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Projected Europe: Understanding the Meanings Associated with European Identity from Erasmus Citizens' Point of View

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to contribute to the analysis of the European identity's narrative. Drawing on a range of focus group interviews with Erasmus students, it is aimed to understand how they perceive European identity and the meanings of Europe in these students' representations. In the light of the empirical findings, it is considered that Europe is more an adjective condition than a substantive one on their representative anchorages. The outcomes also point to the ambivalent and ambiguous character of the meanings associated with Europe's project. Besides, the significance they attribute to their exchange experiences does not always have implications in their ideas about a united Europe.

Keywords: *European identity; European Union; Meanings; Erasmus students*

Introduction

What to expect of the European identity? This has still been a central question for many European intellectuals, who go back to the past of the continent in search for narratives that give internal coherence and a new symbolic meaning to Europe's identity borders (Eder 2006). Historical memories of a common European experience are being mobilised by social scientists and several intellectuals looking for European unity and trying to answer the questions "Who are the Europeans?" and "What is it to be European?". In order to collective experiences and narratives might be articulated to generate a cosmopolitan-*habitus* or a master cultural discourse for Europe that make sense in its supranational, postnational, and transnational narrative levels (Eder 2009). However, in a task like this, one must bear the complexity that arises from the fact that Europe is a polyhedric object where too complex and ambiguous meanings are inscribed, an arena where countless conflicting visions are exalted. Paradoxically, there is also a common cultural

background that all Europeans have access to. For many European citizens, Europe does not go further than a territory with a troubling history, mostly from the memory of the twentieth century. For several scholars who have dedicated themselves to think this subject, Europe represents a symbolic space with cultural significance, where memories, values, and collective experiences might be projected. Democracy, social justice, human rights, citizenship, freedom, critical thinking, and solidarity, constitute the uterine sphere where the reason for being Europe takes root. The search of an identity for Europe alludes at large to this cultural model, which assumes an important commitment to the future of Europeans. Nevertheless, shaping this cultural unity does not consist of universalising these values, but rather drawing on reflexive practices that might create a political and civic culture in Europe (Delanty 2002, 355; Kantner 2006).

Europe is not only a geographical idea, but also an object of thought, an analytical, and practical category where multiple variables reverberate. So far, Europe has been considered a lab for theoretical imagination and "more than ever before, (…) is taking on a strongly ideological character" (Delanty 1995, 6). Recently, the use of the concept of Europeanisation in academia is seen, on the one hand, as a narrative that justifies a process of social change and integration; on the other hand, as a theoretical object, it emerges as a way of imagining a future transnational European society. Found the right motto – "unity in diversity" – the path has been paved by imagining a social and cultural unity for the map of the European Union looking for mechanisms of social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

The theoretical approaches about Europe as a social and cultural unit are still insufficient because Europeanisation is too hard to conceptualise. Insofar, theorising a European identity represents an overwhelming task due to the web of meanings that moves and acts around it. Europe's project represents a continuum of readjustments and questioning at every moment, which includes dealing with more and more multiple points of view, and contentious demands. Seen in its dynamic, Europe appears to be a polysemic, ambiguous, contingent, and ambivalent concept, not only because it is a mosaic of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, but also because its history was not a linear narrative – it was shaped by more ruptures than confluences (Delanty 1995; Goddard, Llobera, and Shore 1996; Jenkins 2008; Malmborg and Strath 2002; Stråth 2002).

This paper sets out to contribute to the analysis of the European identity's narrative, providing an understanding of the practical relationship of the Erasmus

students with the European political project, analysing critically the narrative meanings of Europe that emerge from their discourses. However, it is important to clarify that this essay does not attempt to know the causal inference of the Erasmus Programme in the European integration, as some studies have been done (e.g. Jacobone and Moro 2015; Mitchell 2015; 2012; Sigalas 2010; Van Mol 2018; Wilson 2011). It is intended to understand how Erasmus citizens conceive their ideas about Europe as an identity category, in its cultural and political dimensions, exploring whether they identify with Europe and which idea of Europe they identify with. The questions that guide this article are the following:
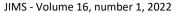
- What does the European Union mean to Erasmus students?
- What representations do Erasmus students have of this political entity?
- If the European Union has an institutional identity, how do Erasmus students perceive it?

Therefore, this sociological analysis seeks to understand the ways of feeling and thinking of Erasmus citizens about Europe and the European Union. In other words, to analyse the frame of identification and cognitive representation of the Erasmus students regarding Europe, namely to understand which specific meanings constitute their representative anchorages.

Methodology

This article draws from a research study conducted at the University of Minho (Northern of Portugal) that aimed to analyse the European unification from the point of view of Erasmus students. Its main purpose was to understand how they perceive European identity and analyse the narrative meanings of their practical relationship with the European Union's political project.

The choice to study European integration through Erasmus students lies in the fact these students benefit from European Citizenship, as well as because they have been the opportunity to experience other cosmopolitan settings, and develop there their European awareness. If the experience may be understood as an individual disposition in several socio-cultural settings of action (Bourdieu 1999), the academic exchange Erasmus means thereby an intersubjective experience that might promote a dynamic and ongoing process of reconfigurations of the subjective dispositions of these students regarding Europe. In this regard, some studies have

concluded that the Erasmus Programme contributes positively to the attitude changes about Europe, identifying more as Europeans those who participate than those who do not (Mitchell 2012; 2015; Jacobone and Moro 2015). Besides, this kind of mobility can promote a pro-social experience that supports the development of cultural comprehension, tolerance for others, and civic consciousness (Papatsiba 2005) because Erasmus students become receivers and carriers of culture within the Europeanisation process (Noversa 2018).

The analysis presented below uses data gathered from focus group interviews. In total, four focus groups were held: two constituted by Portuguese Erasmus students who had been abroad in other European universities and two with foreign Erasmus students in course of their academic exchange at the University of Minho. It was constituted a sample of sixteen[1] respondents, using the snowball procedure. Despite a very small sample, the contributions of the interviewees showed to be very heterogeneous in terms of their perceptions about both political and cultural dimensions of the European project.

The recruitment of the participants was made in two autonomous processes. Foreign Erasmus students were recruited by contacting the members of the group Erasmus Students Network of the University of Minho. The Portuguese Erasmus students were recruited by email or through a Facebook group of students and former of the University of Minho. The selected corpus of interviewees is justified by the criterion of the diversity of the cases instead of saturation of the information. The focus groups were deliberately heterogeneous based on the following variables: time abroad, nationality, major of the academic degree, and host country/university.

Prior to discussion, the objectives of the study were explained to the participants, in order to obtain their informed consent. Therefore, all names used in this paper are fictitious to ensure the respondents' anonymity. The interviews were conducted in the university's facilities, such as meeting rooms and classrooms, between May 2016 and February 2017. On average, the interviews were about eighty minutes long. In all focus group sessions, the moderator has often taken an active role to overcome the insufficient answers to the topics that have been in discussion.

The interview script focused on the following topics:

- European identity: identifying representations and meanings;

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[1] This number is also justified by no attending of some students to the scheduled focus group interviews.

- Identifying representations and meanings about the EU and its flag;
- Identifying elements of perception and feelings about the performance of EU institutions;

All the focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed entirely and subsequently treated using content analysis, following the axial codification procedure (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 124–26). That is, the categories and subcategories suggested by the students' narratives were organised, synthesised, and compared according to the theoretical dimensions of the analysis. Regarding the interpretation stage, the information was compared and discussed through an iterative and inductive process (Weed 2008) within which the empirical data would determine the conceptual linkages with the theoretical and ideological background about Europe, European identity, and European Union.

Projected Europe: A Layered Analysis
The meanings of Europe's identity

When we think about Europe a lot of meanings reverberate in this entity. Europe's history, in its manifold cultural, political, and social revolutions, has had a profound relevance in the construction of a European common background, where ideas, values, and beliefs are widely shared by many of the peoples of Europe. However, European history was not just about unity, but also about successive topographic fragmentation and distinct ideological contention (Jenkins 2008). In addition, Europe is a space of cultural pluralities at the levels of national, regional, and local belonging. Thus, we cannot think about European identity without assuming national belongings as a specific lens through which Europe's meanings are fabricated. European identity encompasses a common historical-cultural heritage, as well as a plural cultural, ethnic, and linguistic map with variable interests and boundaries. Accordingly to sociologist Ulrich Beck (2017, 191), "Europe is not a fixed condition, is not a territorial unity, is neither a State nor a nation. In fact, there is no 'Europe'; there is the metamorphosis of Europeanisation, a process of continuous transformation." So, in the current context, it is necessary to question the place of Europe in the cognitive frameworks of European citizens. What do they think Europe is today? Do Europeans identify with such Europe? Can Europe represent more than geography? Particularly, for young Europeans who have been under the Exchange Erasmus program, how do they think the *idea* of a united Europe? How has *European*

identity been shaped in the *habitus* of Erasmus citizens? How do their representations of Europe set up the identification with *European Union*?

In all focus groups, Europe as a theme unfolds in multiple meanings shaped by ambivalences and overlappings. Despite a European cultural model is being manifested, the identification is focused on a *historical Europe* and meanings are anchored in the memory of a recent past of conflicts and its overcoming after World War II:

> Vasia [Greek] – Throughout history, all European countries have had many bad moments. Greece, Germany, Italy, Spain, England, all had bad moments and we must not forget them, as we say that "we are Europeans, we have culture, but how do we gain that culture? How we are thus? I think that in all ages, people knew the story and read about it, at least the rich, and somehow after World War II all came together, because of Italy and Germany everyone else suffered and then peacefully with them we were all together. (…)

> Adrían [Spanish] – Same as Vasia, I think. For the same reasons.

Furthermore, the identification with Europe occurs at the economic and geographical levels, as well as in cultural diversity, regardless of a sense of unit:

> Rebecca [Italian] – Now it's the economy. The first thing I think about is economics, because every day we hear on television, everywhere, people talk about the economy, in law, in Europe that controls the economy. So stop me, the first thing is the economy and I don't think the culture and the history… we are part of the same world, but with different weight and we had a different story. I think I have a story completely different from Spain when confronting Spain or Yugoslavia and the Czech Republic and many others. So, I don't think about history, I don't think about culture because I have a culture completely different from the others. But now, I think about the economy, because if you listen to "European Union", I think about economics and also as the Erasmus… I know, for example, that my university tries to send many students because they bring money from Europe. For us, it is a good experience and, for us, it is to know different cultures, but [at the base] at my university is to bring money from Europe.

> Katja [Gernan] – Yes, I agree with you and I also think that the first thing that comes to mind it's just the geographic area, it's not really about history or ... It's more diversity than even unity or something.

In another group, all participants have stated that currently, they do not identify themselves with any dimensions of Europe. Their idea of Europe is strongly shaped by the image they have of the European Union:

> Moderator – Thinking a little bit about the continent, but moving away a bit of the geographical idea, I would like you to talk a little about… Europe is, in addition to geography, associated with its values such as citizenship,

democracy, freedom, equality, cultural diversity, acceptance of differences, solidarity ... Do you identify Europe with these values?

João – It is like that, I… from what I studied the European Union, I think it was a

very interesting project in theory [laughs]

Carolina – It was not achieved.

Pedro – A little too ambitious.

João – (…) in the character of democracy I think so, I think it works relatively well, we may have countries like Spain, Italy continue a little with nationalism and a little repudiation with the European Union, but in general, I think it was a completed goal, now in terms of citizenship, identity, puff … solidarity, even of solidarity and acceptance of peoples ...

(…)

Carolina – There it is.

Pedro – The problem of the current European Union ...

Carolina – It's just paper.

Joana – Exactly.

Pedro – … is that the strongest pulled a lot towards them and the weakest did not survive.

Moderator – So, no one identifies with any of the dimensions of Europe mentioned?

Pedro – At the moment, no.

Carolina – Exactly, not at the moment.

João – I think they [short pause] ... they don't even exist.

Pedro – Because the initial idea [

Carolina – Democracy is going on, kinda.

Pedro – … this European Union no longer exists.

João – What do we have, we have a common economic space, we have the Schengen area that is collapsing thanks to Brexit and we have democracy. Whatever else we have, we have a Germany in charge… we have a *Troika*.

From the quotations transcribed, is possible to point out some positions: if for some students there are cultural differences, at the same time, they perceive also a continental unit; for others, Europe is united by the economy because there is no other place for the logic of unity. These positions allow us to sum up: if, on the one hand, there is a unity conception of European, on the other, there is no clear recognition that there is such thing as European identity. This *paradoxical logic* found in the discourses of the interviewees about the idea of Europe foster itself on the antinomies that exist at the heart of the discourse of European identity since its inception. This idea comes up with more clarity in the words of the Polish student, Ursula, that expressed an *ambiguous feeling.* She does not what to think about and what to expect from European identity, but even so, she considers that differences

are not relevant enough to prevent her from feeling part of Europe and part of her country.

> Usually, you don't think about it. For me, as I said at the first place, I feel Polish and maybe if I leave Europe, I could say: 'OK, I'm European like polish 'but you don't see these great differences. Okay, even if ... I can see many differences here in Portugal, I can still say: 'it's Europe'. I don't see many differences, so I can really divide myself (…). (Ursula, Polish)

Moreover, we can see a theoretical clue in the question of identities in this statement. That is, the *ability to choose*. When the context of action changes the response might be different, depending on several circumstances. Therefore, with the excerpt above, Europe can be, in fact, a choice along with national loyalties because this does not block both levels of belonging; they can coexist mutually (Kohli 2000).

It is also in this dispute that the logic of European unification is played. The idea of a united Europe is not and has never been a consensual idea. Marked by ambiguity as well as antagonism, the idea of united Europe has been declined by multiple variations. So, the positions that emerged in the interviews still reveal this dispute for the definition of the concept of European identity. Moreover, we may identify a handful of superficial ideas and vague phrases that have been proven these subjects are alien to them or poorly thought through. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that for most interviewees, Europe appears as "an abstract category, conceptually vague and experientially intangible" (Armbruster, Rollo, and Meinhof 2003, 888–89). Therefore, it is evident here the essentialist myth in the discourse of the identity construction of Europe. According to Delanty (1995, 132), "Europe is simply too large and too abstract to be imagined in a meaningful sense", since the process of building a collective European identity does not depend upon the creation of a specific community, like a nation-state, but communities where narratives circulate, creating overlapping and concentric identity belongings (Eder 2009).

Finally, from the content analysis of the narratives also stems the non-differentiation between Europe and the European Union for the interviewees. Any reading about Europe is based on what they think the EU is today. In other words, some students make no distinction of Europe as a continent with a historical and cultural heritage and Europe as a political and economic project of unification. Thus, this often overlap between Europe and European Union confuses what is, on the one hand, a cultural project of identity and, on the other, what are the institutional

practices to mobilise the citizens to a project of Union with common economic and political interests. However, this category is not very new. There have been some studies that specifically have detected this one; Europe is often synonymous with the European Union in everyday life narratives (Armbruster, Rollo, and Meinhof 2003; Ribeiro 2011; Noversa 2017)

European identity as an identity-project: European Union and instrumental identifications

Identities are the result of symbols and narratives that are given to us in historically contingent contexts of communication and which serve as a catalyser for collective identities (Eder 2009). In this process, boundaries emerge from cognitive processes and institutionalised cultural discourses, represented by symbols that serve as codes of communication and identification among the members of such a group or community (Elias 1992). Identities thereby delimit spaces of action and normalise regimes of belonging through communication networks and symbols. In this sense, post-war Europe reveals itself not only as a phenomenon of *deterritorialisation,* but also as a *territorial institutionalisation* project (Eder 2006, 260) with the opening of borders[2].

The integration process started by producing and reproducing a European-*habitus*. On the one side, by operationalising a performative narrative of redemption of a traumatic past (Ribeiro 2013) and, on the other, through a policy carried out by the EU institutions, translated into the official discourse of self-celebration, which began to produce an imagined cultural community (Sassatelli 2002) under the motto – "unity in diversity" (Lähdesmäki 2012). Also, European political culture was embodied through the creation of institutions, such as a Parliament, a Commission, a Council, and courts. All these institutional arrangements have had a normative impact on the perception and political legitimacy among the European citizens and member-states. In Michael Bruter's words, "European integration has transformed the very nature of the borders between member-states, and also those between the European Union and its neighbours, modifying the 'other' to which we might expect

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[2] Its borders have shaped by a new meaning as a result of the successive enlargements, such as the borders created when was founded the Single Market and the succeed endoveour of the "Schengen Area", creating then a interconnected space for the circulation of European citizens among Member-States. This led the European Union to conquer a concrete space for its governance and border control.

citizens to oppose their own identity" (Bruter 2004, 22).

Another process that has come from the Europeanisation enterprise was the creation of symbols and initiatives that have materialised a European project in the everyday life of millions of Europeans, producing in analogy to the expression of Michael Billig (1995), a *banal Europeanism*. According to Hans-Jörg Trenz (2014, 10) "banal Europeanism" is a way of socialisation Europeans who implicitly accept a change in European society instead of an explicitly consented process. Also, it could be seen as a subconscious process that normalises the European Union as a polity. In this sense, how are these symbols being incorporated and which meanings emerge from the discourses of the Erasmus generation?

To analyse *Europeanness* among the Erasmus citizens was chosen the EU flag as a concrete element to evaluate the Erasmus students' belonging identifications with Europe. According to those who have studied the nation (Anderson 1991; Smith 1991), the flag is one of the symbols that represents the unity of a national community where several meanings are embedded and inscribed from shared historical memory. The blue flag with the twelve golden stars, created by the European Council in 1955 and officially adopted as a symbol of the European Community in 1986, is now recognised by all: it systematically follows the national flag in official events and we can see it every day in posters and documents announcing the European Union's support for diverse projects, as well as on driving licenses, on car license plates, and passports. When asked in the context of the focus group interview what European Union's flag stands for, the meanings emanated were multiple and ambiguous.

Starting with those who identify with the EU's flag. It either represents an experience of peace, freedom and mobility or represents a symbol of sharing a common culture:

> Jessica – I like the European flag because I like the European Union and it shows that we are united stuff [
> Moderator – But as a symbol of the European Union, do you feel connected with the flag?
> Jessica – Yes.
> Moderator - In an emotional, affective way or in a rational way?
> Jessica – Also emotional way. For me, the European Union is also a symbol of peace because we can be sure that it won't be a war again. Maybe it will happen, you can't say never, but is also a symbol of peace, for example, we have the same currency, we wouldn't be so stupid to attack a country that has the same currency because it would affect us as well. So, it's like a symbol of peace, also of freedom, that I can travel everywhere and that's why I feel also

emotionally. It's something that my grandparents never experienced, for example. When they were young never experienced that was so easy to go everywhere in Europe and that we have the guarantee, at least, a Europe of peace. (Jessica, German)

Para mim neste caso representa bastante (…) Mobilidade, ideias comuns… (Miguel, Portuguese)

Eu também concordo com a mobilidade (…) num certo aspecto é mesmo a nossa identidade, porque nós realmente dizemos que somos europeus (…). (Catarina, Portuguese)

Para mim a bandeira da União Europeia representa uma partilha de culturas e identidades (…). (Carolina, Portuguese)

For those who do not identify, the flag can either represent the European Union in an economic sense or a symbolic representation that forges a certain unit, which delimits the "us" of "them":

Rebecca [Italian] – I think now this flag doesn't mean a lot because we have a lot of problems inside Europe. (…) For me, it doesn't mean anything because is based on economics, not on culture (…).
Adrián [Spanish] – I agree with Rebecca. I know that in some ways this flag represents us but in the end, I don't think like… the perception I have, it's… like Rebecca said, is a superior economic authority we have, more than like symbolism Union between Europeans.
(…)
Vasia [Greek] – I agree with him. I think it's not a European Union. Since it came, after, everyone is separated, there is a kind of "wars" between Greece and Germany or Spain and Germany. (…) I think it's not about the Union. It offers many great things, sometimes cultural, but is mostly about economic sense.
Katja [German] – (…) I agree with them most of the things that you said, I don't really identify with it but for me it represents Union.

Moderator – The flag of the European Union, what does it represent for you?
João – Unity, communion, sharing of values, Schengen space… [
Joana – Yes, Schengen area.
João – Single currency… and cultural space. [
Pedro – Let it be a flag shows… our European flag… I don't know how to explain it, that shows that we are all united, that it is a single flag for all [
Joana – Yes.
Pedro – Later, it turns out that we are just one, I don't know…
Joana – That demonstrates unity.
Pedro – This is also a bit… the European Union scene.
Moderator – So, for everyone, this flag means Unity?

Joana – Yes.
Pedro – Yes.
João – At least the idea of… [
Carolina – It may be the idea they [european elite] want to show [
Joana – Exactly.
Carolina – …because in fact this is not happening.
Joana – Exactly.
Moderator – Yes, but what does it really represent for you?
João – Nothing.
Joana – Exactly.
João – … personally nothing.
Carolina – Nothing in particular, when I went on Erasmus, we were all from the European Union and I didn't feel union, we weren't all the same.
João – The national character is still very present.
Joana – Yes.
João – Fortunately.
Carolina – Yes, I think so too. We cannot *lose* our identity just to show that we have one.

This last excerpt highlights and allows us to understand that their knowledge about the symbols of the European Union is surrounded by a lot of doubts. Mainly, in the last intervention performed by Carolina, is emphasised the verb "to lose" our (national) identity. This reveals that for some European citizens the perception they have of the European symbols remains a sign of an "anti-national" plan (Bruter 2004, 30). That is, it would involve a certain loss of sovereignty over national symbols. Overall, the European Union flag for most respondents does not play an affective bond of belonging, because only a German student, Jessica, expressed explicitly that emotional bond with the flag.

In short, the flag either serves the function of representing a certain unit of Europe from the outside or is purely the representation of an economic bloc. From here is just possible to state which are the primordial meanings associated with the Union. The European Union can be understood as a space of freedom, economic cooperation or prosperity, etc. All of these categories could be part of the frame of identification that Erasmus citizens interviewed have to the Union project, less than is a truly political association. This latter dimension has always been silenced in all focus group sessions. This is already a relevant conclusion. Showing us how the European identity project is being imagined.

According to Michael Bruter (2004, 26), "understanding political identities implies a need to understand what those formalised communities might predominantly represent in the imaginary of an individual." In this sense, it is needed

to look into the meanings that the Erasmus citizens attribute to the European Union's political project. What represents the European Union for Erasmus students? Overall, the results are the same: the EU either represents an economic bloc or an entity that gives them material and practical advantages for crossing borders easily among member-states:

> For me it's like: 'of course, I can work abroad'. I can work I don't know where because we don't need a visa and it's easy to stay, I don't need to care about anything (…). (Jessica, German)

> The positive thing is that you travel in Europe without a passport and is simpler. (Rebecca, Italian)

> João – (…) Europe has two very strong points I think the Euro, which is the Schengen Area and the common economic space. These are, these were where Europe managed to be happy and managed to really implement itself and the European Union managed to make its project assert itself. Now, when talking about such social and specific concepts as citizenship, cultural identity…
> Carolina – I think, basically, sorry to interrupt you, the European Union project is an economic project essentially they don't think about the social side as much as it should be, because if the European Union collapsed we would have a big problem of currency, for example.

In the focus group, the European Union was never mentioned explicitly as a federal project that has had the purposes of a political ideal of peace and sharing sovereignty among democratic states in Europe. For most respondents, the European Union is synonymous with the economy, a sign of benefits and a metaphor for freedom to travel, study and work without having to show a passport.

An explanatory hypothesis could be given for this Erasmus students' perception. At the beginning of the European unification, the idea of a united Europe has arisen, above all, as a political ideal of peace and democracy rather than an economic one. But throughout the following decades of profound economic prosperity, along with a global capitalist ambition, made European elites forget about the Union's political mission in the middle of the economic priorities. Also, it is relevant to notice that *Social Europe* has an inconspicuous presence in the discourses produced in the context of focus group interviews. The categories most mentioned were the *economic* narrative and Europe with its material and practical advantages, namely the easy way they can move throughout the space of the European Union without strict cross-border control procedures:

For me, the thing that is most important is that we can work and we can go anywhere you want without the visa. (Kenan, Bosnian)

I'm really happy I don't have to use it [passport]. (Michele, Italian)

Taking on the empirical data as a whole, the EU's ideals as a project with a mission of peace, defence of democracy, cohesion and social protection were undoubtedly steamed up from their discourses. As it was able to verify previously, the European Union has taken on the representation of an association for the fulfilment of economic cooperation, rather than a reference at the cultural, social or political levels. That is, the meanings that have repeatedly emerged in the focus group interviews were those associated with economics and mobility more than the cultural or political categories. To sum up, the findings have suggested that the discourse about European Union is more focused on economics and material identifications, which leads us to bring up the statement delivered by the Greek student, Vasia, who said: "[being] European is mostly about economics."

Meanings of the practical relationship as citizens of the EU

European identity depends on the political success of the European Union institutions. So, in the context of the European crisis is necessary to ask if they do feel like members of the European Union. What does it mean to be a citizen of the EU? Is important to be part of this political community? What kind of European citizen? If the mobilisation of Erasmus students' meanings for the European Union is made in the formula of *benefits* and *advantages*, their perceptions about the practical relationship of the European political community are negotiated in the same formula: *we are European citizens because becoming a European citizen implies advantages in cross-border mobility.*

However, being a citizen involves identifying with citizenship, and feeling member of a political community. Beyond they identify the practical advantages of being citizens of the European Union, nonetheless implies that they foster a feeling of belonging. The excerpt transcribed below is embedded with ambiguous and ambivalent meanings. Concretely, in the interventions of Adrían and Vasia, we may realise that there is no feeling of European Citizenship. Furthermore, both alleged that something affects them but the practices of EU institutions do not appear decoded for them, as well as they manifest difficulties in defining which limits of what classifies them as European citizens.

Katja [German] – (…) it's a good thing for me, I have many good things from it but happens by choice so it's something I'm thankful for because I think I have many things that are easier for European people. But it's nothing I would be proud of or I would identify myself like a present I received.

Moderator – Ok. The rest of you, European citizenship…

Rebecca [Italian] – (…) just for that reason I think that we don't feel like citizens of Europe because we didn't know anything about parties, the Europe government. Only a small part of the Italian people votes in European elections. I remember that and just for that reason, I don't feel like a citizen of Europe.

Adrián [Spanish] – Well, it's a bit the same thing they said and to add something new I feel a European citizen in the way that the stuff that is decided in the parliament affects us. As Katja said before, it's a nice thing to take your car from Madrid and you can drive to Berlin, and you can do it without borders. It's a good feeling but I wouldn't say it's a citizenship feeling, I don't know how to explain it. I feel part of it because things affect me but it's not a belonging feeling. I can't describe it.

Vasia [Greek] – I think like it's not a good or a bad feeling. It depends on the country that you come from in Europe because someone that doesn't know maybe "You're European. How do you feel good?" It's not the same for an Italian or a Spanish or a German or a Swedish. It's not a feeling that we share, to be Europeans, and I don't think that we feel that we belong to the European Union. Europe ok, just a continent, but just a continent.

These opinions appear in the students' discourses because the logic of the European practices is still made without the classification systems that clarify the practices for the individuals. In fact, European identity is a non-institutionalised identity in the sense that still missing the classification systems that order the social experience of the individuals in the field where they act or identify (Bourdieu 1999). Thus, it is clear that the European-*habitus* that the interviewees carry up is still very limited, since the symbolic capital they hold about the European political body does not offer either a frame of reference or an ability to deal with the multiple situations that make up the field in which they move and interact (Goffman 1986). In this regard, a reason could be pointed out. As it is the political experiences in Europe continue to be interpreted exclusively through national affairs (Sierp 2014). Overall, it seems to be that the feeling among Erasmus students interviewed and laconically expressed in the words of the Greek student, who said:

I think that being European is not like being part of Europe, but you just stay back, you can't do things so you just watch things going. But you're a kind of part of the history, you can say: "I was born there", but you didn't fight for anything, you weren't involved in anything, you didn't vote. (Vasia, Greek)

What has been the role of the European Union institutions in building this political community? From the interviews with Erasmus citizens, there is an idea that becomes very evident and that expresses so well the meanings that we have been arguing: the European institutions are not working hard enough to make Europeans feel closer to the European Union and are not being strong enough to integrate and communicate with its citizens. As the arguments highlighted in the excerpts below, the respondents take a very critical stance on the direction that the European Union has been tracking. In this respect, the words of Carolina and Rebecca were very eloquent, recognising the erosion of values such as *social protection* and *political solidarity*:

> In general, It[EU] is not responding well to them [your problems], because the *group* of the European Union is weakened, above all now because of *Brexit* and all that, I think that they are not keeping the values of the European Union safe, they are failing to respect what it means to be European even for the way they are treating, for example, the refugees in Greece and other countries as well. I think you're losing a little bit of that, and how we are going through a crisis… I think of identity too. Now, as we are about in a crisis of values. I think that the European Union is failing to keep its values safe (…) losing legitimacy (…) because the European people identify themselves as being a multicultural people, a people of solidarity and we are not respecting that. (Carolina, Portuguese)

> I would like to have equity in Europe because, for example, about refugees, in Italy, we have a problem because we are the first country that they meet when they arrive sometimes. So, I think if we have more equity in an organisation it could be useful. I say refugees only as an example, but I think that if we can help each other it would be useful. Now, I don't know. Sometimes they change, they hide, they close the borders. So, borders are built again. I don't think that Europe one time in the future will be broken, I don't think… but I really hope that something can be changed, more equity inside, between us, between our country because, now, it's obvious that there is a pyramid and we can't decide in an equity way, I think. So, maybe one day I can feel myself a European citizen. (Rebecca, Italian)

Although the European unification process has created new types of powers and has achieved great political accomplishments, namely the institutionalisation of European Citizenship, the last two decades of crises (e.g. the 2008 economic-financial crisis, the 2015 refugee migration crisis, and Brexit) have revealed the antinomies of the European political project. In concrete, from the last excerpts transcribed, the Erasmus students were able to perceive the differentiated solidarity that has been installed in the political practices of the European institutions.

Concluding Remarks

This study shows that the Erasmus Programme has a positive impact on the way how students perceive Europe, although it only manifests a modest effect on cultural and political levels of the European identity. The meaning that was given to the process of Europeanisation by the Erasmus students interviewed outlined in the economic narrative and the benefits associated with being in a united Europe, advantages that they recognise themselves that benefit, for example, the Erasmus Programme and the Schengen Area.

Despite they see practical advantages of being European citizens that did not imply any sense of European belonging or identification with European Citizenship. The students of this study accept positively the benefits of European integration, but that does not imply adherence to an ideal of the European project, because what was observed in their discourses were pragmatic, utilitarian, and instrumental reasons more than an idea of Europe as a historical project of political solidarity and social cohesion to the future. In this regard, the Europeanism of the Erasmus students interviewed manifests itself in superficial and utilitarian identifications (see Fuchs 2011).

Although some features of European cultural background have been mentioned, yet is not an indication that they are the primary categories, because what prevailed throughout the interviews was the issue of the practical benefits. In the narratives of the Erasmus students, Europe was mostly enunciated as an emblem of possibilities to easily travel and work on the European scale. Thus, their narratives highlight a kind of *interested Europeanism*, shaped by their personal interests.

The European Union's political project was repeatedly inscribed in instrumental elements and practical features more than in the affective or volitional conditions. This was evident in the focus groups: a poor capacity to reflect upon European issues where were emphasised a lot of doubts. To summarise, the empirical findings pointed out the practical and instrumental aspects that have come with the European unification, such as the Erasmus Programme, as explanatory flagships to justify the institutional bond or not with the EU. In other words, the Erasmus Programme in this study takes thereby on an only adjective role within the Europeanisation endeavour rather than a substantive one.

To conclude, the outcomes point to the ambivalent and ambiguous character of the meanings associated with Europe's project. We had the opportunity

to see that when were analysed the meanings of Europe and the European Union: "when two individuals claim to 'feel European', they might mean totally different things in terms of both the intensity of the feeling they describe and the imagined political community they refer to" (Bruter 2003, 1154). Furthermore, the empirical data suggest that there is an evident crisis of awareness and a lack of "European collective memory", since the meanings and the social representations that were produced around the EU project are very distant from the ideas of peace, democracy, social solidarity, and political cooperation sedimented sixty years ago.

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Acknowledgements