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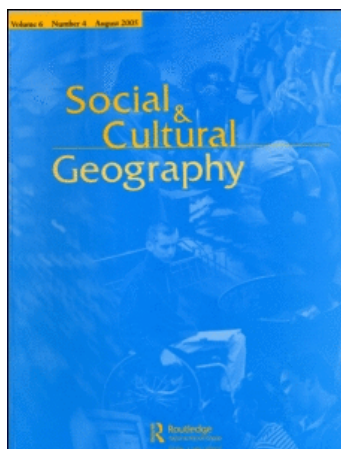
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### Europe as/at the border: Trieste and the meaning of Europe

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# Europe as/at the border: Trieste and the meaning of Europe

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*In this paper, I try to ‘think Europe’ through a cosmopolitan city like Trieste, and its recent and not so recent past. I develop my argument through the analysis of two powerful ‘myths’ that, I argue, limit understandings of Europe and the European project today: (1) the ‘myth of diversity’; and (2) the ‘myth of an identity in crisis’. In doing so, I rely in great part on the work of French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin and his conceptualisation of European identity as a permanent negotiation of difference; what Morin (1990) terms ‘a permanent dialogical simmer’. Starting from Morin’s critical genealogy of European identity, I try to consider some of the ways in which we can go beyond territorial understandings of identity and citizenship, using Trieste’s experience as a mirror of the broader European condition.*

**Key words:** Europe, European cities, cosmopolitanism, borders, Trieste.

## Introduction

In many ways, a city like Trieste is an ideal place from which to consider Europe and processes of European identity-making. Not that long ago, it was considered one of the most iconic sites of the Cold War imaginary of a Europe split in two. The American geographer Isaiah Bowman famously announced that ‘the Cold War began in northern Italy ... and its focal point was the political and doctrinal confrontation at Trieste’ (cited in Ballinger 2003; see also Smith 2003). It is here that Churchill’s Iron Curtain presumably began and the city was seen, for long, as the last outpost of ‘Western Europe’.<sup>1</sup> This important rhetorical function was not only limited to Trieste’s distinct place in the geopolitical

rhetoric of an ‘Atlantic Europe’, however (Kaldor 1990; Taylor 1990, 1993). At the national level, Trieste was also seen as a vital space of ‘Italianness’ and a frontier to be defended against the Communist (and ‘Slavic’) threat by the Italian state (see, among others, Ballinger 1999; Hametz 2005; Sluga 2001). But the city’s role as a bulwark against the Slavic and Communist ‘Other’ came to form a fundamental part of processes of identity building at the local level as well, as the papers by Minca (2009a) and Colombino (2009) in this issue nicely highlight.<sup>2</sup>

Trieste was one of a handful of Cold War places (Berlin was another) where—in rhetoric, at least—‘Western’ Europe directly touched its absolute ‘Other’ (Ballinger 1999);

a site where ‘Europeanness’ had to be daily re-inscribed, re-affirmed. Like Berlin, too, the city’s fate was contested until well after the war: the allied occupation forces did not leave until 1954, and the treaty ceding large portions of the city’s hinterland to Yugoslavia was not made operational until 1975 (De Castro 1981; Rabel 1988). The city and its borderland continue to be at the forefront of processes of identity re-definition in the new Europe as well. The border with Slovenia—the Yugoslav border of old—that lies just a few kilometres from the city centre was the first of the post-communist borders to ‘dissolve’ completely, with Slovenia’s accession to the EU in May 2004, the Euro in January 2007, and the Schengen area in December 2007.<sup>3</sup>

The city’s recent political and geopolitical fortunes are not the only reason for which it is often envisioned as a paragon of Europe, however. Many writers (some of whom I will engage with in this piece) have described Trieste as a mirror of the principal European tragedies of the long twentieth century (to use Eric Hobsbawm’s characterisation)—from the disintegration of European Empires (in particular, the disintegration of the ‘most European of European Empires’, the Habsburg one), to the rise of nationalisms, to the emergence of competing totalitarianisms—Fascism and Communism—which left an indelible mark on the city and its identity.<sup>4</sup>

But what exactly can a city’s past—and present—tell us about Europe and, specifically, about European identity? In this paper, I try to ‘think Europe’ through Trieste and its recent and not so recent past, just as Jan Morris does in her 2006 book *Europe: An Intimate Journey* where Trieste becomes, for Morris (2006: 6), a place from which to contemplate Europe from afar, but also a place from which ‘to sort out [a] lifetime’s experience of Europe’; both the *centre of Europe* (‘one of

the continent’s fulcra’) and a *way to Europe* (‘[that] bill of lading “*via Trieste*” which once had directed so much of the world’s trade towards Europe’). A city where the ‘making of Europe’ is almost palpable: a place from which one can watch Europe ‘try to make something altogether new of itself’ but also a place where one ‘comes to realize that [one] had been European all the time’ (Morris 2006: 7).

It is precisely this awareness of Europe that, I will argue, makes Trieste an ideal site from which to consider the question of European identity today. Indeed, what I will argue here is that the cities like Trieste can be thought of as archetypically ‘European’ not *just* because of their role as key loci in so many of the continent’s most important political and geopolitical events; they are ‘archetypically European’ not *just* because they are (or once were) what we might term ‘cosmopolitan cities’, places where European diversities have come together (and often clashed). Trieste (as many other European cities) has, of course, been both of these things but it is not the point I wish to make here. What I will try to highlight, rather, is how thinking about a city like Trieste—about its past and its present—can open up new ways of thinking about Europe. Trieste (or, better yet, a certain *idea* of Trieste), just like Europe, was at particular moments of its existence an incredibly *powerful metaphor for a certain vision of society*; a powerful ideal ‘container’ for the projection of certain myths and understandings of politics, economy, society (as the other papers in this special issue all suggest). Thinking Europe through a city like Trieste can thus allow us, perhaps, to escape the ‘methodological nationalism’ (Anderson 2006; Beck and Grande 2004) that still characterises the bulk of our attempts at formulating understandings of Europe and European identity.

Just as for Morris, Trieste will be the foil for my argument, but the points I wish to make

here are broader, and they regard the place of cities or, better yet, of a particular ‘cityness’ to use Ed Soja’s term (2000) in ‘making Europe’. As many authors have noted, Europe’s cities are ideal settings for exploring the interface between lived negotiations of difference and wider frameworks and visions of European belonging. Cities are (and have always been) key ‘nodes of diversity’ within Europe, the sites of intense juxtaposition of ethnic, cultural and religious difference (see, among others, Amin 2002; Amin and Thrift 2002a, 2002b; Body-Gendrot 2000; Chambers 2001, 2008; Keith 2005; Sandercock 1998). As Amin (2002) argues, it is in city spaces that everyday cultures of ethnic negotiation are actively produced, be they accommodating, antagonistic, or hybrid. This is not to claim, of course, that cities or city spaces are somehow ‘naturally’ (or unproblematically) cosmopolitan (for critiques, see Keith 2005; Kofman 2005 and the edited volume by Cheah and Robbins 1998). Contact and ‘mixing’ in city spaces are not, in themselves, guarantees of cultural exchange or identitary ‘openness’. Nonetheless (as Waley 2009 also argues in this special issue), urban cosmopolitan cultures, forged as they are out of that which Amin (2002: 959) terms ‘the micropolitics of everyday social contact and encounter’, can hold important lessons for our thinking about Europe.

Passing, then, as Morris does ‘*via Trieste*’, I develop my argument through the analysis of two powerful ‘myths’, two powerful ‘misunderstandings’ that, I suggest, limit understandings of Europe and the European project today: (1) the ‘myth of diversity’; and (2) the ‘myth of an identity in crisis’. In doing so, I rely in great part on the work of French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin and his conceptualisation of European identity as a permanent negotiation of difference; what

Morin terms ‘a permanent dialogical simmer’ (1990: 90). Starting from Morin’s critical genealogy of European identity, I try to consider some of the ways in which we can go beyond territorial understandings of identity and citizenship, using Trieste’s experience as a mirror of the broader European condition.

### The ‘myth of diversity’

Europe [is] a maze of frontiers, enclaves, minorities, irredentisms, ethnic anomalies and political fragmentation, and Trieste is just the place for contemplating it. The city is hemmed in by artificial frontiers, inhabited by people of several races, complicated by the detritus of abandoned empires and by the effects of unnecessary wars. (Morris 2006: 57)

In Trieste ... you are not quite sure what nation you are among. If a nation can be defined as an amalgam of ethnicity, language, history, and landscape, or as James Joyce’s Mr. Bloom more succinctly thought ‘the same people living in the same place’, then the nationality of Trieste is far from absolute ... Who can really take Statehood seriously in such a place? (Morris 2006: 121)

Much of the official and popular rhetoric of European togetherness is fixed around slogans such as that of a ‘unity in diversity’, the idea and ideal of Europe as a (voluntary) union of many different peoples, cultures, pasts (for a discussion, see McDonald 1996; Rumford 2007, but also Delanty 1997; Shore 2000). In this conception, what makes Europe special—indeed, what makes Europe ‘Europe’—is precisely that it is a ‘container’ of such a diversity of peoples, cultures, pasts. This, too, is the idea behind Jan Morris’ book, but also many other popular works on Europe and its legacy that have appeared to wide public

acclaim in recent years (for example, Norman Davies' encyclopaedic *Europe: A History* (1996) as well as Geert Mak's *In Europe: Travels Through the 20th Century* (2007), a 900-plus page tome that has been a bestseller across Europe). Such depictions are not limited to pop-historical reconstructions, however, and indeed the 'Europe as a container of diversity' understanding persists *also* in great part of political (and geographical) theorisations of Europe today: a mark of that persistent 'methodological nationalism' I hinted at previously. As James Anderson argues in his introduction to a recent volume on the changing face of Europe entitled *The Geopolitics of European Union Enlargement: The Fortress Empire* (2006), the various competing visions of Europe's territorial future—whether ideas of 'a Europe of the Nations' (and their variant, 'a Europe of the Regions'), or those of 'a European super-state'—are all fundamentally bound to *still* 'national' understandings of Europe, despite their supra- (or post-) national tinge. Representations of 'European diversity' are equally 'national' in spirit: a 'container diversity', simply scaled up or down (from ideas of a 'multi-cultural Europe' to the 'multi-cultural city').

The persistence of such understandings presents an analytical problem, of course, but also a political one for, as many authors have argued, the 'still-national' trap that binds understandings of Europe and the European project limits the formulation of new, post-national understandings of European citizenship and belonging.<sup>5</sup> It is this latter point that forms the focus of another recent critique: that formulated by Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande in their 2004 *Das kosmopolitische Europa. Gesellschaft und Politik in der Zweiten Moderne*. Beck and Grande argue that conceptualising Europe as a diversity of

geographical containers—nations, regions, localities—rather than a series of by-now inextricable flows, exchanges, such understandings not only *mis-recognise* Europe (i.e. they fail to capture Europe's actually existing and much more messy, much more 'fuzzy' diversities), they also fail to imagine viable political—and geographical—solutions able to govern European complexity. European complexity—European 'diversity'—is still conceived, they argue, in exclusive and dualistic (and, I would add, cartographic) terms: what they term an '*aut...aut* logic' (Beck and Grande 2004: 47).

How is Trieste illustrative of such mis-recognitions of (European) diversity—and how can it help us think beyond them? Trieste is, in many ways, marked by a similar set of misunderstandings, mis-recognitions. Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris' (1982) seminal work on the city's identity, *Trieste: un'identità di frontiera* [*Trieste: A Border Identity*] focuses a large part of its critique on unpicking the 'myth of diversity' cultivated in—and about—the city, a city 'whose multi-nationality is both real and mythical at the same time' (1982: 43). Much contemporary popular writing on the city feeds on this myth, referring to Trieste as an 'urban melting pot'; a place where 'East and West come together'; a fascinating 'microcosm of Europe' (James Joyce, a long-term resident of Trieste supposedly called it endearingly '*Europiccola*'—a 'little Europe'). This is certainly true of the best-selling works by Jan Morris (*Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (2001) and the aforementioned *Europe: An Intimate Journey*), but also the characterisations of other travel-fiction writers such as Paul Theroux (1996) and Joseph Cary (1993). The myth of Trieste's multi-cultural/multi-national past and its presumed/idealised 'diversity' has also provided ample fodder for a whole slew of thrillers and mystery novels,



with the city figuring as the setting for countless stories of international intrigue and espionage (two recent examples are Michael Pearce's (2004) *Dead Man in Trieste*, which follows the adventures of an agent of the British Special Branch in the years preceding World War I, and the latest novel by Alan Furst, *The Foreign Correspondent* (2007), which has as its protagonist a multi-lingual Triestine of Hungarian and Austrian origins). It is not only the city's colourful, 'diverse' past, however, that inspires fanciful reconstructions: contemporary Trieste is the setting for German novelist Veit Heinichen's best-selling police thrillers (also a successful TV series in Germany and Austria) and Heinichen has received numerous awards in Germany and Italy for his 'perceptive portrayal of the complexities of this fascinating border city' (from the notes on Heinichen's 2007 novel, *Der Tod wirft lange Schatten*).

A fetish for Trieste's multi-cultural 'diversity' does not only mark fictional and semi-fictional accounts of the city, however: the representation of Triestino 'diversity' is a highly pertinent *political* issue as well. As Ara and Magris (1982) have masterfully outlined, the 'myth of diversity' provided the unspoken subtext for most reconstructions of the city's historical geographies: whether describing the multi-national, multi-lingual port city of the Empire, or framing understandings of the city in the Cold War years, when Trieste's 'differences' were drawn into the broader confrontation between East and West at the city's outskirts.<sup>6</sup> More importantly still, the myth continues to colour readings of *today's* urban realities. As Colombino's (2009, this issue) research suggests, the vision of Trieste as a 'multicultural city' is well-present both in recent place-marketing rhetoric (as was the case in Trieste's bid for the 2008 World Expo), but also within processes of

identity *self*-definition on the part of Trieste's inhabitants.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with the valorisation of diversity *per se*, whether in the case of Trieste or of Europe more broadly; such framings are certainly preferable to exclusivist visions that presume (and enforce) unitary understandings of identity and belonging, erasing any dissonance or difference. Nonetheless, these readings very often offer a quite limited understanding of 'actually-existing' diversity; as I suggest above, they offer a quite limited understanding of 'actually-existing' Europe and, above all, are *politically limiting* for the formulation of a European project that can fully express Europe's diversity and difference. This is equally true in the case of Trieste, where the 'city of many cultures' idea that flourishes in literature about the city captures only a small part of Trieste's distinctive difference and, indeed, can (and often has) produce quite the opposite political effects from those flagged up by a presumable celebration of diversity, as Minca's (2009a, this issue) paper powerfully argues: the rise of competing territorial nationalisms and of a virulent 'minority politics'.

How else can we conceive European diversity then? And how can Trieste help us in this endeavour? The nostalgic historical reconstructions of the city in fictional accounts as a place where all the nations of Central Europe and the Mediterranean came together—or the revocation of the city as a 'multi-national emporium' in contemporary city-marketing rhetoric—offer a very limited and limiting imaginary. As Minca (2009a) notes in this special issue, Trieste is (and has always been) much more than the sum of its various inhabitants; much more than the sum of its various nationalities. The city has never simply been  $x + y + z$  (Italians + Slovenes + Jews + Greeks + Armenians + ...), co-existing in the Trieste 'container' but all retaining their

distinctiveness; rather, x, y, and z were all profoundly transformed in Trieste—not erased, not ‘assimilated’, but consciously transformed into a unique urban togetherness-in-difference, a unique ‘way of being’: the ‘*Triestinità*’ described by Minca in this issue (see also Minca 2009b). Belgian cultural critic Stefan Hertmans (2001: 47), in his book of essays on identity in the contemporary city (evocatively titled *Intercities*), captures this distinction well: in the chapter dedicated to Trieste he notes that it would be erroneous to speak of the city as ‘a melting pot’; ‘from the modern period’, he argues, ‘it was a question of a [particular] metropolitan consciousness’. A particular ‘self-consciousness’, he adds; a particular ‘city-ness’ that allowed for the coming together of certain people and processes, for the emergence of certain unique geographies. It is more correct, he argues, to consider it the reflection of an ongoing and often conflictual process of being together in difference—a pragmatic tolerance but also (an often conflictual) negotiation. The ‘myth of diversity’—whether in the ‘melting-pot’ interpretation or other metaphors—obscures this process of on-going, everyday negotiation of difference and reifies identities (including the supposed ‘multi-cultural’ one). It hides the difficulties, but also the achievements of this process of endless translation and negotiation: in the ‘*aut-aut*’ conception (to use Beck and Grande’s terminology) ‘peaceful co-existence’ or out-right conflict are the only possible outcomes, not the *permanent negotiation of difference* which was the fortune of Trieste and other ‘cosmopolitan’ European cities like it.

What about Europe then? In their call for ‘a new critical theory of European integration’, Beck and Grande (2004: 19) argue that to transcend ‘methodological nationalism’ we should not speak of ‘Europe but of Europeanisation, ... as a process of permanent

transformation’. A similar distinction is made by Zygmunt Bauman, writing about Europe and difference in his 2004 book of essays *Europe, An Unfinished Adventure*. We should not consider ‘Europe’, he argues, but rather ‘the practice of Europeanism’ (2004: 7), not as a ‘container’ or ‘sum’ of differences but rather a practice of the ‘continuous negotiation of difference’:

Europe as an ideal (let us call it ‘Europeanism’) defies monopolistic ownership. It cannot be denied to the ‘other’ since it incorporates the phenomenon of ‘otherness’: in the practice of Europeanism, the perpetual effort to separate, expel and externalise is constantly thwarted by the drawing in, admission, accommodation and assimilation of the ‘external’. Hans-Georg Gadamer considered it the ‘particular advantage’ of Europe: its ability ‘to live with the others, to live as the other of the other’, the capacity and necessity of ‘learning to live with others even if the others were not like that’. ‘We are all others, and we are all ourselves’. The European way of life is conducted in the constant presence and in the company of the others and the different, and the European way of life is a continuous negotiation that goes on despite the otherness and the difference dividing those engaged in, and by, the negotiation. (Bauman 2004: 7; citing Gadamer 1996: 39)

And it is particularly in cities—in city spaces—that such everyday, prosaic negotiations of difference occur.

This idea of Europe as a ‘process of permanent transformation’, as a process of the ‘permanent negotiation of difference’, has perhaps been best developed by French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin already more than a decade ago. While very influential in France and the rest of continental Europe, Morin’s theorisations have been largely ignored by most contemporary Anglophone writing on Europe (his 1987 book *Penser l’Europe* is



awaiting translation into English), so it might be useful to outline his key arguments in some detail here.<sup>7</sup> Morin (1990: 22) writes about Europe as ‘Complex’<sup>8</sup>: ‘every attempt to simplify Europe—whether by its idealisation, or by abstraction or reduction mutilates it’, he notes, for Europe ‘is a Complex (from *complexus*: that which is woven together) that is marked by the capacity to assemble the greatest diversities and to bring together seemingly irreconcilable contradictions’:

Europe dissolves as soon as one tries to fix her clearly in one’s gaze; she disintegrates as soon as one tries to frame her unity ... Europe has no unity if not in its multiplicity. It is the interactions between peoples, cultures, classes, States that have led to the emergence of a unity that is, in itself, plural and contradictory ... We should thus abandon all understandings of Europe as one, as a clear, distinct and harmonious entity; we should refuse all conceptions of a really-existing (or pre-existing) European ‘essence’ or ‘substance’ that goes beyond division, antagonism, contradiction. Rather, it is precisely within these latter that we should inscribe [Europe]. (Morin 1990: 23–24)

This, indeed, is where we encounter difficulty in ‘thinking Europe’ within our traditional (‘national’, cartographic) conceptions: in such conceptions, ‘the idea of ‘unity’ necessarily dilutes the idea of ‘multiplicity’ or ‘metamorphosis’—and the idea of ‘diversity’ is simply a catalogue of juxtaposed elements’. The difficulty of ‘thinking Europe’, Morin argues, is above all ‘this difficulty of thinking of unity in multiplicity, multiplicity in unity: the *unitas multiplex*. It is, at the same time, the difficulty of thinking identity in [terms of] non-identity’ (Morin 1990: 24).

To begin to conceptualise European ‘unity’ within dis-unity (*désunion*) and heterogeneity, Morin argues that we need to appeal to two

‘principles of intelligibility’ able to capture and elucidate complex phenomena such as that of Europe: that which he terms the ‘dialogical principle’ (*principe dialogique*) and the ‘principle of recursion’ (*principe de récursion*). In Morin’s understandings, the ‘dialogical principle’ means that ‘two or more different “logics” are bound together [as one] in complex fashion (be it complementary, competing or antagonist), without their duality being erased within the unity. Thus [we could say] that what makes for the ‘unity’ of European culture is not the Judeo-Christian-Greco-Roman ‘synthesis’ but rather a complex ‘play’ between these ‘instances’, at times complementary but often competing and even antagonistic instances; a ‘play’ between instances each with its own particular logic; in other words, their dialogical relation [*leur dialogique*]’ (Morin 1990: 24). With the ‘principle of recursion’ Morin refers to, on the other hand, ‘generating and regenerating processes that are to be conceived as never-ending productive *boucles*, where each moment, each part, each ‘instance’ of the process is, at the same time, constituting and constitutive of other moments, other parts, other “instances”’ (1990: 24). From the fifteenth century on, the emergence of European cities, of the European bourgeoisie, of capitalism and later of nation-states, have all been both products and producers of a particular ‘*boucle*’, ‘a self-generating vortex acting and (re)acting on the particular developments that constitute it, spurring these on and integrating them at once. This ‘*boucle*’ [is like] a whirlpool [that] draws into itself apparently antagonistic flows that, [once within it], become complementary and constitute a self-organising form and an active unity’ (Morin 1990: 24–25).

Particular influences, events, people have been, of course, very important in the

constitution of what we today consider Europe. But we cannot consider these in isolation, Morin argues (as in the ‘Europe as the sum of components’ thesis critiqued by Beck and Grande). It is only in the particular ‘European whirlpool’ that these influences could have the effects that they did:

At the origins of Europe, there is no original founding principle. The Greek and the Latin principles come from its peripheries and precede it; the Christian principle comes from Asia and does not spread across Europe until the end of the first millennium. All of these principles have to be shaken, mixed up in the *tobu-bohu* of invaded and invading peoples, of Latinising, Germanising and Slavicising flows, before coming together and coming apart. (Morin 1990: 37–38)

When writing of the constitution of modern European societies, Morin also uses the metaphor of a social and economic ‘*éclatement*’, again evoking a bubbling cauldron, a European ‘whirlpool’; the thermodynamic connotations, he notes, are useful because they convey the amazing generative energy, the ‘generative heat’ produced by such seemingly dis-organised flux. This ‘bubbling’ Europe at certain points reaches a sort of ‘critical temperature’, Morin argues, where disordering forces come together with ordering and organising forces, creating what he terms a ‘Euro-organising historical whirlpool (*tourbillon*)’ (Morin 1990: 54). ‘All that forms modern Europe also divides it; all that divides it, contributes to its formation. [Europe] is born, develops and affirms itself at war with itself. Its (self)generating chaos continues uninterrupted: it has become a permanent *Euro-organising anarchy*’ (Morin 1990: 56; emphasis added).

Europe has always defined itself against a variety of ‘Others’. But above all, Morin argues, modern Europe ‘makes itself one’ not

in opposition to some ‘external’ enemy ‘but rather in [permanent] struggle against itself’ (Morin 1990: 56). He describes, indeed, the centuries of European wars as ‘de-regulating regulators or regulating de-regulators (*dérèglements régulateurs ou des régulations dérég-lées*)’ (1990: 59) that prevent the dominance of any one power or state for very long and thus maintain the vivacity of the European *tourbillon*. The triumph of the nation-state in the late nineteenth century spells, however, the ‘death of Europe’: once the nation-state logic becomes total, hegemonic; once European wars, once a key ‘regulating principle’, become ‘totally national’ and (due to advancements in military technology) potentially genocidal, ‘Europe slides into the abyss’. A Europe that has always thrived on tension, on an ‘ordered dis-order’, on an ‘organising anarchy’—not on completeness—expires, and it will take an enormous leap of geographical imagination and political will to identify a new ‘Euro-organising principle’ (Morin 1990: 77, 159). Trieste’s recent history offers a very useful lesson in this regard, as is illustrated by Minca’s (2009a, this issue) description of the shift that occurs post-1848 from the cosmopolitan perspective of the ‘*Trieste Nazione*’, to increasingly virulent national-territorial understandings of the city’s identity. As Minca and the other papers in this special issue argue, a city that (just like the Europe described by Morin) prospered on a constantly mutating, creative equilibrium, (just like Europe) ‘expires’ as soon as it is forced into the strictures of a fully national logic.

### Cultures of uncertainty

Trieste hardly has a nationality. It is like no other Italian city, and to be Triestino is to be a special kind

of Italian citizen—many Triestini would rather not be Italian anyway. In this city, the lines between fact and fiction, past and present, the explicit and the enigmatic, let alone between one ethnicity and another, always seem to me uncertain. (Morris 2006: 57)

It is a middle-sized, essentially middle-aged Italian seaport, ethnically ambivalent, historically confused, only intermittently prosperous, tucked away at the top right-hand corner of the Adriatic Sea, and so lacking the customary characteristics of Italy that in 1999 some 70 percent of Italians, so a poll claimed to discover, did not know it was in Italy at all. (Morris 2001: 3)

Following from the preceding critique, I would like to explore/unpick a second powerful myth that marks understandings of Europe and European identity today: the idea that a ‘loose’, not fully defined European identity is a ‘weak’ identity—or, even worse, a non-existent one.<sup>9</sup> And here again, Trieste offers an interesting means of comparison, for although its ‘lack of nationality’ may not be seen as inherently problematic by Morris and other writers (it is often considered, indeed, as the city’s mark of distinction, as its endearing particular), it is a (presumed) absence that is easily reified, that becomes a fixed identity of its own. The title of Morris’ book on Trieste is revealing: *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*—the ‘nowhere’ referring to what Morris sees as the city’s ‘suspension’ in time and place; its national and geographical indeterminacy. Morris’ depiction is not the only one to locate Trieste ‘outside of time and place’—other literary reconstructions of the city also enframe it as a ‘there that isn’t fully there’: Katia Pizzi’s (2002) work on Trieste’s literary history is revealingly entitled *A City in Search of an Author*; while Joseph Cary’s (1993) *A Ghost in Trieste* considers this as a

‘city made of books’; not only ‘an exile home’ but above all ‘an exiled city’. Italian writer Diego Marani’s (2003) *A Trieste con Svevo* (an itinerant journey through the city, following the traces of one of its best known writers, Italo Svevo) similarly describes a city ‘where you get the sense that something is about to happen but never fully does’, a city ‘out of time’.

In the melancholy reconstructions of the authors cited above, such indeterminacy, such ‘ghostliness’, is seen as something quite ‘charming’; a somewhat eccentric refusal of the strictures of the nation-state; the impression of earlier, pre-national identities. But readings of this sort easily lapse into nostalgic idealisations that have very little to do with the complexities of today’s (or past) urban realities—the messy and often painful negotiation of difference that has always been Trieste’s everyday, but that is much more than ‘a mess’; not fully defined but for that reason no less powerful a force in shaping a unique urban togetherness; the result of an ‘organising anarchy’ of the sort described by Morin (1990). Such fetishised descriptions of a city of ‘ghostly absences’ and ‘shadows’ are radically different from the ‘geographies of absence’ described in this issue by Minca (2009a). For writers like Marani or Cary, ‘absence’ signifies nothing other than a supposed lack of presence (of a set identity, of an ‘accomplished’ urban present), as charming as that may appear. In Trieste, such ‘geographies of absence’ made up a cosmopolitan urban culture that far from being ‘lacking’ was, indeed, characterised by abundance: a city that was, at once, ‘both many places and uniquely itself’, as Andre Aciman (1996, 2000) has characterised another cosmopolitan (and yes, also ‘European’) city: the Alexandria of his youth.

Defining Trieste’s identity through ‘absence’, ‘loss’, ‘lack’ or ‘incompleteness’ is, therefore, a dangerous operation—just as it is

in the case of Europe (Morris in fact describes Trieste as ‘a totem of European disunity’ (2006: 319), its multiple, ambiguous identities emblematic of Europe’s own (supposedly) messy, ambiguous attempts at self-definition). Indeed, defining identity in/through absence can be just as powerful (and problematic) as defining it through presence: as Ara and Magris (1982: 5) argue, both ‘have a tendency towards myth—that is, a seductive solidification of sameness’. Once ‘petrified in the mask of myth’, the (process of) the definition of identity tends to overlook, to mis-recognise any phenomenon that appears contradictory: ‘it extracts and abstracts ‘typical’ characteristics and grants these exemplary and absolute value, considering ‘representative’ only that which ‘fits’ into [this imaginary]’ (1982: 5).

Can we transcend such an ‘*aut-aut*’ reading that sees (a presumed, mythologised) identity absence as the clear opposite of presence; that sees (a presumed, mythologised) lack of clear unity as necessarily ‘dis-unity’? Can we conceptualise the European/Triestine *complexus* in ways that incorporate contradiction; that do not require identity closure, completeness, full (territorial) definition, or entrapment within a nostalgic tableau that makes of absence a fetish? If we follow Angelo Ara’s and Claudio Magris’ analysis of the genealogies of the Trieste ‘myth’, such presumed ‘ambiguity’ or ‘dis-unity’ is actually a very special sort of urban identity *self-awareness*; a *conscious* choice (part of the process described by Minca (2009a) in this issue.

Ara and Magris’ analysis dates back more than twenty years: it is curious, then, that some of the most interesting recent theorisations of European identity have focused on very similar notions of uncertainty and self-awareness, suggesting that it is precisely in this awareness that European difference, Europe’s

‘Europeanness’ lies. Europe’s greatest problem, indeed, is the temptation to ossify such awareness into ‘essence’, into a ‘European identity’—in this way actually mis-recognising, denying Europe. One of the most perceptive commentators in this sense is again Zygmunt Bauman. In his *Europe, An Unfinished Adventure*, Bauman focuses on the perils of the European ‘journey’: a journey that started as an ‘adventure’, but that by now ‘has left a thick and heavy deposit of pride and shame, achievement and guilt; and it has lasted long enough for the dreams and ambitions to gel into stereotypes, for the stereotypes to freeze into ‘essences’, and for the essences to ossify into ‘facts of the matter’ as hard as all facts of the matter are assumed to be. Like all facts of the matter, Europe is expected [then], in defiance of everything that made it what it has become, to be a reality that could (should?) be located, taken stock of and filed’ (Bauman 2004: 4). ‘Filed’ into the proper territorial cabinet, that is: for in today’s supposedly de-territorialised world, all social-political realities are still presumed to be ‘spatially defined and territorially fixed’—or at least there is the presumption that they necessarily *should* be (Bauman 2004: 4; see also Anderson 2006 and Beck and Grande 2004 for a similar argument). Territorial or identity ‘uncertainty’ holds little favour.

This is the first ‘peril’ identified by Bauman. The second regards the presumed total and complete correspondence of a specific geographical representation (i.e. what we conceive of as ‘Europe’ today) to all that is ‘European’. And here, again, we see the enduring power of methodological nationalism. But, as Bauman rightly argues, ‘the ‘essence of Europe’ tends to run ahead of the ‘really existing Europe’: it is the essence of ‘being a European’ to have an essence that always stays ahead of reality, and it is the essence of European realities to always

lag behind the essence of Europe' (Bauman 2004: 5—I will say more on this point later, in relation to Trieste). What is more, while the 'really existing Europe'—most visibly, the European Union, but more broadly 'that Europe of politicians, cartographers and all its appointed or self-appointed spokespeople' may be conceived as

a geographical notion and a spatially confined entity, the 'essence of Europe' is neither the first nor the second. You are not necessarily a European just because you happen to be born or to live in a city marked on the political map of Europe. But you may be European even if you've never been to any of those cities. (Bauman 2004: 5)

It is not a question of territorial or identity uncertainty or ambiguity, however, but rather, a conscious, self-aware choice; the adherence to a specific, self-aware project.

Bauman's argument may seem merely an interesting provocation (that one may be 'European' even if one does not happen to be born or live in a city marked on the political-map of Europe) but if we consider the case of Trieste, it is not far from historical reality. Here, Italians, Greeks, Jews, Turks, Armenians, White Russians all became 'Triestini' through their conscious, self-aware adherence to/participation in a particular urban project, a particular urban geographical (and political) imagination: the ideal of the '*Trieste Nazione*' that Minca (2009a) outlines in his paper.

It is just this sort of conscious participation in what he terms 'the practice of Europeanism' (2004: 7), in an always evolving project of making and re-making something called 'Europe', that Bauman sees as the true mark of Europeaness. Citing Polish philosopher and historian Krzysztof Pomian (1992) he notes that Europe was

the sole social entity that in addition to *being* a civilisation also *called itself* 'civilisation' and looked at itself as civilisation, that is as a product of choice, design and management—thereby recasting the totality of things, including itself, as an in-principle-unfinished object, an object of scrutiny, critique, and possibly remedial action. In its European rendition, 'civilisation' (or 'culture') ... is a continuous process—forever imperfect yet obstinately struggling for perfection—of *remaking the world*. (Bauman 2004: 7–8, emphasis in original)

Bauman is not the first to have remarked on this aspect of 'European identity' or 'culture'. His (2004: 8) argument draws heavily on Heidegger's distinction between the (taken-for-granted) realm of the *zuhanden* and that of the 'brightly lit stage of the *vorhanden* (that is, the realm of things that ... need to be watched, handled ... moulded, made different than they are)'. It is here that we can locate 'Europe's discovery of culture'—a culture that is self-aware, and that demands action: 'the world as *zuhanden* forbids standing still; it is a standing invitation, even a command, to act' (2004: 8). It is, Bauman (2004: 9) suggests, precisely this 'discovery of culture as an activity performed by humans on the human world' that makes Europe unique: 'the discovery [awareness] that *all things human are human-made*' (emphasis in original); 'an incessant activity of ... making of the world an object of critical inquiry and creative action' (Bauman 2004: 11). But 'it was not just culture that happened to be Europe's discovery/invention. Europe also invented the need and the task of *culturing culture*. [Europe] made culture itself the object of culture ... the human mode of being-in-the world itself was recast ... as a problem to be tackled. Culture—the very process of the production of the human world—was [thus itself] made into an object of human theoretical and practical critique and of subsequent *cultivation*' (2004: 11).<sup>10</sup>



Edgar Morin's (1990: 90) historical analysis of the emergence of something that can be termed a 'European culture' proposes a very similar argument. Such 'culture' emerged, Morin argues, from Europe's 'permanent dialogical simmer'; from 'the infinity of 'dialogical instances' between faith, reason, doubt, empiricism, from the Renaissance to the present'. And what marks the 'originality' of European culture, he notes, is precisely this endless dialogical relation:

all attempts at [establishing] foundational 'truths' are followed by radical contestation. ... From the 15th century on, [that is, from the loss of the pre-modern foundational truths], what grants [European] history any sort of 'unity' [is] precisely a search for new foundations—and their subsequent problematisation through endless new theological, philosophical, theoretical and moral responses. (Morin 1990: 93)

Morin calls this 'the foundation without a foundation of European culture' (1990: 93): always questioned, forever un-accomplished, but for that no less powerful. 'There are instances of dialogue in all cultures', Morin writes, but this 'dialogical relation' in most cultures

has been more or less delimited by a band of dogmas and prohibitions; it has been restrained, dampened. The specificity of European culture is, above all, the continuity and concentration of its dialogic, where no one of its constitutive instances ever fully erases or exterminates the others; ever exerts hegemony for long ... European culture does not only have 'guiding ideas' (Christianity, Humanism, Reason, the scientific method etc.): it has these ideas and their opposites. The 'European genius' lies not only in plurality and change, but rather in the dialogue of pluralities which produce an endless process of change. (Morin 1990: 148–149)

Morin sees the figure of the so-called 'European intellectual' (from the 'men of culture' of the seventeenth/eighteenth century to the 'public intellectuals' of the twentieth) as key in maintaining and diffusing this 'virus of uncertainty' (Morin 1990: 143)—'not only in [European] opinions and ideas but also—and above all—in the very process of generation of [European] opinions and ideas'. What 'makes Europe', for Morin, is precisely this sort of 'generalised problematisation': the awareness that 'the problem of History cannot be resolved. It must remain' (Morin 1990: 155, citing Czech philosopher Jan Patočka 1982).<sup>11</sup>

What does this mean? Bauman suggests that 'the outcome is that we, the Europeans, are perhaps the sole people who (as historical subjects and actors of culture) have *no identity*—fixed identity, or an identity deemed and believed to be fixed: 'we do not know who we are', and even less do we know what we can yet become and what we can yet learn that we are. The urge to *know* and/or to *become* what we are never subsides, and neither is the suspicion ever dispelled about what we may yet become following that urge. Europe's culture is one that knows no rest; it is a culture that feeds on questioning the order of things—and on questioning the fact of questioning it' (Bauman 2004: 12). And such an aware, self-conscious and self-constituting identity is indeed very different from national-territorial 'cultures'/identities:

another kind of culture, a silent culture, a culture un-aware of being a culture, a culture that keeps the knowledge of being a culture a secret, a culture working anonymously or under an assumed name, a culture stoutly denying its human origins and hiding behind the majestic edifice of a divine decree and heavenly tribunal, or signing an unconditional surrender to intractable and inscrutable 'laws of history'. (Bauman 2004: 12)



## Accidental Europeans

Jorge Luis Borges, one of the most eminent among the great Europeans in every except the geographical sense, wrote of the ‘perplexity’ that cannot but arise whenever the ‘absurd accidentality’ of an identity tied down to a particular space and time is pondered, and so its closeness to a fiction rather than to anything we think of as ‘reality’ is inevitably revealed. This may well be a universal feature of all identities ... but in the case of ‘European identity’ that feature, that ‘absurd accidentality’, is perhaps more blatant and perplexing than most. (Bauman 2004: 5)

Trieste, just like Europe, has been shaped not (only) by accident, of course: just like Europe it bears the mark of the political and (geo)political choices of various States and Empires who happened to lay claim to it at a particular moment in time; we could say, indeed, that the city is in many ways the conscious creation of the Habsburg Empire-State. But the utility of the metaphor of ‘accidentality’ is another: it reminds us that something else ‘could (also) have been’; it allows us to unpack the inevitability of certain territorial definitions; it allows us to escape in part the methodological nationalism that still binds our understandings of cities like Trieste—and of Europe.

The Triestini, to some accounts, are quite aware of that: in Hertmans’ eyes

perhaps that is why they are such self-conscious Italians: they look from a distance towards the country that binds them, the culture for which they finally opted after separation from the Habsburg Empire—as if sitting on a distant bench, where they are happier than the throng on the noisy square of the nation itself ... This also makes Triestini different. It is obvious that they are staunch nationalists—the city has fought hard enough to be able to be a part of Italy. (2001: 43)

Theirs is, however, always a self-aware nationalism, a conscious choice: expressed, as Hertmans (2001: 48) argues (citing Ara and Magris 1982) ‘through the negation of a traditional [territorial] identity’.

Can we think of cities like Trieste as ‘laborator[ies] of a non-territorial citizenship’, as Minca (2009a) asks in the closing paragraph of his paper? Can the experience of such cities perhaps allow us to rethink the spatial and scalar constitution of ‘cosmopolitan collectivities’, as Waley (2009) suggests? In Hertmans’ eyes, Trieste’s ‘self-aware identity’ does indeed hold the emancipatory potential of what he terms ‘cosmopolitical’ cities<sup>12</sup>: cities that can ‘rise above nation-states ... in a new sense of the word *free cities* where hospitality and sanctuary are concerned’ (Derrida 1996, cited in Hertmans 2001: 12). The mark of such cities, Hertmans argues, is precisely the sort of

urban self-consciousness [visible in Trieste]; invariably characterised by a complete absence of ‘fundamentalist’ ideas about enrootedness, native soil or origin. The self-realisation of individuals in [such] cities does not take place according to traditional values, but through a [shared] emancipatory struggle for freedom. (2001: 11)<sup>13</sup>

How such ‘shared emancipatory struggle’ can/will be expressed in today’s Europe is an open question. In the case of Trieste, beyond the nostalgic celebrations of the city’s supposed ‘diversity’ in fictional accounts and in municipal place-marketing rhetoric, the past several years have witnessed some very real stirrings of change, some quite concrete attempts at formulating alternative spatial imaginaries. The project for a new ‘Euroregion’ that should have Trieste as its ‘capital’ is, for one, a novel attempt at decoupling citizenship from (national) territory. This project will place

Trieste at the centre of a new administrative entity that will not only take in border areas in Italy and Slovenia, but also territories in neighbouring Austria and Croatia, creating a ‘community’ based not on territorial contiguity but on the presumed will to be part of a common political and economic project. What makes this project even more interesting from a geographical point of view is that beyond the usual variety of economic and cultural exchanges that characterise similar initiatives elsewhere across Europe (see, for instance, Kramsch 2003), the new Euroregion aims to create also a *common political and social space*, including cross-border forms of political representation and a joint health care provision system<sup>14</sup>; something quite striking for a borderland that only slightly more than a decade ago was considered the ‘last outpost of Europe’ and a key frontier in the struggle against the ‘Communist Other’—in rhetoric, at least.

I say this because the reality of the border here was always much more complicated than Cold War rhetoric would allow, and the supposed Iron Curtain much more porous (see Ballinger 2003; Cataruzza 2007; Pupo 2005; Rossi 2005). In the everyday reality of the Triestini, the world across the border may have been the fundamental ‘Other’ against which they defined themselves, but it was also an ‘Other’ with whom they had constant—often daily—contact, part of the ‘micropolitics of everyday social contact and encounter’, to use Amin’s (2002) characterisation. Indeed, when the border posts were definitively removed to great fanfare on 20 December 2007, Triestino writer and journalist Paolo Rumiz (2007: 2) noted (in words very similar to Bauman’s) that whilst not wishing to take away from the enormous symbolic value of the event, the opening of the border meant, more than anything, that ‘really-existing Europe had finally caught up with what had been

happening here for decades’. The dissolution of the border and the plans for the new Euroregion were simply, he argued, a (somewhat delayed) recognition of the ‘countless everyday practices of “spontaneous diplomacy” and (often conflictual) exchange’ that, literally, ‘made up’ the city and its border; to use Morin’s expression, its ‘permanent dialogical simmer’ that never allowed identities on both sides of the border to ossify completely.

How Trieste and its borderland will be transformed in the years to come by the new geographies of Schengen is an open question, but perhaps the city can still teach us a thing or two about dealing with diversity and difference—and about the meaning of Europe.

[and] it is a great place for contemplative escape anyway, a great place for sitting on quaysides in the sunshine, thinking about history and toying with the idea of writing essays. (Morris 2006: 7)

## Notes

- 1 For a consideration of the geographical imaginations that framed the Cold War see Campbell (1992) and O’Tuathail (1996); for the specific case of Trieste, Ballinger (1999, 2003) and De Castro (1981).
- 2 For a discussion of these three interlocking dimensions, see also Ara and Magris (1982), Ballinger (2003) and Valdevit (2004).
- 3 On the reworking of the Italian–Slovenian border and changing border identities see Minnich (2006) and Sedmak, Mikolic and Furlan (2006); also Favretto (2004), Janschitz and Kofler (2004), and Kaplan (2001).
- 4 We could go even further back in time to make this argument: Minca’s (2009a) paper in this issue notes, indeed, some of the ways in which the city embodied many of the key crises of European modernity, from the 1700s on.
- 5 For a review of some of these debates, see Painter (2002), Rumford (2007), Soysal (1997) and Wiener (1997).
- 6 For a critical reading of Trieste’s role as a ‘multi-national port city’, see the paper by Purvis (2009) in this issue. On the place of Trieste during the Cold War

- years, see Hametz (2005), Rabel (1988) and Sluga (2001); Ballinger (1999) provides a perceptive critique.
- 7 Geographers have much to learn from Morin for his work *Penser l'Europe* offers a masterful 'critical mapping' of the European idea. Although commonly considered a philosopher and sociologist, Morin comes in fact from a background in History and Geography studies at the Sorbonne, and was Henri Lefebvre's replacement at Nanterre in the late 1960s.
  - 8 Morin has been one of the key thinkers in complexity theory (see, especially, his six-volume work *La Méthode*, published in the 1980s, and recently re-issued) and has inspired numerous contemporary French theorists (including Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard).
  - 9 This criticism colours much popular—but also academic—critique of the 'weakness' of the European project: see, among others, the arguments made by Siedentop (2001). For a more thorough consideration of the discursive construction of a 'weak' and 'indeterminate' Europe, see Bialasiewicz (2008).
  - 10 For a deeper consideration of the 'self-awareness' of 'European culture', see Cacciari (2006) and De Vitiis (2006) in the edited volume *Filosofi per l'Europa: Differenze in Dialogo*.
  - 11 Other writers have similarly characterised 'European culture' as a 'culture of uncertainty': Eduardo Lourenco (1991) writes of 'European culture' as being marked by 'restlessness, anguish and self-doubt', as a culture that 'stands in defiance against any and all figures of certainty'; Derrida (1991) makes a similar argument in *L'autre cap*.
  - 12 It is important to note that Hertmans does not speak of 'cosmopolitan cities' but 'cosmopolitical cities', drawing on the terminology (and understanding) of Jacques Derrida (1996, 2001; see also Derrida and Roudinesco 2003).
  - 13 It is not possible to write of Triestino 'cosmopolitanism' (both real and mythologised) without recognising the important role of the Jewish presence in the city (and its continuing echoes today): I do not have space to give this question proper attention here, but any discussion of the distinct Triestino 'way of being', of its distinct non-national, non-territorial way of conceiving urban politics, must take into account the role of the city's Jewish economic, political and cultural elite, and the role of leading Jewish thinkers (see, among others, the work of Dubin 1999). Morris (2001: 93) herself devotes one chapter of her book on Trieste to the 'ghosts' of Trieste's Jewish community 'those supra-national, extra-territorial citizens of the

world [whose] spirit [remains], diffused but inherent, like a gene in the chromosome, [and] makes me think of Trieste as a Jewish city still'.

- 14 For details, see <http://www.euroregione.fvg.it>.

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### Abstract translations

#### *Europe est/à la frontière: Trieste et le sens de l'Europe*

Dans cet article, j'essaie d'«imaginer Europe» à travers une ville cosmopolite comme Trieste, et son passé plus ou moins récent. Mon argument repose sur l'analyse de deux «mythes» répondus qui je l'affirme, limitent la compréhension de l'Europe et du projet européen actuel: (1) le «mythe de la diversité»; et (2) le «mythe d'une identité en crise». En faisant cela, je me fie en grande partie au travail du sociologue et philosophe français Edgar Morin et sa conception d'une identité européenne comme négociation permanente de différence; ce que Morin (1990) a nommé «un tourbillon dialogique permanent». En se basant sur la généalogie critiquée d'identité européenne de Morin, j'essaie d'envisager certaines des manières dont on peut transcender les compréhensions territoriales d'identité et de citoyenneté, en utilisant l'histoire de Trieste comme miroir de la condition européenne générale.

**Mots-clefs:** Europe, villes européens, cosmopolitisme, frontières, Trieste.

*Europa com/en la frontera: Trieste y el significado de Europa*

En este papel, intento ‘pensar Europa’ a través de una ciudad cosmopolita como Trieste, y su pasado reciente y no tan reciente. Expongo mi argumento por un análisis de dos ‘mitos’ poderosos que, discuto, limita los entendimientos de Europa y el proyecto Europeo hoy: (1) el ‘mito de diversidad’; y (2) el ‘mito de una identidad en crisis’. De esa forma, utilizo el trabajo del

sociólogo y filósofo francés Edgar Morin y su conceptualización de la identidad Europea como una negociación de diferencia; lo que Morin (1990) se califica ‘un dialogo permanentemente a fuego lento’. Empezando con la genealogía crítica de identidad Europea de Morin, intento considerar algunas maneras del cual podemos superar los entendimientos territorios de identidad y ciudadanía, incorporando la experiencia de Trieste como un espejo de la condición más amplia de Europa.

**Palabras claves:** Europa, ciudades Europeas, cosmopolitanidad, fronteras, Trieste.