

Identity and Politics in Late Modernity

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English abstract

Late modern society seems to be inescapably permeated by a conflict between universalizing and particularizing dynamics. The article discusses this basic condition from the perspective of late modern identity formation and its implications for the development of democratic politics. A critical discussion of a number of prominent positions in the theoretical debate on identity opens the argument. In the wake of this critical discourse, an alternative position based on contemporary critical theory is suggested, and the potentials and risks of late modern identity work are outlined in relation to the perspective of democratic civil society. The article concludes that identity-based processes of politicization are fragile and unpredictable, but that they nevertheless form necessary preconditions for creating and maintaining the necessary popular engagement in developing universal democratic civil society. Finally, the potentials and limitations of a European cultural policy in relation to the characteristics of late modern identity work are briefly discussed.

Keywords: Late modern identity, Civil society, Political culture, Cultural policy.

The argument of this article is first of all theoretical and aims at establishing a nuanced frame of reference for reflecting the current relationship between identity and politics and its perspectives for the development of democracy. In other words, the argument aims further than the specific field of cultural policy towards general basic issues of contemporary society. Moreover, the argument has implications for the understanding of the role, the potentials and the risks of cultural policy, which will be briefly addressed in the final section of the article.

Conceptions of identity

'Identity' has long been a subject of controversy in the discussion of the conditions for politics and culture in late modern society. The concept has been defined and used in a multiplicity of ways in the various currents of the debate, and it can therefore be difficult to establish a foundation for discussing its theoretical and practical implications – including, in particular, its democratic perspectives – in the apparently increasing intertwinement of political and identity-related issues.

The theoretical tradition in the field of 'culture and identity' is characterized by a major element of essentialist thinking. Whether it concerns the notion of a "soul of the people" as expressed by Herder and national romanticism, the theories of race that flourished with particular vigour in the first half of the twentieth century, or the post-Second World War notions of "national character" (and in part also "national identity", cf. Østergård 2007), these were definitions that construed culture and identity as static, self-enclosed constants, as essences. Although this kind of conceptualization has lent itself to legitimizing the discourse for genocide and ethnic cleansing, the validity of this thinking is in practice problematized by far-reaching historical and current experiences of interaction and dynamic cultural blending across ethnic and national lines (Tomlinson 2007).

In addition, this thinking can only conceive of identity in collective categories, and therefore it doesn't seem to offer any productive starting point for reflecting on a crucial issue of contemporary democracy, namely the tension that exists between the democratic equality of citizens and unique individual or group-based identity. This tension manifests itself in a very tangible way in the basic conflict between universalizing and particularizing dynamics that characterize the cultural and political processes of late modern society, and the inability to reflect this conflict constitutes a severe limitation of the cognitive potential of the line of thinking mentioned above. Even so, this position is prominently represented in the debate in the shape of, for example, Samuel P. Huntington's global diagnosis based on identity politics in the essentialistic and collectivistic sense of the term (Huntington 1996).

Apart from these reminiscences of essentialism, the current theoretical debate on identity is entirely dominated by positions defining themselves anti-essentialistically – the crux of the matter is thus on which *premises* the non-essentialist viewpoint is established. Diametrically opposed to essentialism is a group of positions that explicitly or implicitly determine identity as an 'arbitrary construction', i.e. as entirely incidental and freely variable attributions of meaning to human practice. A position like this is a consequence of Jean Baudrillard's notion of "semiocracry", or "freely circulating signs", as the 'post-modern' generators of meaning (Baudrillard 1982). Even the concept of identity as expressed by a more balanced theoretician like Zygmunt Bauman shows this tendency, in that he defines 'postmodern identity' as a question of "avoiding fixation and keeping all options open" (Bauman 1996, 122; my translation). Judith Butler's early thesis on gender identity as basically arbitrary, performative attributions of meaning to the body also belongs to this category (Butler 1990). Likewise, in their effort to eradicate essentialism, the most consistent functionalistic analyses

of 'national identity' tend to reduce identities to fundamentally arbitrary conventions whose status is solely based on having proven to serve the power strategies of the dominant actors in a concrete historical situation (Gellner 1983). This kind of conceptualization of identity does not offer any productive perspectives on the conflict between universal equality and individual or group-based self-realization, insofar as it cannot reflect the tension between them in social practice. The symptoms of the conflict are regarded as merely incidental discursive constructions which – according to the consequent implicit assumption – will disappear if they are voluntarily erased from the linguistic universe.

Another main group of non-essentialist positions analyzes identity as a historically constructed and fundamentally variable entity that can, however, at any time be linked to specific collective processes of experience and social institutionalizations, and which therefore cannot be arbitrarily redefined. To this group belongs, first of all, the modern anthropological tradition, represented, for instance, by the Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup (2004). As Hastrup admits, this effort has – despite its many qualities – a problem resulting from its lines of continuity to the classical anthropological tradition: Like this tradition, modern anthropology also tends to conceive of culture and identity as collective and homogeneous systems of meaning which may continuously change but which at any point in the process close on themselves as the valid overall proposal of meaning. Prominent characteristics of current cultural and social development are thus difficult to conceptualize in a satisfactory way because of the anthropological position's tendency toward a monocultural approach. To these characteristics belong the differentiation of a heterogeneous plurality of fields of practice and forms of discourse, the individualization of significant parts of the formation of experience, as well as the multiplicity of tendencies towards cultural pluralization and hybridization in the population as a consequence of the process of globalization (Clifford 1997; Hannerz 1992). This position is thus not the most obvious starting point for illuminating the current tension between the ideal of democratic, universal equality and individual or group-based identity seeking.

Second, this category contains an ideal-typical position that, in contrast to the above-mentioned, is based on modernity's multiplicity of differentiated fields of practice and the associated separate rationalities of action and roles of the players. In this light it suggests *a plurality of identities* as the adequate point of departure for the understanding of modern culture and identity (Brannaman et al. 2001; Tsaëlon 1992). In other words, according to this position, modern individuals have shifting, non-coherent identities according to whether they are acting as family members, as market players, or as citizens at a local, national or international level. Considering the consistent reflection of the reality of late modern differentiation and individualization and the clear and handy distinctions it proposes, this position can be captivating, but in reality it reduces the individual to a reflex of the circumstances, to merely a role bearer in the staging of shifting contexts. This analytical lens is neither capable of identifying the connecting lines, interactions or conflictual dynamics between the various roles of the individual nor between differentiated social contexts and therefore does not constitute a promising starting point for reflecting on the tension between universal equality and unique identity.

A third ideal-typical position in this category includes a heterogeneous field of theories with one feature in common: they all regard identity as a concept for positioning in an ongoing symbolic power struggle. Pierre Bourdieu as well as the entire post-structuralist tradition in the wake of Foucault, including much of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Cultural Studies and Identity Politics adheres to this position. Whether the analytical focus is on class relations, habitus groups, ethnic lines of conflict or gender relationship, from the outset these theories reduce the issue of identity to

a collective and particularistic discourse of power (Benhabib 2002). Individuals' articulations of identity are in their totality viewed as part of power struggles between existing, collective discourses. Since these theories do not reflect a general, overall level of discourse where dialogical interaction and the formation of compromises and consensus across discursive borderlines could be a possibility, these symbolic positionings and struggles for hegemony have a monological character by definition: the individual articulation of identity is inscribed in advance within the particularistic "either-or" thinking of monologic, collectively binding discourses.

In this perspective, 'universal equality' represents a symbolic focus for particularistic power struggles (according to the motto "which position is able to conquer hegemony over the ideal of 'universal equality' and define it authoritatively on the premises of its own particular discursive interests?") rather than a general perspective for further strengthening universal potentials in the ongoing development of culture and society. Likewise, the individual's pursuit of a unique identity would here be embedded in the struggles of collective discourses and thus devoid of any dynamics of its own and of autonomous potentialities of change. In other words, these positions only to a very limited degree appear to be able to illuminate the tension between universal equality and unique identity.

This article joins the majority of non-essentialist understandings of culture and identity as historically constructed and processually variable entities. In conceptualizing the late modern issue of identity as a complex process of experience, this argument corresponds with the approach of Anthony Giddens (1991), but, inspired by German critical theory it elaborates this basic assumption along different lines. In contrast to the associated positions characterized above, the proposal here is, in an overall perspective, to understand the issue of identity as permanently involved in a complex interaction between two different levels of social practice that possess relative autonomy and at the same time place limits on and condition one another: a level of conflict and a level of consensus. As a characteristic of the political process of democratic societies, the thesis is that in the non-violent, compromise-orientated regulation of struggles between special interests, particular forms of practice and divergent processes of experience at the immediate level of conflict, an overall, politico-cultural level of universal reflection is created and recreated. In principle, on the basis of this formation of political culture the possibility exists for dialogical exchange, learning processes, and the identification of common concerns.

Under these circumstances, the perspective of universality finds its foundation in democratic political culture, i.e. the level of consensus, in the sense of the set of shared values and assumptions that tie modern democratic society together as a political collective (Habermas 1992; Nielsen 1991, 1993). Political culture is shaped in society's processing and adaptation of the experiences of conflict that it historically gains in internal struggles between various classes, interest groups, and movements as well as in external conflicts with other nation-states. These collective experiences are inscribed as memory traces in the citizens' bodies and forms of interaction and are reflected in the shape of institutions and collective narratives. As an integrated dimension of this ongoing reflective adaptation of the experiences of conflict to which the historical process gives rise, the political collective develops a series of normative assumptions about the nature of the world and the right way of handling it. These assumptions then serve as the obvious, hegemonic value-based frame of reference in the political process – until it is perhaps modified or entirely transformed by new experiences of conflict that break up the former construction of experience. Evidently, the democratic perspectives of political culture are dependent on the nature of the conflict experiences in question and the way in which society processes and reflects them in the political public sphere.

So far, in late modern democratic societies this process has resulted in universalistic conceptions of value and in democratic institutions inclined towards compromise and consensus.

As will be elaborated further in the next section, the current conditions and developmental possibilities of democratic political culture are increasingly intertwined with questions of individual and collective identities. It will be a basic argument that the universalistic ideal of equality and the particularistic, individual or group-based efforts to establish a unique identity are to be understood as actual, dynamic and experiential factors in cultural and social development which cannot be reduced to one another. However, their concrete, actual forms of interaction are of critical importance for the kind of cultural and social development that will occur. In other words, universalism and particularism should not be regarded as abstract ideals that we can choose to affirm or reject, but as immanent dynamics in late modern social practice, and the crucial question is how we as a society deal with this conflictual condition.

Politics and the late modern issue of identity

The following account should be understood as a critical theoretical illumination of the relationship between identity and politics in late modern democratic societies (Nielsen 1993, 2001, 2007a). On this basis I will tentatively evaluate the democratic potentials and possible pitfalls in current developments in the relationship between identity and politics – not least the basic tension that exists between universalistic and particularistic currents.

To understand the complexity of the modern issue of identity, we can distinguish analytically between two levels: ‘identity as dynamics’ and ‘identity as discursive practice’ (Nielsen 2001). This distinction is necessarily analytical because the level of dynamics only manifests itself in the staging of actual existing practices rather than in a ‘pure’ form. However the thesis is that each given discursive practice is nourished by and draws on dynamics that contain a multiplicity of fundamental possibilities for realization and therefore cannot be reduced to the discursive horizon and self-conception of this particular practice.

Initially, the dynamics of identity have a reactive character. It is a question of a social psychological impulse towards re-balancing that is released in individuals and collectives when habitual conceptions of value, life-world structures and circuits of interhuman relations are destabilized or disintegrated.¹ Or, to use a different terminology: when established self-regulating balances in social exchange are displaced, a reaction of “balance economy” is released (Negt & Kluge 1981). This dynamic identity work seeks to reorganize the individual’s or the collective’s former material of experience and adjust it to the new conditions of practice. Identity work is thus initially determined by crisis and a lack of orientation; it operates according to the principle of availability, and is solely directed towards pragmatically re-establishing a functioning balance in relation to the surrounding world.

Balance-seeking identity work furthermore has an *ambivalent* character (Ziehe 1989): it works – and obtains its dynamic force – in the field of tension between the experience of loss and pain triggered by the end of traditional certainties and the undetermined, unbound opening of new life possibilities that the same process brings about. In other words, the dynamics of identity is not in itself oriented in a specific direction or otherwise determined as regards content or discourse, and therefore it can, in principle, become the driving force in cultural and political processes of any kind.

Political and cultural processes serve as specific discursive practices that form, focus and channel dynamics as they develop. And as modern history has shown, the register of discursive possibilities includes regressive identification with a totalitarian mass movement as well as emancipatory, universalistic democratic engagement in the common good, and a self-sufficient individualistic or a particularistic subcultural self-definition.

At the same time, conditions of practice will always modify and condition the actual plasticity of the dynamics of identity: It is the particular individual's or collective's specific life history that constitutes the building blocks for identity work. In other words, modern identity formation is a process of construction, but it is an *experience-based* construction with its accompanying limitations and inertia, not an arbitrary construction with an array of choices. Furthermore, the social space of practice that an identity-seeking discursive practice must realize itself in is at any given time characterized by specific struggles, collective experiences, constellations of interests and hegemonic discourses that mark the playing field available to the identity-seeking discursive practice.

The process of modernization in general and the process of globalization in particular are major distributors of the radical transformation of the structures and meanings of social life that trigger the ambivalent, balance-seeking dynamics of identity. This circumstance characterizes the entire era of modernity, but the processes have accelerated considerably and have become more comprehensive since the 1960s (Giddens 1991; Beck 1986).

The unbinding of the collective dynamics of identity and its organization in shifting discursive practices – including political – is thus not a historically new phenomenon. For instance, the struggles of the Danish peasant movement and labour movement in the 19th century also included a dimension of identity work which, among other things, was discursively expressed in an autonomous cultural self-definition and its accompanying institutions (Korsgaard 2004). But these historical movements occurred in a space of practice that was nationally defined and characterized by clearly identifiable lines of conflict, class relations and associated collective life contexts and life possibilities. This specific space of practice equipped the balancing identity work with clear points of orientation, and thus channelled the unbound dynamics of identity into the discursive practice of the class struggle.

Today, however, we operate in a late modern, partly globalized space of practice with non-lucid relations and constellations of interests. Moreover, in the rich part of the world, we face extensive complications of class structure and an even more far-reaching differentiation of the processes that create and recreate the social order and the processes that organize cultural meaning for individuals (Nielsen 2007b). In this perspective, it is significant that in the late modern context reflective orientation, according to the lifestyle groups of the cultural market, tends to emerge as a predominant discursive practice in modern individuals' identity work (Schulze 1992). In political life, we find the same tendency in the extensive collapse of the classical, interest-based patterns of voter identification with parties (Goul Andersen 2004). Further, in reaction politicians attempt to create an almost intimate, personal appeal to the individual voter, which tends to result in the fading out of political content behind the pleasing aesthetics of the staging.

With the individual's increasing economic and legal unbinding the dynamics of identity seeking appear to be channelled into an urgent reflective project which each person has to come to terms with. In this process, the traditional forms of community are eroded, as well as the associated collective patterns of identity work. Identity work is individualized, and the societal consequence

of this spread of individual, dynamic and ambivalent identity-seeking processes on a mass level is that social practice tends to become “culturalized”: In societies of this type, it is subjectively meaningful cultural factors – inputs for identity work – that seem to motivate individuals to act, rather than economic interests and class structures.

Evidently, social practice still entails a crucial dimension of the unequal distribution of resources and material life opportunities, but this dimension is decreasingly reflected in the late modern issue of identity. Or rather: it is – like questions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality etc. – reflected in individualized identity work when it manifests itself in a pivotal role in the discursive organization of concrete processes of experience, i.e. when social practice attributes meaning to it. Under the conditions of individualization and culturalization, these collective frames of reference are, in other words, not to be regarded as a priori determining factors but as questions of concrete social practice and discursive experience formation.

The term “culturalization” should not be confused with an essentialistic, “culturalist” understanding of identity and politics, as represented for example by Samuel P. Huntington (1996). On the contrary, the thesis of late modernity as characterized by a process of culturalization offers a background explanation of the fact that this type of particularistic, culturalist essentialism has been able to achieve a relatively prominent position in contemporary theoretical and political debates at the expense of the reflection of universal rights and equal distribution. In itself, the concept of culturalization refers to the specific, late modern conditions of processes of experience formation, not to a given substance.

It is, however, an important distinction that the process of individualization and culturalization does not necessarily lead to self-sufficient, particularistic individualism. The crucial question is what kind of discursive interplay is created between unbound individuals and society at large. The answer to this question is a matter of historical practice and depends on the development of the hegemonic relationship between modernity’s overall principles of societalization. Modern society is characterized by the following conflicting overall principles for establishing and regulating social relations: the *market* (characterized by formal social interaction mediated by money and the actors’ orientation according to private interests), the *state* (in the sense of social interaction mediated by formal law) and *civil society* (in the sense of public, communicative interaction committed to the common good as a discursive framework) (Cohen & Arato 1992; Nielsen 2001; 2007a).

In this perspective, individualization should be understood as a structural condition that can form the basis of a conflictual plurality of discursive practices. Individualism in the selfish sense is one of these, universalistic civic engagement in society is another. The decisive point is whether it is the principles of the market or of civil society that underlie the particular identity-seeking practice. In this respect, it is significant that late modernity has developed as part of the general globalization process, which in its entirety must be characterized as dominated by the market and thus as politically underdeveloped: so far, global integration has only to a very limited degree resulted in institutions and forums for discussion and public opinion formation on a global level that are capable of matching market forces (Held 1995; Held & McGrew 2007; Gosewinkel 2004). Under these circumstances, the identity work of unbound individuals will in a global perspective primarily tend to orientate itself towards the market relations’ discursive horizon of self-sufficient special interests. Correspondingly, politically orientated identity work tends to remain within the particular space of reflection of the nation state.

Culturalization and politicization

In other words, processes of politicization always involve both individual and collective identity issues, but as is evident, it is necessary to differentiate: on the one hand, historically, as indicated above, and on the other, in a current perspective with respect to global imbalances in development and distribution produced and reproduced by the current, market dominated process of globalization.

In view of the increasing momentum in charging the discursive practice of politics with unbound individuals' orientationless, balance-seeking dynamics of identity, this description of the late modern culturalization of the political process highlights a tendency that until now has only really unfolded in late modern democratic societies. In the rest of the world the situation is, roughly speaking, characterized by shifting combinations of economic scarcity, clear political and economic power relations and profiled social struggles, and direct mutual relations of dependency between individuals in collective life contexts. Further, these societies have a more or less intact, mutually obligating context of tradition which serves as the meaning-constituting framework for social practice. Under these circumstances, the discursive practice of identity work is, in other words, intimately intertwined with discourses of social power.

In these societies, the relationship between identity and politics does not therefore have its dynamic centre in the unbound individual's search for individual meaning in life, but rather in the disintegration of the collective relationship to tradition and the economic and political conditions it legitimizes. This means that the politicizing processes concerned with the underlying theme of identity, which are triggered by the radical transformation of social conditions due to the process of globalization in these countries, initially develop in a space of practice that is much more strongly predefined as regards hegemonic discourses and power relations than is the case in culturalized societies.

In these circumstances, politicized identity needs are therefore articulated in close connection with struggles over the distribution of economic resources and political power. The globalization process spawns displacements in the countries' constellations of interests, and often new, not yet established interest groups make successful use of an identity politics discourse on their way towards ensuring themselves part of the power and goods. The mobilization of Indian Hindu nationalism in the 1990s is an example of this (Blom Hansen 1999), the outbreak of Islamic fundamentalism in a large number of countries is another (Erslev Andersen 2007).

Even the national conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s can be understood on the basis of power politics: forgotten narratives of national identity were revived and purposively used as legitimizing discourses by local powers-to-be who aimed to exploit the end of the Cold War to expand their own spheres of influence. The identity discourse was thus initially a legitimizing pretence, but it quickly became exceptionally real when organized violence was launched along ethnic/national dividing lines and in this way created its own facts: An active bond between the idea of the nation and the individual citizen was now *de facto* installed. The question of life or death depended on this in a very literal sense, and these particularistic processes of identification, produced through terror, were then channelled into the strategies of power politics, in that discursive practice equated the nation's survival with territorial expansion or ethnic cleansing (Williams 2008).

In late modern democratic societies, the political process also includes both identity needs and conflicts over power and the politics of distribution, but they are seldom integrated in one and the

same discursive practice. This circumstance is in part due to the extensive institutionalization of conflict regulation in these societies, where well-functioning parliamentary institutions, collective bargaining systems, and welfare-state redistribution mechanisms largely ensure that these quantitative political themes do not impose themselves on the everyday identity work of the ordinary citizen. Concurrently with the increase in national income, the unbinding of the individual and the tendency towards culturalization following from this, new areas of politics of a more qualitative kind crystallize (environment, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, minorities' conditions, global peace, global justice etc.), and it is mainly in these areas that identity-seeking processes become integrated with a political discursive practice. In other words: the forms of practice that characterize the new social and cultural movements from the 1960s and onwards.²

However, this tendency to focus identity-seeking political engagement on qualitative areas of politics stands or falls with late modern society's material wealth and thus in reality with the continuing exploitation of poor countries by the rich countries of the West, as well as with how the institutionalized, quantitative distribution policy actually functions. If these terms are no longer guaranteed, we will once again be dealing with an integrated relationship between social struggles of interests and identity-based orientation. In this way, in social groups, such as traditional industrial workers or unemployed people with low educational background which are positioned as losers in Western societies in the process of globalization, we already see the rudiments of such integration. Frustration over their marginalization as regards the distribution of wealth and life opportunities is often politically dealt with in close connection with the identity-motivated, particularistic efforts to marginalize the immediately visible symptoms of globalization: immigrants from non-Western countries (Bauman 1998; Glotz 1999).

The politicization of unbound individuals' identity-seeking processes does not occur automatically. And when it does occur, there is no guarantee that the process of politicization will have a universalistic, democratic character – it may just as well assume self-centered, 'life political' or fundamentalist, totalitarian forms. This is entirely dependent on the concrete circumstances in which the process of politicization is inscribed – on its relationship with the prevailing constellations of interests, hegemonic discourses and politico-cultural experiences, as well as with the character and adaptation of experiences of conflict to which the discursive practice of identity politics (in the sense of the term suggested by this article) gives rise upon encountering the context.

This kind of politicization process is more unstable and fragile than other, more institutionalized kinds of political discursive practice because of the key role played by this ambivalent, directionless dynamics in its formation. The concrete political visions of change are fused with the existential identification needs of the participating individuals, which are basically diffuse but which take shape in the process of politicization in dialectical interplay with the discursive practice in which they are involved. In these processes, the question of political success or fiasco therefore assumes an intensified character: in principle, it is the unbound individuals' entire balance of identity with respect to the surrounding world, the very question of their social recognition, which is at play in their concrete struggles to have their demands met (Honneth 1992).

This intensification furnishes discursive practice with a high degree of engagement and, in favourable times, politicization processes of this kind can be exceedingly productive and rewarding for the participating individuals as well as for political culture in general. But in times of adversity – if identity-based processes of politicization encounter considerable opposition or are simply

bureaucratically or violently marginalized by authorities or other political agents – their fragility becomes apparent as they tend to change into either total disillusion or fundamentalism. To suffer political defeat implies a totalizing violation of one's identity that is dealt with either by retreating from the violating reality or through an even fiercer practice of resistance in which one's self-understanding becomes absolute and the adversary's discourses are denied legitimacy. As we have seen in some of the consequences of the '68 uprising, in the 'autonomous' movement, and in parts of the contemporary movements against the capitalist version of globalization, for instance, these processes may result in totalitarian thinking and in a militant practice that can cause considerable damage to democratic political culture as such (Rucht 2004; Nielsen 1991). In addition, this kind of politicization process tends to promote a strictly collectivist and particularistic discourse of identity that is neither capable of reflecting the legitimate individual needs of the participants nor the common concerns of society in general.

In a democratic perspective it is therefore crucial to reflect on the discursive practice of identity politics as an ambivalent cocktail of positive potentials and risks for the democratic political process: it provides civil society and democracy with major resources in the shape of the participating citizens' high degree of engagement; but if the agents of the democratic institutions are short-sighted and are unwilling to co-operate or compromise, they risk initiating processes of particularistic radicalization whose obligation to current democratic rules is not guaranteed. In the interest of democracy it is thus a matter of channelling these movements into universal, democratic political culture, as defined earlier in this article. The movements of identity politics continuously provide new kinds of experiences of conflict. In the interest of further developing democracy so that it is on a par with developments in society, it is therefore an important task to integrate these experiences with the historical experiences of conflict in democratic political culture.

In other words, identity-based processes of politicization should be treated as valuable, yet fragile, civil-society resources. At the same time, one should be aware that these processes of politicization seldom start off being equipped with a horizon of reflection that contains a subtle notion of the common good. Identity-related processes of politicization are typically based on particular questions and single issues, and to further the democratic perspective of these processes it is vital that this particular starting point is gradually transcended, so that the concrete theme of struggle can be reflected on and weighed in respect to other legitimate social interests, as well as to the common good as a universal discursive framework for the democratic process. To this must be added learning processes in interaction with the other political agents in the arena, in which all parts learn how to deal with conflict peacefully and with a view to compromise, and to accept that particular interests should be legitimized with respect to the universal perspective of the common good.

European cultural policy and the issue of identity

This general line of thinking has substantial implications for the understanding of the perspectives and potentials of cultural policy. To be sure, the type of identity-related learning processes outlined above should not be regarded as exclusive qualities of the political field of practice. The field of art and culture also represents an important space of experience and reflection for late modern identity work, a specifically aesthetic laboratory for the development of discursive practices of identity formation, so to speak. This wider, empowering socio-political potential of aesthetic practice has been explicitly reflected in the enlightenment- and welfare- orientated tradition which since the 1960s has dominated cultural policy in many European countries (e.g. Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries) and which to some degree has also influenced the

relatively vague cultural policy strategies of the EU. In this perspective, a central task and challenge for democratic cultural policy could thus be defined as the attempt to create conditions for experiential processes in the field of art and culture which stimulate discursive practices of identity that transcend self-sufficient, particularistic patterns and open the horizon of reflection towards universal ideals and the common concerns of society.

Major obstacles to this line of development are the expansive consumerist appeals of the cultural industries and predominant economic-strategic state policies aimed at instrumentalising art and culture in the strengthening of the national competitive position on the global market. At present, this 'creative industries' approach to art and culture seems to be gaining top priority in EU strategies in the field of cultural policy (European Commission 2010).

Nevertheless, on the level of the European nation states public, cultural policies have to some extent been successful in establishing a universal, civil society-orientated discourse in the field of art and culture (Duelund 2003). However, in recent years, this universalism seems to increasingly confine itself within national borders and the value of art and culture tends to be defined by its adequacy in confirming an ideal of national cohesion and community. Furthermore, this tendency corresponds with a strengthening of nationalistic currents in political life in general.

In this perspective, an important task for cultural policy on EU-level would be to challenge this trend towards the nationalization of the discursive practice of cultural identity work and to contribute in universalizing the horizon of reflection. As we have seen above, this presupposes a complex and delicate mediation between the particular and the universal in identity-based processes of politicization. It is precisely the absence of this mediating reflection that is the problem in Jürgen Habermas's otherwise appealing idea that a universalistic 'constitutional patriotism' can replace 'national identity' as a collective political frame of orientation (Habermas 1992). Habermas's purely rationalistic – and on these terms plausible – argumentation remains powerless with respect to the plurality of particularistic and irrational (libidinal, egocentric, anxiety or aggression-related etc.) dynamics that are part of late modern identity work and that require a comprehensive adaptation before complying with a universal democratic perspective.³

So far, the institutions of the EU themselves seem poorly equipped to perform this adaptation (Bach 2008; Eriksen 2005; Negt 2010). Because of the bureaucratic nature of the political process of the EU and the lack of an inclusive, general public opinion formation on the level of the union, cultural policy on this level is institutionally out of touch with the cultural dynamics of the identity work of ordinary citizens and thus lacks experiential plausibility on the national and local levels. The EU level can still in interaction with the institutions on the national level contribute forcefully in challenging nationalistic currents, but in itself it is experienced as too remote and abstract to be able to offer alternative frames of orientation for the discursive practices of identity formation in the life-world of the citizens. This would require the creation of a participatory public sphere on the level of the union which the ordinary citizen can relate to and identify with, in which conflict experiences on the European level are reflected on life-world terms and processed dialogically thus leading to a common political culture.

The contours of this type of development, one could hope, may slowly be emerging in the increasing 'dialogue from below' (Næss 2009) that is involving civil society organizations in the cultural field across Europe, but as long as this is not a comprehensive process engaging ordinary citizens, the

cultural policy of the EU will remain weak and marginal, and the task of confronting tendencies towards nationalism and chauvinism in the discursive practices of identity work will primarily have to be performed by the nation states.

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- 1 Of course, these are fundamentally different types of processes (mental processes at an individual level, social processes at a group level), but the dynamics and forms of processing can be regarded as analogous.
 - 2 It is this tendency that political science conceptualizes as a shift from 'materialistic' to 'post-materialistic' values. Cf. Ronald Inglehart: *The Silent Revolution*, Princeton, 1977.
 - 3 As a utopian category the notion of constitutional patriotism remains sympathetic, and it has historically had a very positive function as a universalist frame of identification for democratic, non-xenophobic citizens in the chaotic dissolution process of ex-Yugoslavia, but as argued above, it remains unable to channel and organize the ambivalences of late modern identity work in general.