of power in Europe is obviously not recognized. An element fundamental to the process of political emancipation is thereby lost. There are no ‘people’ external to the centre of power – the people have united with the political administration itself.

Without any excluded people to include within a democratic political system the only exclusion left for the political system to emphasize in the elaboration of the common values of its populations is that of the totalitarian society. At the level of EU politics restrictions are thus imposed upon prospective new members of the EU and Third World countries; prospective new member states and Third World countries must prove they represent true democracies and they have to prove they protect the human rights of the individual. According to this logic none other than the Union states can claim to be truly democratic and only Union citizens can be said to have been through those processes of political emancipation making the values of the political system understandable to them. The EU states (Western Europe) are the only states that have historically been capable of providing all parts of their population with the rights necessary to be citizens in democratic states. And this ability is now what distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’, and it is what makes ‘our’ world superior to ‘theirs’.

Any reference to unified European values involves a paradox, which was once the very condition of possibility for democracies to emerge in Europe. However, in presupposing that the democratic state is a realized historical fact in Europe, the European values of peace and democracy can now only condition a future totalitarian European society where one must accept a ‘European Idea’ if one is to be or remain included. The ‘European Idea’ represents an ideal of democracy and the protection of human rights – an ideal that can be used pragmatically to legitimize any political purpose whatsoever. To talk of European values is thus to describe the collective consciousness necessary for the European populations to conform to the criteria set by liberal politics. It also infers that there are ‘others’ who must still be shaped through the EU model of tolerant, democratic and peace-loving citizens. By predetermining the political norms of the totality as the universal ideals of peace, democracy and human rights, the ideals become culturally specific and other parts of the world are necessarily excluded from the idea of the totality. In order to sustain the collective consciousness of the European people others are necessarily excluded and inevitably conceived as undemocratic; violaters of the human rights of the individual.

Risking ‘Europe’

The paradoxical concept of the people is situated at the core of the modern idea of popular sovereignty, whose only realization is a process of constant becoming. The continuity of the process depends upon recognition of the fact that those who are excluded from a given centre of power must become included. The necessity of exclusion, however, means that the concept of the people inevitably carries the seed of political fundamentalism, making it a dangerous tool in the political unification of a population. Because of this, ‘culture’ cannot be regarded as an apolitical and purely educative phenomenon. Identities achieved in cultural processes of understanding may undoubtedly develop into different forms. But even when some of these forms are more admirable than others, there are no mechanisms built into the process of identity construction that prevent ‘culture’ from being used by extremists as a weapon in political struggles.

Nothing constructive can be said about the relation between culture and politics if we remain trapped within an understanding of culture according to which the confrontation with and between cultural identities is necessarily enlightening for the individual’s self-
understanding. This stereotypical understanding of culture appears in Habermas’s writings when he speaks of the learning process founding the cosmopolitan political culture that he would like to see realized in Europe. According to Habermas, the confrontation between various cultural identities helps achieve a new attitude to culture, which is significant for the self-understanding of the cosmopolitan citizen. In The Postnational Constellation he claims that the cosmopolitan identity arises through the practical confrontation between various culturally constructed identities.

The proliferation of anonymous relations with ‘others’ and the dissonant experiences with ‘foreigners’ have a subversive power. Growing pluralism loosens ascriptive ties to family, locality, social background, and tradition, and initiates a formal transformation of social integration. Developing a cosmopolitan identity would thus be dependent upon the practical confrontation between various cultural identities.

But the relation between the cultural identity of a people and the state based on popular sovereignty should make us wary of this Enlightenment understanding of cultural identities, according to which they are processes of self-understanding driven by a sense of collective belonging and necessary both for the structuring of society and for the individual as an educational process. Understood as a structure of narration giving meaning to the individual and his or her life-world, cultural identity is obviously not a wholly negative phenomenon. But its imbrication with the ambiguous concept of ‘the people’ means that cultural self-understanding cannot be limited to these positive features.

Moreover, the practical awareness that, in modernity, cultural identities have all too often turned into political fundamentalisms is not sufficient knowledge if the aim is to prevent political fundamentalisms from occurring again. It is not sufficient because the legitimacy of a constitutional democracy is linked to an idea of popular sovereignty that harbours such latent fundamentalisms. The prevention of political fundamentalism demands a rethinking of democratic legitimacy. In legitimating the democratic political structure it should be taken into account that it is only in the individual’s transcendence of culture in a conceptual realization that identity construction concerns the self-understanding of the individual (rather than of a group of people) and that social solidarity must base itself on something more, or something else. Only then is it possible to move to a level where cultural uniformity and the modern political state are no longer mutually dependent.

It is almost impossible to promote cultural unity as a means for the individual’s entry into a social context, at the same time as wanting to eliminate the fundamentalism latent to cultural identities. Given the recurrence of European nationalism, the least one could ask for in a European context is that our social life is not tied to a specific, geographically bound historical tradition with its historically determined political norms. In contrast to what EU politicians may think, it is impossible to combat nationalism if the historical and territorial background is still ascribed a privileged position in relation to the individual’s construction of his or her identity. Moreover, there are no real means available to prevent social stigmatization because of place of birth (and therefore often also of colour), if we cling to the traditional liberal presuppositions that only cultural identity generates human differences and that cultural identity is a necessary means for social integration.

To combat fundamentalism each and every individual needs to understand the foundations of cultural identity construction. But it is also just as necessary that at the organizational level people are provided with the space and the tools to create forms of self-understanding that do not rely upon a culturally grounded education. Social solidarity should not have to be constructed in a process of understanding through which the ‘cultural foundation of any identity’ is realized before being conceptually transcended. Other means have to be regarded as legitimate ways for individuals to cultivate themselves; indeed, true differences can actually only occur when the individual has the opportunity to choose between means. Perhaps, then, it is time to risk something in Europe: to try to think radically differently about socialization, which means finally abandoning the idea that it is a cultural privilege to belong to a Western European tradition.

Notes

4. Ibid., p. 5; emphasis added.
5. See for example, the Treaty Establishing the European Union, §151, and the official commission documents on the area of culture.
6. In order to understand the practical implications of Habermas’s reflections on the future of European Union politics, it is important to recognize the tremendous impact Habermas’s theories have upon international relations today.


11. *The Postnational Constellation*, p. 64; emphasis added.

12. Ibid. p. 72.


15. As Hannah Arendt has pointed out in *On Revolution*, the ‘very definition of the word [people] was born out of compassion, and the term became equivalent for misfortune and unhappiness – *le peuple*, *les malheureux* m’applaudissent, as Robespierre was wont to say; *le peuple toujours malheureux*, as even Sieyès, one of the least sentimental and most sober figures of the Revolution would put it’ (*On Revolution*, Viking, New York, 1963, p. 70).

16. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, ‘Robespierre … embodied the logic of revolutionary sovereignty. His relation to the Terror was to produce the sovereign unity that “democracy” demanded: “He was the people to the sections, he was the people to the Jacobin club, he was the people to the national representative body; it was continually necessary to establish, control and restore the perfect fit between people and the various assemblies that claimed to speak in its name …, for without that perfect fit there would be no legitimate power, and the first duty of power was to maintain it: that was the function of Terror”’ (*Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, pp. 11–12).


19. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri also operate with a different understanding of difference from Habermas. The two authors are inspired by Gilles Deleuze’s Spinozian understanding of real differences, which is expressed as ‘the multitude’. ‘The multitude’ differs from institutionalized differences because there is no centre of power determining the relation between differences: ‘The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of itself’ (*Empire*, p. 103).
