Identity, Space and Politics:
The Europeanization Process Between
Necessity and Personal Choice.
A case study of the Danish and
the Italian Customs Administration

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Abstract

On the 1st of January 1993 the territory covered by the European Union member states became the Single European Market (SEM). The political and economic implications of this transformation have been analyzed by many political scientists and economists. Sociologists have been much less interested in the matter, probably because it looks like an exclusively ‘technical’ one. However, such a ‘technical’ matter has also had deep social consequences. From its early beginning the professional category of the customs officials, for example, has been influenced very strongly by the European integration process. Nonetheless, the transformation of the customs official’s occupational role from a purely national to a supranational one has not been automatic. It has gone through a long process of redefinition, which faced the resistance of the officials and of the institutions they belong to. During the study an international comparison between two very different cases: Italy and Denmark, has been carried out. The objective was to collect the broadest possible pattern of reactions, with the aim of understanding the dynamics that can lead to the redefinition of personal affiliations and allegiances. Through the professional role, in fact, actors define their personal identity. An important change in such a central role provokes a general readjustment of all their attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, it forces them to redefine the meaning they attribute to different socio-territorial entities such as the nation-state or the European Union.

To conclude the presentation of the research and on the basis of its findings, some general hypothesis about how a personal identification with the European Union could emerge in broader parts of the national societies will be formulated.
Introduction
What is commonly called ‘Europeanization’ or the ‘Europeanization process’ is a complex phenomenon that can be seen as composed of two main aspects: an institutional or objective one, related to the creation of common organizations and structures, and a socio-cultural, or subjective one, which concerns the emergence of a sense of community among the citizens of the European Union’s Member States, often defined as a ‘European Identity’. These two aspects are normally considered separately by authors whose main interests lie in different disciplines: political scientists and law scholars are mainly concerned with the first; anthropologists, sociologists and cultural scientists with the latter. Nonetheless, they are both deeply connected and need to be analyzed together for the dynamics of the Europeanization process to be fully grasped in all their practical and theoretical implications.

The study presented here represents an attempt to integrate the two perspectives utilizing a classical sociological tool: the concept of social role. The aim of the study is to investigate empirically if and how a ‘European Identity’ could emerge in some sectors of the society as a direct and indirect effect of the institutional Europeanization process. This is interesting, partly because it shows how role changes take pace, and partly because the identification with Europe might spread from these sectors to other parts of the society.

In the attempt to achieve efficient and effective common institutions, more and more ordinary national employees and citizens are involved in what can be defined as, in Turner’s (1990) terms, a role change. This role change implies the assumption from the side of the employees of new attitudes and behaviors, which are likely to pervade their whole personality, modifying their system of identifications, affiliations and loyalties or, in other words, their personal identity. Actors are, however, not simply ‘victims’ of events out of their control. They take an active part in the change, negotiating their roles in the interaction process (Bennis, Benne, Chin 1970; Graversen 1998: 395).

In the following pages, I will illustrate and discuss the results of an empirical investigation into two national cases, Italy and
Denmark. The investigation has focused on an occupational category, the customs officials, because of its interesting relation with the main actor of the Europeanization process, namely the nation-state.

**Research Methodology and Units**

Following the definition offered by Robert K. Yin (1985), this research must be thought of as a case study. In fact it 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and – in it – multiple sources of evidence are used' (Yin 1985:23). It might be thought of as a multiple-cases study, where more exemplary situations have been chosen to explore a specific field and to try explaining the ongoing process of change.

The investigation has been limited to two particularly information-rich cases: Italy and Denmark. These two countries have been chosen as potential representatives of the most dissimilar situations in Europe to get as much variation as possible, thereby increasing the generalizability of the research findings.

Since the research focuses on a process of change and due to the impossibility of collecting longitudinal data, the research has been based on qualitative, partly retrospective interviews, supplemented by a large amount of official documents such as laws, internal letters and directives, autobiographies, and some available quantitative data.

On the basis of the first already-collected information about the territorial structure of the customs administrations in the two countries, it was decided to carry out interviews both in sea border regions and in land border regions. In fact, the geographical parallel position of the two countries, as peninsulas pointing out from the European core, was one of the reasons why their relation to the common European center had been considered especially interesting. This has also allowed for an evaluation of possible differences between the attitudes of the people working at ‘internal’ European borders and of the people working at ‘external’ European borders.

Likewise, it has been considered important to carry out some other interviews in the two capitals and in the General Direction XXI
in Brussels, which is responsible for the Customs affairs and the Indirect Taxation. These interviews have helped reconstructing the role expectations reaching the street-level bureaucrats.

The number of interviews carried out was determined in accordance with the most recent theories concerning qualitative analysis: ‘In current interview studies, the number of interviews tend to be around 15±10.’ (Kvale 1996: 102).

Therefore, fifteen interviews have been conducted in each country. A first introductory conversation with a/some representative/s of the central administration has been followed by interviews with the chiefs of the chosen customs regions. These have suggested a list of names among which it has been possible to choose the informants, following the sampling criteria. Other names have been obtained through the first interviews (‘snowball sampling’).

The subjects, both male and female, have been selected on the basis of their professional level (middle-high-level civil servants) and competencies (representing different work-sectors). One of the conditions was to find occupants of ‘mirror positions’ in the two countries, to allow comparisons between their statements.

Each interview lasted between one hour and two and a half hours, and has been tape recorded except for the few instances where the interviewees have preferred the tape recorder to be turned off. The tape recording has been supplemented with the registering of the subjective impressions of the interviewer. All the interviews have been conducted in the customs office of the individual officers interviewed, even though in some cases the conversation has continued in more informal situations, allowing the collection of supplementary information and insights. Differences in the physical environment of the interviewees and the location of their offices have also been taken into account in the interpretation of their life-world.

The interviews have been conducted in the mother tongue of the interviewees in Italy, and in English in Denmark. In one case the interview was conducted with the help of a Danish scholar, who was

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3 The interviews took place between the spring and the autumn 1998.
supporting the interviewer with some translations from English into Danish and vice versa.

**Discussion of the Research Findings**

The primary objective of this study was to verify the hypothesis that an exogenous change such as the Europeanization of the working conditions of a specific category of national public officials – the customs officers – could affect their personal identity and identifications, through a change in their occupational role.

Many studies have been conducted in the European Commission and at the level of the central European government⁴, investigating the effects of an international working context on the employees, but until now not much effort has been put into the investigation of the social and socio-psychological consequences of the European integration in the member states’ national administrations. Nonetheless, the EU integration process is exposing national employees to many changes in their everyday working life. Firstly, laws and regulations that are relevant to the member states’ administrations are to an increasing extent being promulgated by the central European legislator instead of only by the national one, which means that a new reference group, constituted by the EU Parliament and the Commission is attracting the attention of the national employees. This new reference group is increasingly requiring them to take into account supra-national or non-national interests in the use of the discretional power and authority they have been granted by the states. Secondly, exchange programs and other joint activities are organized to improve the overall quality of the European public services and the mutual understanding and trust of the people who implement the public policy measures. This allows people previously divided by barriers of mistrust, stereotypes, fear, and special

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⁴ For an approach, which resembles mine, in the field of the so-called comitology, see Trondal (1999).
confidentiality to experience an international environment, to build up networks of formal and informal cooperation, and to exchange information and know-how across borders. Thirdly, partly as a consequence of the policies of the European Union, the general awareness and acceptance of the importance of collaboration is growing in the member states, producing a favorable climate of cultural credibility for a change in the direction of the shaping of supranationally defined occupational roles.

The customs administration was chosen as the empirical case, since this has been influenced by all the above-mentioned factors, and the connection of the officials to the sovereignty and territoriality of the state has appeared to be especially strong in this field. The socialization of the officials working in the sector was in fact expected to have particularly underlined the importance of their loyalty to the state, and of the protection and preservation of its borders, with all their emotional and symbolic value.

As it will be illustrated in the following, the conclusion of the research is a partial verification of the formulated hypothesis. The investigation into the conditions of the Danish and Italian customs officials has demonstrated that there has been a progressive development of the official’s occupational role, in the direction of the role’s increasingly supranational definition. Such a change seems to have affected the personal identity of the actors involved, contributing to the modification of their identifications with different socio-territorial entities.

In the next paragraphs, these and other secondary research findings will be summarized, partly through the elaboration of a general explanation model. Finally, some major points will be addressed that could form the basis of further investigation.

**Towards the Evolution of a Supranationally Defined Occupational Role**

In the study it was established that before the introduction of the common customs tariff in 1968 and the entry of Denmark into the
EEC in 1973, both the Italian and the Danish customs administrations were quite close to the definition of ‘greedy institutions’ (Coser 1974). Working in the customs, and possibly in many other places in the public sector, required the total commitment of the employees. Moreover, customs officials were often connected to each other by strong ties, even of kinship. Sometimes they were living in extreme conditions, and quite close to one another. A big part of their public and private life was played out in environments that were deeply intertwined with their occupation.

Even when, like in Denmark, the country of belonging (Gubert 1999) had a special relation to other countries (read: the Nordic Countries), the authority and sovereignty of the state was an unquestioned reality, and the national territorial borders represented clear-cut, and often highly charged emotional barriers between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Customs officials were proud representatives of the state’s authority and sovereignty. Their loyalty was built through clearly definable socialization processes, the result of which tended to be, in both cases, an almost complete Role-Person Merger (Turner 1978). Briefly, a Role-Person Merger is defined as a situation in which actors are best described in terms of some roles that are played even outside their normal context, and that color the way other roles are played. The identification with one’s own occupation is very frequent. Work is extremely important for the definition of the personal identity and it has a highly predictive value regarding social status, value orientation, interpersonal traits and so on. In some cases, it can assume an even higher importance, due to the specificity of the work that is carried out. This is the case with law enforcing jobs, as the customs work, where the occupation is strictly related to other important societal values and norms. Therefore, when the occupational role with which the person is merged is exposed to pressures deriving from big changes in the surrounding structure, the whole personality of the people involved is necessarily subjected to deep strains and actors resist the change. In fact, playing roles is a means of achieving personal reward in the form of validation of self, self-esteem and reinforcement from the others. When all this is at stake, actors are perceiving changes as menaces to their personal identity. However, if
they recognize the change as a possibility to obtain higher rewards, in terms of a betterment of their material conditions (instrumental goals) as well as of personal improvement (expressive goals), and if they can find internal or external support for the action, they are likely to accept and foster the change. This appears to be the mechanism that has been activated in the customs case, even though the two analyzed instances revealed important variations. To understand these variations, it is important to look at the history of the two administrations and at the factors that have influenced the actors in the investigated contexts.

A clear difference between the Danish and the Italian administrations before the year 1968 (1973 for Denmark) appears to be the much higher degree of trust and collaboration between the public and the private sector that was reported in the first. When the interviewees in Italy have reported a similar collaboration, it has happened in the context of a possible conflict situation. The level of interpersonal trust diffused in the society is likely to be a distinctive characteristic of each nation-state to the degree that the state is a nation, and it has a common shared culture. In some way, it is connected to the specific ‘content’ of the national role, which is intertwined with the occupational role of the public officials (Kelman H.C. 1965). Public officials therefore act in accordance with broader shared norms of the national society they are embedded in. In both cases, however, the attention of the officials was constantly focused on the state and its interests.

The period of time between 1968 (1973) and 1992 witnessed the development of quite different environments in the two states and administrations. In Italy, the value of the protection of the state’s borders and interests progressively lost importance in the society and in the administration, while growing emphasis was put on the European level; in other words, the European project found a general cultural credibility in the society. In contrast, Danes perceived the European Union as ‘the lesser of two evils’, accepted mainly for economic reasons. Before that time, competing attempts had been made to foster the social construction of alternative ‘us’-feelings
among the Scandinavian countries (Laursen 1994; Gersman, Therkildsen, Meyer 1986).

In Italy, the European Commission gained importance in the everyday life of the officials, adding itself to the other reference groups of the employees. In Denmark, everything remained basically centered around the state and its needs and requirements. The administration and the employees continued being directly and almost exclusively accountable to the national government. In addition, the central customs administration was clearly working against the European policy of integration through harmonization, and efforts were made to rationalize the public services and to improve their effectiveness, also when this was countering European interests and agreements (Administrationsdepartment 1984).

Before the opening of the Internal Market in 1993, Italian customs officials found themselves in a situation of extreme intra-role conflict and ‘crisis’. Their occupational role had become more and more untenable and dysfunctional in relation to the new structural conditions. The role expectations coming from the new European reference group (the Commission) and from the changed broader society were pushing them to abandon the previous, traditional power position in relation to the citizens, to stop considering the national borders as barriers where everything should stop and to start looking at the customs officials of other member states as co-operating for the achievement of the same goal: the protection of the European borders and interests. Moreover, in the confusion of the time, they thought they would risk losing their jobs – the main source of their income – and the prestige and power connected to their work position. At the same time, they could not avoid facing the crises, since the exit opportunity was blocked for them by external factors (the reform of the national pension system). Therefore, they remained united in the desire to encourage the already started process of modernization and Europeanization of the administration, turning the situation to their

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5 Europeanization and modernization seem indeed to be tightly connected concepts in the view of the Italian customs officials.
own advantage. Their experience was in fact that Europeanization meant personal and collective improvement.

As it was expected, and consistent with the findings of other studies (Campbell, Pepper, Barnes 1989), the officials tried to resist the impending change. Their opposition found expression in strikes and protests. However, it was quite quickly overcome due to the personal and collective advantages that the customs officials were able to derive from the new structural conditions. On the one hand, accepting the new requirements and transforming their role definition meant that the officials had the possibility to survive as a group and even to improve and ‘professionalize’ their occupation. On the other hand, many individual officials could better their personal position and get new enthusiasm for their everyday work thanks to the increased international connections and cooperation. They also found the challenges personally attractive, enriching, and promising for the future generations. According to Shein’s (1970) theory of organizational change, they followed a ‘scanning’ procedure, or, in other words, they looked at the successful attempts of some of their colleagues and imitated them. Obtaining a new adjustment, or a role change, using Turner’s vocabulary (1990), was simplified in Italy by various conditions, among which: the cultural credibility that the European project had in Italy; a mobilized client demand that wanted the administration to modernize and saw in its ‘Europeanization’ a step in the right direction; the fact that as a consequence of the pension reform, customs officials did not really have any other open alternative; and, finally, the unity and mobilization of the entire category.

In Denmark, the possibility of the customs officials to experience an intra-role conflict, or a role/person misfit (Turner 1990) was decreased by the merger of the customs and the tax administration. This occurred in 1990, and caused the dismissal of many of the old, highly committed customs officials, forcing those left to concentrate on a partial role transition. This meant that the traditional customs official’s role was already weakened. Due to the merger, customs officials were divided and could not find any real group support for the reconstruction of their occupational role in a
European sense. Moreover, they had a concrete and feasible alternative: to remain loyal to the state and to reinforce their new tax-oriented national role definition. Even in society in general, the European project was not unanimously welcome, and a role change in that direction would not have been seen in an extremely positive way by the institution itself. Differently stated, there was no cultural credibility, no mobilized client demand, no structural support and no unity and mobilization of the actors involved for a role change to take place in the direction of the evolution of a European-oriented one.

However, in recent years, it seems that the direct comparison with the other European customs administrations and the need to cooperate to find a solution to common problems have forced the Danish administration to re-professionalize its officials, and to create specialized territorial customs units. This has given the middle-high-level employees new reasons for being proud of their occupational role and identifying with it. Moreover, the encounter with the other customs officials in the European context has made them increasingly aware of the importance and meaning of the European Union. Europe is finally starting to be regarded, also in the Danish customs administration, as an opportunity to improve, personally and collectively. Customs officials working in other member states have become ‘colleagues’ with whom information is shared and cooperation developed. The community of the European customs officials is increasingly perceived, in Denmark as well as in Italy, as a big ‘family’, with internal differences, but still working together for the improvement of the European collectivity.

The European customs officials’ role is nowadays mainly focused on the European external borders and their protection, while internal borders have become bridges to the newly acquired ‘colleagues’. The middle-high-level customs officials interviewed clearly feel the importance of their cooperation for the protection of the European people’s safety and interests, and they are extremely proud of their occupational role. Moreover, they see that the best way for them to fulfill their tasks would be to become part of one single administration, even if this would highlight the already present problems of communication, deriving from insufficient language skills
and mutual cross-cultural misunderstandings. Generally speaking, they do not offer resistance to the idea of getting a common education and of being subjected to the same employment conditions. In addition, they reveal a large acceptance of an eventual temporary mobility inside Europe. They are also aware of the fact that their feeling towards Europe is especially strong and positive because of the particular kind of experience they get through their occupational role, and that the same experience is not shared by large parts of the national societies. These other parts would need, from the officials’ point of view, much more time to understand and to get used to the idea that Europe is already a reality, and that it can be considered, all in all, a positive one. When asked about a time perspective, the officials interviewed in both countries talk about generations. Their opinion is that the change, which has taken them few years, due to their direct experience of internationalization, would take the national masses in Europe some 50-100 years.

It can therefore at first be affirmed that in both analyzed cases there has been a parallel evolution of a European consciousness in the context of an occupational role. Such a consciousness has apparently spread into the personal identity of the actors involved, modifying the perception of their belonging to main socio-territorial entities, and the meaning of those entities in relation to each other.

However, what is particularly relevant is that the same evolution has taken place in two very different environments. Interestingly enough, the change appears to have occurred also – although only to a certain extent – in the Danish context; in a country almost characterized by ‘hostility’ towards social integration and harmonization in Europe.

Following Turner’s theory (1990), a role change can happen when some conditions are fulfilled. In the Danish case, contrary to the Italian, not many of his conditions were fulfilled. Firstly, the “impetus to change” was not so strong, because the structural conditions had been modified before the opening of the Internal Market and because many of the actors involved had been reallocated or dismissed. Secondly, the Commission had not entered the scene as a relevant “alter role”. Thirdly, a role transition to the tax collecting role – or a
simple role adjustment in that direction – was a feasible and advantageous alternative to a role change in the direction of the evolution of a European occupational role. Fourthly, there was no structural support for a role change in the national administration, and the officials involved were not united or mobilized. Finally, there was no mobilized client demand, and no strong cultural credibility in the national society in general.

The question that arises is then: what has led the middle-high-level customs officials to anyway redefine, at least partly, their occupational role? The answer seems to lie in the mechanism of scanning, identified by Edgar Schein (1970). The actors involved have apparently observed different strategies utilized by colleagues, and they have collectively, though implicitly, agreed upon the best possible solution to the common situation they shared. Personal experience of improvement, in the sense of an improvement of the working conditions and increased job satisfaction, but also in terms of personal growth and intellectual stimulation, has been the key of the officials to negotiating a new role definition. The role change has therefore been initiated by a structural change, but it has become a reality thanks to the active choice and intervention of individuals and groups. These have acted, utilizing the new means they were given, to obtain personal and collective advantages. With their action, they have influenced the structure in which they were embedded, in the form of the definition of the occupational role, as well as in the form of all those meanings that are in various ways connected to it, such as the meaning of belonging to the state and to Europe.

In Italy, this process has been facilitated by different environmental conditions, but still it has followed the same path. The occupational role change has certainly been an effect of the Europeanization of the structural environment which the actors were part of, due to the decision and active intervention of individuals and groups when they recognized the advantages of the new situation.

Personal and mediated experience was therefore crucial for the realization of the role change.

The change has finally been stabilized and integrated into the personality of the actors involved, provoking a general readjustment
of their different roles – including the national membership role – and of their various social identifications.

Conclusions

Some general conclusions can be drawn from the study of the customs officials’ professional category.

First of all, it is possible to affirm that this group is developing a sense of personal identification with Europe.

This identification appears to originate as an indirect effect of the Europeanization of the working environment of the actors involved. The identification seems to be a consequence of the personal, more or less conscious manipulation of the occupational role performed by the actors, and of the consequent redefinition of their personal identity. This is particularly relevant if compared with the resistance to change that the category was expected to exercise at the beginning of the research.

Therefore, it is possible to formulate the larger-scale hypothesis that it is through the personal involvement in (already) established structures that people develop a sense of affiliation to communities (Stinchombe 1965). Changes in the structure are at first resisted by the actors affected, since they are perceived as threats to their personal integrity and to individual and collective interests. However, after a period of time of varied length, they can be personally and collectively accepted and rationally chosen as effective solutions to concrete problems, and to the satisfaction of subjective and group interests. Once they have taken place, structural changes always imply the transformation of roles and, through them, the redefinition of personal identities and social identifications of the actors involved. Actors are then likely to act back on the structure and to modify, among other things, the definition of collectivities. The

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6 These have been adequately investigated during the research. Space constraints do not allow further elaboration.
more the new structure directly influences the everyday life of people, the more likely it is that they are going to learn to identify with it.

This large-scale change that is touching upon personal identities, identification processes, and social structure could therefore eventually affect other groups than the customs officials and public employees, if other groups are going to be directly involved in the Europeanization process to the same extent as the customs officials. However, since nationalism does not disappear and is, on the contrary, in some way reinforced by the adding of the European level to the pattern of belongings of the European citizens (Delanty 1995: 132), a future new opposition to the reinforcement of a European identification cannot be excluded. Moreover, for the resistance to change to be overcome, it is important that the actors involved are directly and strongly affected by the new structural conditions and that they recognize in it a personal and collective advantage. If this has been true of the category of the customs officials, and probably of other public officials at the central European level as well as in the national administrations, it should not be underestimated that the majority of the national population is not directly involved and affected by the development of European common structures (or at least not consciously). Therefore, it is not possible to develop an opinion based on experience and, eventually, an identification with the European Union moving in the direction of the emergence of a European supranational community.

In accordance with the findings of this research, the identification with the European level is developed through personal, positive experiences of Europe. In this condition, the change takes place and is accomplished quite fast (Liberman 1956). A diffusion of such an identification should then be fostered by actions that encourage the direct participation of the broader strata of the European population and that underline and explain in simple terms the long-run and large-scale effects of the European policies.

Otherwise, as the interviewed middle-high-level customs officials have recognized, the change would need a long time to be
realized, if it could at all be achieved. In this sense, the workers’ exchanges (Matthaeus program\textsuperscript{7}, Custom 2000\textsuperscript{8}), not only at higher levels – as it is suggested by some chiefs – but also at lower levels of the hierarchy, constitute a very important means of creating support, increasing motivation and building a basic structure of interpersonal trust across borders.

In addition to the above-illustrated results, the study shows that people do not identify exclusively with one socio-territorial level but with many, and that they attribute different meanings to them, which probably change in time. The fears of one level (the European) substituting others (in particular the national one) do therefore not find support in the empirical findings of this research. However, the discovered tendency causes questions regarding the loyalty of these people to their own state and to Europe. There have been reports of cases where customs officials, placed in a situation in which they could autonomously choose between a national and supranational interpretation of norms, have acted in the interests of Europe. Nonetheless, from the results of this research it is not possible to determine whether we are faced with a general pattern. It actually does not seem so. The question of loyalty remains open. Moreover, it becomes a crucial question, since it turns evident how often the national policy in each member state contradicts the policy of the states in the international context, and the aggregated effects of their decisions at the European level. In other words, people receive contradictory messages from the states when these act alone compared to when they agree upon decisions made at the European level. Moreover, these decisions also regard questions such as whether the national interest or the European interest will be prominent, rendering, therefore, the requests for fealty and allegiance increasingly ambiguous.

\textsuperscript{7} Council Decision of 20 June 1991 No 91/341/EEC.
\textsuperscript{8} Decision of the European Parliament and Council of 19 December 1996 No 210/97/EC.
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