New European citizens? The Erasmus generation between awareness and scepticism

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Abstract - A recurring criticism of the European Union is that it focuses mainly on political and economic factors while neglecting the development of a common European culture and sense of European citizenship. However we can find signs of cultural transformation in the way that Europeans use their borders as a physical, social and symbolic space. Usually nowadays, the term “frontier” is replaced by “boundary” as an elastic and extendible meeting space. The aim of this paper is to analyse the relationship between the concepts of boundaries, mobility and integration and the notions of European identity and citizenship. To understand the meaning these concepts have for people who live in the trans-national European dimension, opinions of Italian and foreign students who took part in the Erasmus exchange programme were gathered. The in-depth interviews were focused on the meanings, the expectations and the real experiences that the concept of European citizenship presents for Erasmus students and also whether European citizenship really exists for them. The opinions of the respondents helped highlight the symbolic potential for European citizenship rights to serve as a vehicle of new integration strategies. The way Erasmus students reinterpret the concept of European citizenship and how its symbolic potential could help the European integration process was also analysed.

Keywords – European citizenship, integration, mobility, boundaries, identity.

1. Introduction

Among its various consequences, the introduction of European citizenship has produced three useful effects to highlight in this analysis. Firstly it has redeﬁned and reshaped the concept of “foreign” with regard to the citizens of the European Union (EU) (Carens, 1987; Triggiani, 2006: 438). Secondly, it has eliminated the association between citizenship and nationality caused by the fact that rights of citizenship could only be recognized within nation states (Barber, 2002; Bulvinaite, 2003). This has led to a third interesting consequence: European citizenship is a set of rights that transcend the borders of the nation state and include the right to circulate freely, promoting the extension of what Green calls “the sense of home space from national to continental boundaries” (Green, 2007: 48). Nevertheless the expansion of territorial boundaries within which the same rights are guaranteed does not necessarily imply the extension of a sense of belonging to a supranational reality and as a consequence the affirmation of European identity. Therefore the relationship that links the concepts of boundaries, mobility, integration, identity and European citizenship must be researched within the context of this enlargement of the “home space” outside of national boundaries.

The free circulation of citizens, which evolved into a right of European citizenship, has in fact encouraged the emergence of forms of mobility that are less structured than tourism or migration (Urry, 2007; Favell and Recchi, 2011; Recchi, 2013). These forms of mobility have fostered a sense of familiarity with moving between cultures and boundaries of a transnational reality, like that of Europe. For the EU, therefore, recognising the rights of those who move and in fact “live” between borders represents an important tool for encouraging integration.

Those who benefit the most from these developments, which evolved into a right of European citizenship, has in fact encouraged the emergence of forms of mobility that are less structured than tourism or migration (Urry, 2007; Favell and Recchi, 2011; Recchi, 2013). These forms of mobility have fostered a sense of familiarity with moving between cultures and boundaries of a transnational reality, like that of Europe. For the EU, therefore, recognising the rights of those who move and in fact “live” between borders represents an important tool for encouraging integration.

Those who benefit the most from these developments are the so-called “new Europeans” (Eurobarometer, 2011) or “mobile Europeans”. Many studies use these terms to describe a privileged minority making up only about 2-3 percent of Europeans, which are nevertheless a valid group (Rogers & Scannel, 2005; Recchi & Favell, 2009; Rother & Nebe, 2009). Beyond this experience of flexible mobility there are also forms that are more structured and in some ways more “protected” because they have a limited time frame and are planned within programmes recognised and supported by the EU and educational institutions, such as the Erasmus, Leonardo and Socrates programmes. These exchanges are an opportunity to experience living like the “new Europeans” or “mobile Europeans” for young generations who are expected to develop a sense of belonging and a natural tendency towards integration, aside from benefiting from the rights connected to European citizenship (Maas, 2007).

2. The cultural dimension of European identity and European citizenship

Several studies in different disciplines have focused on the impact of the Erasmus programme on the education and development of young people (EU, 1987a, 1987b, 1997, 1998). Nevertheless, as Wilson (2011) underlines, it is not easy to measure the impact and efﬁciency of this programme because over the years the aims of the EU has hoped to achieve through it have changed repeatedly (Papatitsa, 2006). Beyond the purely educational goals of the programme, European institutions have started to pay close attention to the secondary ad cultural consequences that it can generate to construct a sense of communal belonging (Figel, 2006; Figel, 2007). These have included the idea that the Erasmus programme could represent a “civic experience” (Papatitsa, 2006; Mitchell, 2012; Karolewski and Kaina, 2012). As asserted by Mitchell (2012), “The idea is that intermixing students of different nationalities (Erasmus programme) instils or enhance a sense of European identity among participants and serve as a path to creating truly European citizens” (Mitchell, 2012: 491) aimed at forging a European consciousness.

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Other studies have therefore sought to examine the influence of the Erasmus programme on the development or reinforcement of the sense of belonging and of European identity. On this specific aspect some controversial positions have emerged. The positions of Wilson (2011) and Sigalas (2010) are particularly critical. Both are based on studies arguing that international mobility between different member states is important because it reinforces the “we-feeling” and fosters integration processes in which individuals stop perceiving themselves according to where they are from, like as an Italian, or a French person, but start to see themselves as belonging to the same community. (Deutsch, 1953; Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Fliqgstein, 2008). This position is confirmed in other research (ESN, 2007; Eurobarometer 2008) showing that Erasmus students tend to be particularly pro-European. Nevertheless, this “we-feeling” is not necessarily going to lead to the formation of a civic consciousness that defines the feeling of being a European citizen. According to Wilson (2011), if Erasmus students appear in research as more pro-European it is because they already had a favourable view of Europe when they decided to take part in the programme. If this is not the case, in fact, during their time abroad one would have to see a strengthening of their pro-European stance. Sigalas (2010) follows the same line, studying the impact of the Erasmus programme on the students’ sense of European identity and showing how socialising with other Europeans can have a positive, yet modest, effect on European identity.

In other cases, problems coexisting with other foreigners can even be counterproductive for European identity, because contact with other foreigners is often of a superficial nature, while it is much more probable that students develop deeper relationships and quality dialogue with people from their own nation. However Sigalas and other authors have above all had to deal with the different meanings that European identity can have as a multilayered concept. Sigalas cites the distinction between political identity and social identity. The first indicates an identity shared by members of a political collective that provides a government with sufficient public support to ensure its stability (Easton, 1965). Social identity is on the other hand a part of oneself and derives from feeling part of a group, and attributing value and emotional significance to that belonging (Tajfel, 1978). It is from this premise that Sigalas studies European identity starting from the proximity of Europe for Erasmus students, understood as the traits they perceive as shared by Europeans.

If we deviate from identity in a strictly political sense, some authors emerge with positions that are less critical than the previous and that are useful for the aims of this study, such as those of Van Mol (2013) and Bruter (2004, 2005). Van Mol underlines that it is necessary to also consider social European identity. The mobile student’s interpretation of Europe is multi-layered, therefore one should not overlap European identity and identifying with the EU. The fact of becoming part of a new network and the fact of seeing oneself classified by others can help structure identification with Europe, keeping in mind that at the end of the experience abroad the young people have re-appropriated Europe as their own personal project in which the social dimension prevails over the political. Bruter (2004) poses an interesting question in his qualitative investigation of the significance subjects give to being or not being European when they claim to feel so. In a previous study (Bruter, 2003), the author explains how it is necessary to distinguish two aspects of the political identity of a population, the civic and the cultural. The first implies identification with a political structure, the state, which is the combination of institutions, norms and rights. The second implies a sense of belonging to a group or a community of reference. Therefore a European identity in the political (civic) sense should be based on the link existing between the individuals and the EU.

Cultural identity leads instead to recognising shared traits even before the differences that exist within a group. According to Bruter (2004), European citizens responding to the question whether they feel European or not refer to a concept of identity that depends a lot on the image they have of Europe. In his study civic identity prevails over cultural identity. In fact, while the first is connected to the image of Europe as the absence of borders, free movement of citizens, a shared civic area, policies and prosperity, the second, noted less by his respondents, is related to the image of Europe that evokes ideas of peace, harmony, the overcoming of divisions between peoples and cooperation. Following the same line, Oscar Fernández (2005) focuses on the relationship between the Erasmus programme and the European citizenship using qualitative methods to understand the idea university students have of the concept of European citizenship. For Fernandez the concept should be understood also as a social practice based on how we structure our sense of belonging; according to differences with others, through conflict, negotiations and the relationship between individuals and their context of belonging.

The concept of European citizenship is characterised by cultural differences. In fact, Fernandez explains that cultural diversity is a fundamental element of European identity. The perspective of Bruter (2004) and Fernández is interesting for the aims of the present study, not only because it is focused on the theme of citizenship, but above all because it is based on qualitative methodologies. It therefore allows us to extend European citizenship to a series of symbolic references that the concept assumes for respondents that normally are difficult to grasp through analysis of wider and more representative samples. Secondly, as argued by Fernández and as the analysis of the interviews show, the recognition of reciprocal cultural differences plays a key role in the definition of belonging to Europe and what it means to be a European citizen.

We therefore need to understand whether and to what extent students that took part in the Erasmus programme can constitute a “civic resource” for European integration as Mitchell (2012) argues.

The hypothesis this pilot study aims to demonstrate is that an experience of mobility like that of the Erasmus programme contributes to extending the sense of “home space”, redefining the sense of boundaries (Green, 2007). It also fosters forms of integration based on acquiring a cultural model that makes Erasmus students capable of relating to difference, an integral part of European culture. The Erasmus experience, in fact, redefines the borders of the in-group and the out-group. As a consequence it creates a condition of territorial, cultural and identity suspension, making it necessary to relate not just to the cultural system of the host country but with all the cultural systems they come into contact with when meeting other Erasmus students. As the interviews highlight, integration does not derive from the removal of reciprocal differences, but from the capacity to recognise them and adapt oneself. It is from this new set of competencies that Erasmus students start redefining their identity and constructing or questioning the idea of European citizenship (Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013).
3. Methodology

The results presented below are based on a pilot study involving 30 in-depth interviews of Erasmus students from three groups made up of both Italians and foreigners, who took part in the programme over different periods of time.

Erasmus students represent a privileged group in the sense that they experiment with and benefit from one of the fundamental rights foreseen by European citizenship: the right to move and reside freely within the EU.

Selection of students to interview was based on two criteria: their geographic origin and the amount of time passed since the Erasmus experience took place.

In terms of geographic origin, half of the respondents were Italian, and half held other nationalities (Spanish, German, Slovenian, Greek, French). In terms of the time periods, three groups of ten students were formed. The first group was composed of “old” Erasmus students that went through the experience between 1990 and 2004, the second group included students that had the experience a year ago, and the third was composed of students who were abroad on the scheme at the time of interview.

This study has three elements that differentiate it from the studies and research papers cited above:

Firstly a conscious choice was made to not use a panel study with longitudinal analysis. This allowed a wider time frame to be considered that also included students for whom the Erasmus experience was something new. The aim was to understand if and how this experience influenced the redefinition of their relationship with Europe and the formation of a particular image of a European citizen. Furthermore this made it possible to gather whether and by how much their views differed from those of subjects who had the time to digest their experiences and apply them in their daily lives once back in their own countries, or of students that at the moment of interview were facing the difficulties and opportunities presented by the Erasmus programme.

Secondly, and in contrast to the studies and research cited above, a decision was made to not concentrate the interviews on homogenous groups based on origin (the studies of Sigalas (2010) were focused particularly on British students, while those of Van Mol (2013) and Wilson (2011) on three or four specific nationalities). On the contrary each group of respondents was composed of five Italians and five foreigners, all from different areas. Interviewing a higher number of Italians as opposed to foreigners was useful to gather whether being Italian is a factor that affects the formation of a certain idea of European citizenship.

Finally, the use of an exclusively qualitative approach compared to the large part of the research that focuses on the theme made it possible to overcome the pro-European/anti-European dualism of respondents, and to explore the idea of Europe and of European citizenship that emerged from their experience independently from students’ level of affection or disaffection towards the EU.

Among the themes discussed in the interviews, some were aimed at deepening:

- If and how much this experience modified the idea respondents have of Europe and if this idea relates to the EU or to the European peoples and cultures.
- What idea of European citizenship emerges from the words of respondents (is it of a political, social or cultural nature and do the views of Italian students have some specific traits compared to those of foreign students?)
- If in their view a European citizen exists, what characteristics does he/she have and how did the Erasmus experience help form their idea of European citizenship.
- If they perceive themselves as European citizens and why. If not, what is preventing them from doing so.

4. Outcomes emerging from the opinions of Erasmus students and discussion

It was interesting to investigate whether students’ ideas of Europe changed after their Erasmus experience. This question made it possible to assess above all whether respondents referred to the EU or a “Europe of cultures”.

For some of the “old” generation of Italian Erasmus students, the experience confirmed the idea they already had of Europe as a vision of a future to head towards. The programme helped others in this group even form an idea of Europe that was previously non-existent, awakening their interest in what happens outside their national boundaries using also information channels. The Italians therefore emphasised the cultural dimension of Europe, looking at some European countries as models Italy can aspire to if it wants to create greater possibilities for development. The position of the foreign students in this group differed. In their interviews they referred more to the EU than a Europe of peoples and cultures. In general the foreign students expressed strong scepticism of a political Europe. Their Erasmus experience helped their understanding of a cultural Europe, teaching them how to handle differences that, nevertheless, according to many of the students, will make it difficult to solidify the European political project. So while institutional Europe is perceived as distant, the Europe of citizens seems like it is always getting closer. In this case a perceived sense of belonging develops into citizenship in the cultural sense of the term.

The Italian Erasmus students that completed this experience a year ago found that their image of Europe changed substantially. The experience redefined their perception of boundaries leading to the extension of the sense of “home space” (Green, 2007). As mentioned by some respondents: “Europe definitely seemed “smaller” to me after this experience” (Valerio, Italian), “I believe nowadays Europe for me is just an extension of Italy, not something alien to it, and therefore I would consider it my home” (Mariangela, Italian). But this image of a more familiar Europe was anything but romantic, with many students alert to factors that may hinder full integration, such as the lack of a common language and political system of reference accepted by all the countries, and cultural differences that, though a source of richness, are significant. The foreigners in this group also shared the idea that the Europe of cultures is close to integration thanks to the ease of mobility which makes the different countries seem like regions in a single nation. However many felt that additional efforts were necessary to fully realise the European political project.
The respondents that were in the middle of the Erasmus experience, along with the previous group, appeared much more socialised in Europe compared to the “old” Erasmus group. In fact, many of them said they had links with the European sphere before their Erasmus experience thanks to periods of study abroad through other projects. Nevertheless, respondents in this group did not refer to the complete set of countries and cultures when talking about Europe but defined their own idea of Europe based on the specific country they were staying in. Therefore the opportunities and the negative aspects Italians in this group associated with Europe were affected by how they were welcomed or the difficulties they faced in their specific context.

Foreign students on the Erasmus exchange scheme saw it as an experience that provides cultural models that allow participants to relate to difference, a similar view to those in previous groups. Scepticism remained strong towards a political and institutional Europe that would be able to create a union. This set of foreign students viewed this development as unrealistic or potentially a cover for concealing economic interests.

Respondents were asked to describe who the “European citizen” is and comment on whether they think this citizen exists. According to the “old” Italian Erasmus students the European citizen is above all someone who is able to view their own country in a new light by putting it into perspective alongside the others. Many described this “citizen” as “an open person” or someone who is “able to look past his or her own borders”. Even though the importance of mobility came up often in interviews, respondents believed that this openness does not depend on travelling a lot but on developing a curiosity towards what is happening outside one’s own national borders. Although some clear ideas emerged on the characteristics the European citizen should have, respondents were sceptical about whether this citizen exists due to deeply rooted national traditions.

Points of disillusion were more noticeable among the “old” foreign Erasmus students. Their opinions were divided between those who, in terms of the existence of a European citizen, believed that “maybe only Eurocrats in Brussels still have this illusion” (Blaz, Slovenian) and those who believed that the Erasmus experience is an important step for the development of European citizens. In their view the European citizen coincides with the image of a cosmopolitan person who lives their life across borders. Also in this case when respondents spoke of European citizenship it was exclusively on a cultural level and not political.

The position of the Italians who finished the Erasmus programme a year ago was quite clear. Those who were sceptical of the existence of a European citizen were thinking of citizenship in political terms. These respondents saw major barriers in the absence of linguistic unity and in the divergence between national and European politics. This position, expressed more openly by male respondents, contrasted with the enthusiasm of those who believe they embody the image of a European citizen. This citizen is again a subject that does not necessarily have to travel but has a vision of the world that leads them to find “their piece of Europe in every thing that they do or wherever they are” (Angela, Italian). European citizenship was described as a cultural model that involves learning and relating to different cultures and not in searching for similarities. Foreign students in this group were able to express the difference between European citizenship in the cultural sense and in the political sense in a clearer way, explaining that the first exists as a fact, while it is more difficult to speak of the second because of a series of obstacles that prevent the two statuses developing at the same speed.

The image of the European citizen held by Italian students who were still taking part in the Erasmus programme was much more abstract. They spoke of this citizen in the third person as a holder of rights that are valid in any EU country. The image of the European citizen described by foreign students on the scheme was more idealised. They referred to an image of a citizen who is active politically and socially for a collective good at the European level.

According to the majority of respondents, the Erasmus experience helped them form their idea of the European citizen by opening their minds and providing an opportunity to discover how different nationalities face and resolve the same types of problems, how they are able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the EU, and what sort of attention different countries reserve for their own citizens. This, in their view, can help to form a common European consciousness. This position was shared by all the Italian respondents. Positions of strong scepticism emerged among the foreign students, some of whom were convinced that European citizenship is not possible due to the cultural and linguistic diversity and political fragmentation which cannot be overcome through the Erasmus programme. These positions were balanced by those who said that the Erasmus programme provided them with the mental openness that led them to feel closer to Europe than they thought they were before.

Finally respondents were asked whether they see themselves as European citizens. The Italians from the “old” Erasmus generation said they felt like European citizens because they recognised similar historical roots and a shared culture and way of life. Self-perception as citizens in the political sense appeared more distant. Despite this, the Erasmus experience sparked curiosity to understand the way Europe really functions in more depth.

Once again foreigners from the “old” generation came across as more critical than Italians. They recognised that being able to move freely from one country to the next is an important indicator that European citizenship exists. However they saw this as insufficient to overcome divisions that exist, especially in a period of economic crisis, and that impede the ability to think of a homogenous and united citizenship. It is interesting to note that foreigners almost always referenced citizenship in a political sense in their interviews (even when they denied its existence), referring to the common currency, economic policies and the Schengen agreement. The Italians, on the other hand, still adhere to the cultural meaning of citizenship, recalling the common roots of the different nationalities of the old continent.

For the Italians that took part in the Erasmus programme a year ago, feeling like a European citizen was equivalent to being able to distance oneself from a provincial approach to life, having learnt to relate to foreigners. In contrast to the “old” Italian Erasmus students, there was more scepticism among those that took part a year ago who claimed to feel predominantly Italian.

Foreigners that finished the programme a year ago took a more proactive approach, viewing the Erasmus exchange as an experience that generated curiosity and met their need to meet and compare themselves to other foreign people. Curiosity towards difference developed to such an extent that they could no longer do without it. Like foreigners in the previous group, this set of respondents often referred to citizenship in the political sense and claimed to feel like European citizens because they can vote in the European parliament, use the same currency, move around without needing a visa,
and benefit from student grants.

For Italians that were in the middle of the Erasmus experience, feeling like a European citizen coincided with no longer feeling like a tourist in a foreign country. Instead they felt like someone living and studying in a different country who had managed to settle there, albeit with difficulty in some cases. Responses from Italians in this group suggested that for them integration and citizenship are terms that can be used synonymously. What made them feel like a European citizen was the ability to settle in a context different from one’s own. Once again foreign students were more sceptical, still feeling more like citizens of their own country. This was above all because they did not see themselves as active citizens, referring to citizenship more in the political than the cultural sense. Those who felt like European citizens were by virtue of the extension of that “home space” cited by Green (2007) that led them to feel at ease in a multicultural environment.

The results that have emerged from this pilot study show how the theme of European citizenship merits an examination from the qualitative perspective. The opinions of the respondents have allowed us to go beyond studying affection or disaffection for the EU and the feeling of being or not being a European citizen. They have made it possible to explore the different meanings and the strong symbolic value that the theme of European citizenship has for young people who have had this experience of mobility. In future research it would be useful to increase the number of respondents and include a larger number of Erasmus students from countries that joined the EU in the most recent enlargement. That would help gather the similarities and differences between “old” and “new” European citizens.

5. Conclusion

These Regarding the questions we began with, the Erasmus experience of mobility, while limited, helps to redefine perceptions of boundaries which become less defined and, in some cases, become too narrow for the participants in the programme. The culture of mobility therefore appears to be a key element for European integration based on the attainment of new cultural models that make Erasmus students capable of relating to several cultural systems.

During this study we asked if students that have taken part in the Erasmus programme can constitute a “civic resource” (Mitchell, 2012) for the EU and for European integration. Based on the responses we can say they undoubtedly represent a civic resource for European integration because they have learnt to relate to cultural diversity. Problems arise when considering the Erasmus generation as a civic resource for the EU, while they represent a major civic resource for the Europe of peoples and cultures. The relationship with institutions once again emerges as weak. When defining the concept of citizenship, for respondents the cultural dimension prevails over the political, around which there is a lot of scepticism.

The idea that emerges from the interviews is that the more citizenship in the cultural sense is active, the less any democratic deficit is tolerated.

Overall, according to respondents, European citizenship is possible, though still not completely formed. A paradox emerges: as opposed to the fears of many, the formation of European citizenship of a cultural kind is a bottom-up process that involves EU institutions very little. It is developing due to the mobility that has increased the opportunities to meet different people and a bigger interest in diversity. Respondents rarely linked the advantages of mobility back to the intervention of European institutions, as if the formation of European citizenship could be achieved without the political and institutional side of Europe.

Respondents’ statements suggested some guidelines on what Europe can do to improve relations with its citizens. Defending the culture and economy of the continent against the influence of other countries such as the United States and China, and making more effort in the political and economic spheres to reduce economic and social differences between member states, were among the suggestions.

Finally, regarding the impact of being Italian on the definition of European citizenship, the Italian respondents, in several cases, saw their European identity prevailing over their Italian identity. This is probably related to reduced faith in Italian national institutions due to their handling of the economic crisis. The EU is seen as providing opportunities to improve and to recover, as well as a reality which is more capable of reflecting the ideals of growth and development of young generations.

To conclude, a culture of mobility appears to be not only an instrument for integration and construction of European citizenship, but above all a tool that is capable, with time, of overcoming the gap between citizenship in the cultural and civic sense. The image that emerges for now is not quite that of citizenship, but of a European humanism that helps lead to points of agreement between people, recognising cultural differences without the illusion of being able to bypass them.

6. References


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