**‘Europe in your Pocket’: Narratives of Identity in Euro Iconography**

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**Abstract**

European institutions have long been concerned with how citizens perceive them and how this is connected to shifting notions of Europe and collective identities. This article contributes to the analysis of EU narratives as revealed by the design of the euro banknotes, their intended institutional meaning and the debate they raised. The seven denominations’ main images are bridges and doors, inspired by European architectural styles, but representing abstract symbols and not actual landmarks. In the public debate, this has attracted more criticism than praise; scholars, too, have generally been dismissive. In this article, I aim to provide an interpretation of how currency iconography becomes the medium of both accepted and occasionally contested narratives of identity. First I consider how the euro was designed and officially promoted; then I advance a critique of the main interpretations, as an indicator of accepted (or unacceptable) representations of Europe. Available narratives will finally be rethought through an analysis of the significance of the bridge and the door as cultural symbols, following Georg Simmel’s essay on the subject. The significance of this will emerge in relation to the wider relevance of architectural metaphors of Europe as tropes in narratives of European identity.

In 2015 Belgium unveiled a €2 coin commemorating the bicentennial of the battle of Waterloo. The French government objected, their reasoning being that the site of Napoleon’s defeat was a negative symbol for some Europeans. To circumvent this veto, Belgium minted a €2.5 coin, as irregular denominations do not require other countries’ approval. British newspapers jumped at this European squabble, with titles such as ‘France wins the battle, Belgium wins the war’.[[1]](#footnote-1) But the United Kingdom provides equally good examples, both in ironic value and troubling connotations. Displaying an iconography which, comparatively, is on the ‘traditional’ side of the spectrum (Hymans 2004: 17, 29), new pound banknotes proposed in 2013 were even more conservative, as all female faces, except the Queen, were to disappear. This time feminist activists protested, with the leader of the campaign building a strong following on social media but also receiving death and rape threats. Eventually the Bank of England announced that from 2017 Jane Austen would appear in the new design.

These examples, anecdotal as they are, illustrate how the seamless fabric of everyday indifference for currency symbolism covers a kind of silent consent, easily disturbed in a crisis. At national as well as at European level, the iconography of money can quickly switch from being a taken for granted background to eliciting demands of fairer, more inclusive integration of a plurality of events and characters into a supposedly shared story – and as such provide a unique entry point to that story. This article focuses on the heuristic gain in exploring the range of meanings that have been and can be associated with the imagery of the euro, especially from the point of view of the intended meaning the institutions involved were trying to convey with the new currency, as well as the public and academic debate that followed. Moving away from a causal analysis, my focus is not to reflect on the likely limited and hard to measure shift in public opinion a new iconography such as the euro may cause or be the effect of.[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead, I aim to provide an interpretation of how money becomes a medium of both accepted and contested narratives of identity.

The case of euro iconography is particularly relevant precisely because it is here apparent that the narrative carried by the euro cannot be studied merely as an isolated text (verbal and visual). That narrative emerges fully only when analysing both the final iconography itself, with its own set of constraints and possibilities, and the complex interaction between its producers, their interpretation and its reception in public debate.[[3]](#footnote-3) Narrative analysis accommodates, and in fact requires, attention to the various forms narratives can take and to how their meaning is not an objective, intrinsic property but one emerging as part of a social process, and not fully reducible to unilinear models of discursive power or causality (see Bouza, this issue). As we shall see, it is such a focus that allows us to properly analyse how euro banknotes visualise a particular story of Europe in seven stages and denominations. This also shifts attention from money’s main economic character to its lesser acknowledged cultural significance. As the sociology of money has shown (both classic and contemporary, see Simmel [1900] 2004; Dodd 2016), to fulfil its economic function money needs to elicit trust: at the crossroad of money’s economic and cultural significance is its reliance on trust, and therefore on the availability of a shared basis of that trust, both institutional and imagined. The images and words, as well as dimensions and other physical features, even the very name given to the money, all must evoke trust, and together tell a story about its foundation.

With these premises, I propose a sociological analysis of the euro iconography seen as a site where narratives of European identity are visualised through symbolic images. This visualisation requires the story to be told in a rather simple way – one that can work for the everyday settings in which people use currency as they go about their daily lives. However, coming up with such a simple story is far from easy, as we shall see. In section 1 of this article I present the imagery of the euro, how it was chosen and officially promoted. Then, in section 2, I look at how the euro banknotes have been discussed, both in the general media and in a small but growing collection of academic literature. Having also shown how the euro iconography fits within a well-establisheduse ofarchitectural metaphors of Europe, Iadvance, in section 3, a different reading of the euro. This is partly inspired by the works of sociologist Georg Simmel and his reflections on the bridge and the door as cultural symbols.

One further preliminary remark is necessary. Contemporary theories of nation-building, otherwise sensitive to the means for the imagining of a community (Anderson 1983), have tended to overlook the relationship between money and identity. Money has been interpreted as what destroys social and cultural ties, viewed as the ‘radical leveller’ that ‘does away with all distinctions’ (Marx [1867] 1974: 132), a formal, abstract and rational means of exchange undermining identities rather than connected to their formation. Historian Eric Hobsbawm famously noted that ‘money is the most universal form of public imagery‘ (1983: 281) but left it at that. More recently, ground-breaking studies on money and identity (for a recent sociology of money, also exploring the euro’s hybrid nature, see Dodd 2016; for a national example see Sørensen 2014; see also Zelizer 1994; Fishman and Messina 2006; Moro 2000) are filling this gap. One important distinction emerges, although it is often overlooked even in the recent debate on the euro, that between money and currency. Currency is the material concretisation of the exchange value that ‘money’ represents abstractly, its material, socially accepted form: it is currencies that are created, used, dismissed. Currency therefore is not only a means of exchange, but also a means for defining a social group. The euro is obviously a new currency, not a new type of money – as the effects attributed to it by some of the more catastrophic accounts imply – and should be studied accordingly.

##### 1. A brief cultural history of the euro and its design process

Currencies tell stories. By the very act of uniting some people in mutual trust, these stories will also exclude others. The excluded may react, especially if they think it is their story, too, which is being told, wrongly or unfairly. The debate that was generated around the design of the euro makes explicit those stories that the grainy pictures on banknotes and miniature bas-reliefs on coins merely evoke. According to the European Central Bank (ECB), the euro banknotes and coins’ appearance has been chosen to evoke cooperation and openness, a tangible example of the well-known rhetoric of European identity as ‘unity in diversity’ (Sassatelli 2009). Euro coins materialise this rhetoric rather literally with their common obverse and national reverse, the latter designed by each member state. A comparative analysis of the selected images on both sides of the coins in all the eurozone (Raento *et al*. 2004) supports the tepid but overall benign public reception of a design selected to be inclusive and seamlessly integrate within previous traditions. The conclusions of this study show, like the euro coins themselves, a perhaps predictable but still relevant combination of two different sides: on the one hand the authors remark that with their typical, recurrent national icons, euro coins continue to work as ‘messengers of state symbolism’ (ibid. 950). On the other hand, maps on the common side ‘create a continuous link to the supranational ideal of a politically and economically integrated, culturally harmonious Europe’ (ibid.). More significantly, and as supported also by other comparative research (Brion and Moreau 2001; Hymans 2004; Fornäs 2011), human figures are in the vast majority, including state figures but also cultural personalities, men but also women (increasingly not just of the allegorical, young and beautiful type).

This is remarkable because, unlike euro coins, the design of euro banknotes is radically different from the norm in its complete lack of human figures, or even of heritage landmarks. As a result, a much more controversial debate was sparked. By way of example, around the time of the release of the planned design, a journalist commented that it looked ‘as if it has been designed for a ‘Star Trek’ episode about some culturally denuded land on Mars not for the home of Socrates, Charlemagne, Martin Luther, Notre Dame, the Uffizi, Bach, Beethoven and Mozart’ (Zakaria 1999). These are indeed just a few of the names and places that could have been portrayed on the new banknotes, had the euro followed 14 out of 15 member states and depicted culturally significant individuals and landmarks.

The euro, instead, shows abstract bridges, doors and windows. For many, these virtual images seem to reflect the virtuality of Europe as a community or union. Critics generally see the weakness of the euro in its preceding a full-fledged political community, predicting that the latter may never develop. Still, those who celebrate a re-unified Europe recall Roman and Carolingian times, when there were also common currencies, as if a teleological process that led to a final unification through the euro could be discerned. Ahead of 2002, it was common to find in the general press short histories of money, where the euro was described as the final step in a genealogy of forerunners. Interestingly, to visualise this long trajectory, these accounts often showed the passage from the depiction of an owl on the ancient Athens’s tetra drachma to the Greek €1 coin showing the very same image, telling the story of a linear evolution from the cradle of European civilisation in classical Greece to the European Union (EU).

Both critiques and celebrations of the euro tend to be based on a comparison with well-known national(ist) strategies, as generally the term of comparison for European identity has been national identity (Smith 1992). We know that, when creating national currencies, nineteenth century policy-makers considered, among more substantive aspects, the power of currency imagery to help in the promotion of a national identity, both because of the vastness of its audience and its constant, banal presence in everyday life (Billig 1995; on the euro, Helleiner 2002; for aspects beyond iconography see Kaelberer 2004, 2010). Yet, to take national currency and identity as sole and normative model does not seem an apt means of evaluating a currency which, in many respects, constitutes an emerging hybrid requiring a redefinition of key distinctions (Dodd 2016, 251-265). Recent research on currency design adds that non-state agents and concerns are also at stake, requiring a much more nuanced analysis than supported by default methodological nationalism, with its exclusive focus on an often ill-defined ‘state’ or ‘government’ as sole agent (see Penrose 2011). The complex design process of the euro discussed below is exemplary in this respect.

The choice of images to go on euro banknotes was a crucial matter, as these are, alongside maps on both paper and metal money, the only common images. The official history starts in 1996, when the governors of the national banks of member states gathered in the forerunner of the European Central Bank, the European Monetary Institute (EMI), launched a call for proposals. The guidelines given to banknote designers strictly forbade any images that could be associated with a particular country, including portraits of famous composers and artists, national heroes and landmarks. The designers could choose between two themes, ‘Ages and Styles of Europe’ or ‘Modern/Abstract’. This story however omits an interesting prehistory. Already in 1994, the newly created EMI asked the advice of a team of expert historians, art historians, psychologists and professional banknote designers to propose design themes and guidelines. Whilst the choice not to have a national side was an easy one, mainly dictated by the practicalities of avoiding counterfeiting, it also had the symbolic effect of putting a new common imagery in the foreground. The experts emphasised the importance of symbolising Europe in a way that would be intelligible and acceptable to the EU public. That the banknotes should include the European flag was easily established. However, whenever an actual theme was proposed, the stumbling block of ‘national bias’ emerged. The selection of the ‘Modern/Abstract’ theme can be seen as capitulating to that impasse. However, the complexities and compromises around the theme ‘Ages and Styles of Europe’ are revealing, especially as that was to be the winning design theme. As Luuk Van Middelaar (2013, 238-44) notes in his detailed analysis of the back and forth consultation process, whether the banknotes should merely represent architectural styles to ‘convey, without specific reference to any given building, a clear message on the architectural richness and unity of Europe’ (ibid.: 241), or whether they should represent real buildings, was a shifting issue. Eventually the guidelines settled for a combination of recognisable buildings and anonymous portraits. Yet in the end the winning design interpreted these guidelines rather freely. In December 1996, on the basis of advice given by a jury of experts and the results of an EU-wide survey of public opinion, the EMI Council selected the now well-known bridges, windows and doors of Austrian graphic designer Robert Kalina (ECB 2007). The euro banknotes, as per guidelines, represent the architectural styles of seven periods in Europe's cultural history: classical (€5), romanesque (€10), gothic (€20), renaissance (€50), baroque and rococo (€100), the age of iron and glass architecture (€200) and 20th century architecture (€500). However, instead of the anonymous portraits suggested by the guidelines, windows, doors and gateways are the main features on the front of the banknotes. On the reverse bridges are the main images, and, these too, take a liberty with the guidelines by not depicting specific and recognisable buildings. Interestingly, the EMI, against its own initial brief, eventually requested that the images be indistinct enough not to be identified with any known structure. After a first set was exposed to media critique when disclosed to the public – notably from the UK – for resemblances to existing buildings (Calligaro 2013: 158), the EMI asked it to be redesigned to increase abstraction. The final images are abstract ideal types of the chosen styles. Kalina declared that the idea of gateways and bridges came to him as symbols of ‘the spirit of openness and cooperation in the European Union, and in particular the bridge as an image that links peoples, and windows and doors, always open, as an invitation to head to the future’ (ECB 2007: 24). Official EU rhetoric has appropriated and codified this explanation, declaring that ‘windows and doors represent the European spirit of openness, whereas bridges symbolise the close cooperation and communication between European peoples, and between Europe and the rest of the world’ (ibid.), as we can read in several official publications widely distributed across the eurozone countries. The history of the euro has barely started and the design keeps changing and adapting. Recently, the introduction of a watermark and hologram with a portrait of the mythological princess Europa in the new ‘Europa’ series as a new security feature seems to respond to the icy media reception the people-free first series.[[4]](#footnote-4) Those who inspect their coins and notes with a magnifying glass might also have noticed changes in the maps of Europe on their euros. Rather than solve the problem, this tinkering seems just to confirm the euro’s predicament as an unsettled symbol of European identity.

##### 2. No people, no story?

The convoluted itinerary of the euro and the many levels and types of agencies, including institutional and non-institutional players as well as lay people, across all the participating countries involved, shows the symbolic importance attributed to the euro as a vehicle of identity, in search of a new symbolic language (Calligaro 2013; Van Middelaar 2013). As we have seen, the new iconography was the result of a strict mandate, indeed almost an ‘obsession’ to avoid debate and resistance (Mori 2000), by ruling out what Calligaro summarises as the triple dangers of national bias, gender imbalance, and political incorrectness. These are obstacles that other currency designers have often been allowed to ignore, or thought they could, even in contemporary times, as in the case of the Austen pound banknote affair. Against the idea of a thoroughly ‘ahistorical’ and ‘post-cultural’ currency (Delanty and Jones 2002), Calligaro concludes that the euro represents ‘a symbolic *tour de force*: preserving an essentialist and teleological discourse on European culture in an utterly neutral design’ (Calligaro 2013: 179). Van Middelaar, too, concludes with a similar partial defence by arguing that ‘[a]fter successive phases of anonymisation, an essential element remained: the idea of time and of changes in form. Time was given a beginning, too. Europe, the notes said, was born in Antiquity, has a long history, and cherishes her metamorphoses’ (Van Middelaar 2013: 243). One could argue that in its radical departure from the consolidated tradition of iconic figures or landmarks and state heraldry the euro went under the radar of analyses programmed to grasp those elements. It still did not manage to avoid fierce and influential criticism:

the adoption of a single European currency is a relatively trivial issue compared to others facing the EU, but none of these fundamental issues can be dealt with successfully without a debate about what it means to be European and what European values are - exactly the kind of debate which would have been sparked off by putting Europeans on euro bank-notes. There would have been much screaming and shouting, outraged editorials, nationalist hysteria - in other words, normal democratic discourse. But the architects of the euro did not want that. Their Europe, of bridges, doors and windows, is very pretty and peaceful ... without any Europeans to spoil the view (Meek 2001).

The lack of a democratically supported basis also worried the French scholar Bruno Théret, who in an article revealingly titled ‘A currency without soul nor culture’ links the uncertainty of political and economic effects of the euro, as much as its impact on everyday life, to the lack of assertiveness of the physical aspect of the new banknotes, especially when compared to the dollar. Théret comments on the rich baroque aesthetics depicting national landmarks and founding fathers on the dollar bill, with a wealth of emblems and stamps, and clear and emphatic mottoes like ‘This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private’ and ‘In God we trust’, properly underwritten by the authority protecting them, printed in clear letters: ‘The United States of America’, ‘Federal Reserve Note’, ‘US Treasury’. These are more or less features common to most modern national currencies. The euro is just the opposite, the banknotes in circulation not only have no concrete images and symbols, but also no written messages, only the name, euro, the acronym of the ECB (both in several language variations), and the serial number. There are indeed the European flag and the map of Europe, but no other symbols of the EU or emblems of sovereignty. The only human sign, an illegible signature, was initially not clarified by any title. Following criticism, perhaps, the new Europa series sports the portrait of Europa and a clearly legible signature of the president of the ECB. Still, probably Théret would stand by his conclusion of a significant symbolic deficit, which he connects to a denial of history and a lack of reference to any superior authority: ‘With a design that shows doors and windows open onto emptiness, the banknotes only recall a limitless, deterritorialised, dehumanised space: that of the market’ (Théret 2001, my translation). This is perhaps reinforced by another trait, noted by the otherwise more benign Van Middelaar, in the shape of the international copyright symbol which precedes the ECB acronym on the banknotes: ‘It suggests that the Bank is a company attempting to protect its intellectual property (…) Money becomes real not through the assertion of a copyright on the design, but through its claim to represent a political community. By including the copyright symbol, the Bank is suggesting that such a claim cannot be substantiated’ (Van Middelaar 2013: 244).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The gist of these critiques is that, at present, European identity is as abstract, empty, and virtual as the symbols chosen for the currency, a superficial, artificial and legitimising level of allegiance that has no foundation of trust beyond and before the market: a bank without a state, a union without a *demos*, and so on in the usual normative comparison with the nation-state and its currency. However this conclusion is somehow inherent in the comparison with national identity, in trying to read the story of the euro from a completely national blueprint, and a rather simplified one at that. First of all it does not stop to consider, as indeed more recent research supports (Hymans 2004), that the cultural difference shown, say between the euro and the dollar, might have much more to do with history than geography; a dollar redesigned today might indeed display more ‘postmodern’ aesthetics than the baroque one we are familiar with. Furthermore, in its wholesale interpretation of the euro as the lowest common iconographic denominator it only sees abstraction. But as the more attentive observers have noted, history is far from excluded in the euro, in fact it is all that is left. The euro tells a story about history, even (not very post-modernly here) progress: it portrays seven ‘ages and styles’, tracing what could have equally been criticised as an essentialist and teleological, unified, path to European progress. Far from an inclusive and open narrative, this could be seen as one where an average person may be forever stuck in the renaissance (€50) if not in medieval gothic (€20), with very little hope to ever see the 20th century (€500, increasingly unattainable as it has been discontinued in the new Europa series). Abstraction is, in one sense, the device used to smuggle in a broader, reflexive content, much as it has been the result of the EU constant compromise in areas where symbols and meanings matter (Sassatelli 2009: 39-58). The story of the euro so far confirms that not anything goes; a very specific, managed and yet plural process led to the euro we handle and to the interpretations that stimulated public imagination. There is content in the euro’s form (White 1987) that lies at the basis of whatever narrative cogency it may have. The ‘ages and styles’ conjure up a narrative that combines historical and architectural metaphors, a narrative of origin and foundation as well as progress and project.

The relevance of this can only be appreciated when recalling the centrality of architectural metaphors in the history of European integration from its origins. Since the very early days of European integration, architectural metaphors have been used to render familiar this ‘unknown political object’ (*à la* Delors). It is not rare to hear about foundations (laying those of a new type of governance), *construction européenne* (building a new political, social, and hopefully cultural entity), architects and home (the well-known trope of the common European home). Even critics use architectural metaphors, as is the case with ‘fortress Europe’. These metaphors reveal the vision of Europe being promoted. The power of metaphors lies in the fact that they define a whole frame of reference implicitly, unnoticeably, with a naturalising effect, setting limits that will be perceived as natural: a house needs a roof, foundations, architects – experts that you just have to trust, not understanding the logic of their work until finished. Once again, scholars have criticised the artificiality and lack of content of these metaphors, arguing that whilst there are specific recurrent types or forms, their content remains vague (Shore, 1997; 2000). They point out how the lack of content of EU discourse serves to hide the fact that there are many visions of Europe, which compared with the essentialist discourse of national identity is believed to mean that there is no vision of Europe. Once again though, it may be useful to try and move away from an analysis premised on a normative comparison with national imagery. One way to do so is to take more seriously the specificity of the particular structures, those bridges and doors, on which the foundation of the trust in the euro has been symbolically laid to rest.

**3. Bridges and doors: on architectural metaphors of Europe and the foundation of trust**

The bridges and doors on the euro notes are polysemic, not empty nor ‘open’ symbols. Far from recalling just connection and openness as the official rhetoric goes, they can be seen as thresholds and in their ‘liminal’ nature could easily (although media critics seem to have missed this one) be seen as barriers: ‘[t]he gateways, windows, and bridges that are employed as images of Europe’s supposed openness could be also rethought as its borders. Bridges are not only links between otherwise divided territories but also points of controlling access or levying tolls. Windows not only communicate transparency, but also frame the gaze of the onlooker, separating her from the outside world’ (Papadopoulos 2015: 229). The interesting thing here is, once again, not so much to pitch one interpretation against the other, but to interpret the modalities of their unstable but fertile coexistence, the horizon of meaning that together they trace.

Georg Simmel’s short essay dedicated to the ‘Bridge and Door’ seems to have been written precisely to remind us of that, and is worth recalling in some detail. Simmel suggests that bridges and doors are paradigmatic figures of ambiguity, and thus of the human way of being in the world. Bridges can only connect what is separated, and thus contain the idea of separation as much as that of union. Like the road that can only be traced from distinct, separated points, the bridge links what was previously divided, more so, actively divided by the natural obstacles that rendered a simple road insufficient. The bridge, though, does not remove the obstacles, they are still there, even objectified by the will to overcome them, which in the bridge takes a permanent form. The ambiguity is thus deeper, because to distinguish two elements in what Simmel calls the uninterrupted unity of natural being, means to relate them to one another, to single them out by mutual contrast: separation and connection are two aspects of the same process, not alternatives. It is thus not only the practical function of the bridge that makes it so significant, it is also its image which becomes a symbol of the typically human capacity of connecting, and of the necessity of a prior conceptual separation of what is to be connected. With its permanent form defining the landscape, the bridge connects whilst rendering the distance visible, measuring it as it is crossed.

In summary, the bridge shows that ‘the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating’ (Simmel [1909] 1994: 10). The door is the other powerful metaphor analysed in the essay, showing how the human being is also ‘the bordering creature that has no border’ (ibid.). Here the ambiguity is even stronger: in the last instance, the bridge emphasises unity over separation, yet the door renders it clear how separating and connecting are just two sides of the same act. One could think that the primary function of the door is of separating, interior from exterior, human world from the rest. However, if the door separates, thus creates, an interior, the act of enclosure is balanced by the possibility that the movement of the door is as much that of opening as of closing. The bridge mainly connects; the door divides as much as connects, as every entrance is also an exit, and the in- and out-sides are not substantially different but only relative to the door itself. The door testifies to the continuous possibility of a reciprocal exchange between what rests at its two sides, it is thus an image not of opening or of closing, but of the movement that links them.

This analysis raises several points with regard to the interpretation of the euro. First of all, the symbols chosen by the EU in order to avoid debate and send a message of transparency and openness, prove even more problematic than critiques have acknowledged so far. If indeed EU official rhetoric is simplistic, as some have dismissively noticed, it does not exhaust the possibility of the images used. Secondly, bridges and doors are archetypal not only practically, but also symbolically. As Simmel shows, bridge and door are inherently symbolic, powerful images of their practical function, that is of the connecting/separating relationship. The bridges and doors on euros, being abstract, emphasise this symbolic aspect. That is, they can be seen as ‘pure’ figures of the bridge and the door, directly recalling the complex relationship that links connection and separation. Thirdly, bridges and doors are not just architectural features; they are basic, fundamental elements, for which we may even dare to use the dangerous word ‘universal’. Castles, theatres: there could have been other architectural typologies usually considered as specifically European, at least to some extent. This is not the case with bridges and doors, which are far more cross-cultural and fundamental.[[6]](#footnote-6) The choice is then not to try and define something thoroughly European, but to show a ‘universal’ subject, depicted in its European variant. Even the clear evolutionism suggested by the progression of denominations towards the future (from little money to big money, from the classical age to today) may then appear to refer more to a universalistic discourse of progress than a particularist, identitarian one.

When we move beyond the national monopoly of currency making, and of our imaginary of currencies and money, it emerges that currency iconography not only, or even primarily, visualises narratives of identity. First of all it needs to symbolise a very much simplified economic narrative that evokes the source of authority, stability and the very existence and operation of money via an appealing, confidence-inspiring representation (this is the main argument of Papadopoulos 2015; see also Kaelberer 2004). Simmel, this time in his main work *The Philosophy of Money* ([1900] 2004), moves from the observation that currency embodies trust in the authority issuing it, and ultimately in the wider social organisation underpinning it.[[7]](#footnote-7) Simmel is also particularly perceptive of how this fundamental dependency on trust finds a concrete shape on both metal and paper money. He notes, for instance, how coins in Malta bear the inscription ‘non aes sed fides’ - not money but trust (ibid., 177), - and how especially in early paper money, dimension tended to signify value. With his typical attention for how the same meaning can be carried by opposite forms, he also noted how in some contexts banknotes to be accepted as genuine need to be ‘white and clean’, and in other cases ‘greasy and dirty’ (ibid.). As we have seen, during the design of the euro one of the main concerns of central bankers was how to inspire confidence in the new issuing authority, so that the euro could be accepted as ‘our money’; interestingly the very group set up by the EMI to ensure sufficient abstraction of the euro bridges and doors also availed itself of engineers to make sure the designs were nevertheless realistic from a structural point of view, and not so distorted as not to be functional and ‘sound’. As Calligaro reports from her interviews with involved experts: ‘the EMI thought that the citizens would not trust a currency representing a bridge that, constructed in the real world, would collapse’ (Calligaro 2013: 159).

Far from lacking in content, the fact that ‘building Europe’ and ‘common European home’ are the central metaphors says much about how attempts are made at imagining a new community as a source of trust. Because references to ‘natural’, or ancestral ties are not available, or too controversial, the fact that Europe is itself a construction cannot be denied, there is only the possibility of making a virtue out of necessity, and highlighting, celebrating the construction process itself. If the European home seemed to remain an empty metaphor because its content is never well defined, the door and the bridge are *ambiguous*, but not *generic* metaphors; they are pure thresholds, thus showing that the question is precisely not the content, but the act of building – connecting and separating – itself.

**Concluding remarks**

In light of this analysis, the euro banknotes may thus be reconsidered, in particular the related critiques of their abstract and post-cultural character. With regards to the post-cultural character, a comparison with national currencies interprets the lack of heroes, geniuses and landmarks as a retreat from culture because of the latter being national. However heroes, geniuses and landmarks are not only part of national cultures, they are usually part of high culture – and often of a highly Euro-centric, narrowly Greek-Roman-Christian version of it (undiscerning of its own non-Western elements) – conceived of as an exclusive national heritage defining identity, despite the pretence of an inclusive and horizontal imagined community. To choose them would have meant not only to start the debate about what is European, but also to opt for that kind of foundation for European identity; something that, as Hymans (2004) shows, goes significantly against the grain of the current *Zeitgeist,* not just in Europe. One may thus argue that, on the contrary, to avoid them could be a hint of a departure not only from national cultural heritage, but from that type of essentialist, particularistic narrative of cultural identity. This however does not imply an overall dismissal of cultural identity. As Simmel shows, bridges and doors are even quintessentially cultural and they may suggest a strategy for the foundation of an identity alternative to that of identification/exclusion: that is, an identity made of links that do not destroy the specificity and diversity of what they connect, that recognise in diversity the basis for connection, and in connection the basis for distinction. Such an identity clearly does not exist in the current socio-political landscape, but it may be built, it may be a project, and it may already suggest itself as a different narrative of identity.

This leads to the emphasis on construction, and a discussion of the abstract character of euro images. ‘Who crosses the bridge, who opens the gate, and who looks through the window remains a mystery’ (Meek, 2001), the critique goes. However, the question may be misplaced. No-one crosses the bridge, because it does not yet exist: these bridges and gateways are yet to be built. Because of the way they are drawn and because of the lack of background, those on the euro look like projects of bridges and doors, an architect’s technical sketch. They are virtual rather than abstract, not in the sense that they are generic ideal types, but because they are still projects (in the stronger sense of ‘virtual’, that is ‘potential’). As such, they are images not so much of a specific landscape, place, community, but of what it means to build bridges and doors, that is, again with Simmel, to simultaneously connect the separated, and distinguish the connected. Interestingly, this ambiguity strongly recalls accounts of the complex dynamics of identity, based on the recognition of the difference within, as opposed to mere identification with, the same (Derrida, 1991; Ricoeur, 1990; on Europe specifically see Morin 1987).

Both these remarks show that the most significant aspect of these ambiguous metaphors lies in that they are architectural ones and reflexively so, they do not hide, they highlight instead the act of construction, and therefore their project nature. Together, they tell a story – better still, a story about history. As much as the images are not about specific places, they are also, despite the theme, not about specific times. As all historical references have been removed, what is left is history as a process, even history stripped to its narrative structure. The story they tell is then highly reflexive, designed more to instil trust that there is indeed a new age of Europe waiting ahead, than to illustrate past ages in detail. The confidence or trust the euro calls for is trust that, building on these seven ‘ages and styles’ of Europe, the new project of European integration is likewise safe and sound, it will not collapse, it is creating a space to be inhabited. This is a finding that some may want to embrace and others criticise, but that it is first of all important to understand. The different possible interpretations of the euro – and there are certainly more still to be found – show just how contested narratives of European identity still are, and how relevant it remains to tell and listen to the stories printed on our money.

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1. The Guardian, June 10th 2015. At <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/shortcuts/2015/jun/10/euro-coin-row-france-wins-the-battle-belgium-wins-the-war>> (accessed December 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The literature in the area usually aims to establish a causal link. The dominant approach sees the state as pedagogue trying to bring about change via currency iconography (see Gilbert and Helleiner 1999, building on national cases from the 19th century onwards). Others have criticised this, arguing for the opposite by claiming states adapt their imagery to dominant values so as to gain legitimacy (Hymans 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The wider popular reception of the euro iconography since its launch is beyond the scope of this article, which, in focusing on institutional narratives and public debate, aims at questioning the available narratives of identity the euro can be mobilised for and contributes to establish. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Perhaps because allegorical thus in need of a dose of ‘reality’, this particular portrait is far from anonymous, with lots of detail provided in official texts (see press communication, at: <[www.ecb.europa.eu/euro/pdf/material/discover10/WEB\_ECB\_Public\_BRO\_10Euro.en.pdf?1c4892eea24fe0e0a6149872c928c2b3](http://www.ecb.europa.eu/euro/pdf/material/discover10/WEB_ECB_Public_BRO_10Euro.en.pdf?1c4892eea24fe0e0a6149872c928c2b3)> (accessed December 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is however not an isolated case, as many banknote designs are copyrighted and some also carry the copyright notice, notably the British pound. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Attempts at defining inherently European elements are easily criticised, in architecture as elsewhere. An example is the arch: even though it is often appropriated as a typically European element, some note that its origins are outside Europe (cf. Gregotti, 1999:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An interesting debate is open as to whether in Simmel, as in other founders of sociology, this means by default the state – thus establishing an as yet insurmountable deficit for the euro (see for instance Cavalli 2014) – or whether instead Simmel can be exempted of the critique of methodological nationalism due to his processual notion of society, making his analysis useful in our era of both currency homogenisation and diversification (and thus leaving the verdict much more open as to the future or the euro; Dodd 2016 makes this point particularly explicitly). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)