Not So Different After All?:
The EU and Myths of Exceptionalism

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A Google Scholar search for “exceptionalism” and “myth” will produce results that use these terms in practically every national or regional context possible, from American and Arab to Zimbabwean exceptionalism. All nations weave a story of being “exceptional” or different in one way or another from other nations; it is an important element in the construction of their identity. A political community needs to have a story that demarcates a boundary, one that helps set it apart from others and which helps explain why it stays together. These stories very often have a sacred character so that to question them is to raise issues about the very basis of the political community itself; they are political myths. Myth is not used to connote a fictionalised account that is countered by “reality” but a sacred narrative that highlights a unique feature that gives meaning to a political community.

There is no doubt that the EU has a different, possibly unique, institutional and political architecture. Its complex decision-making structure and procedures, combining inter-state bargaining with supranational institutions, some with exclusive authority over specific policy areas, have led many to claim that the EU is *sui generis*. Scholarly research in the social sciences, law and history has numerous debates about whether these differences constitute the basis for exceptionalism, thus limiting the utility of conventional concepts and heuristic tools used to understand governing in the modern era. This debate, in part, centres on the extent to which the unique features of the EU’s institutions and governance render it different from the state. Yet, paradoxically, the notion of exceptionalism makes the EU similar to most, if not all, modern nation-states in that they all claim to be different as a means to justify the formation of a political community with its form of government. Modern states have construct a narrative that justified their creation and legitimised the use of political authority by highlighting that they possessed some unique or exceptional quality that distinguished the political community. Like the EU, they are built around narratives that have an inherent tension between universal values and a claim to particularity or exception that establishes the boundaries of political community and authority (Borg 2014).

This raises the question of the extent to which exceptionalism, and the myth of exceptionalism, has played a role in the evolution of the politics, policy and polity of the European Union. Our focus is not on “what” the EU is but whether or not sacred narratives that seek to define who it is and why it is a political community have been used in the case of the EU. We can explore two types of myths of exceptionalism. Europe’s exceptionalism has been an integral part of a story about how Europe[[1]](#footnote-1) is a different kind of global actor. Beginning with a discussion of Europe as a “civilian” power in the 1970s, to more recent reflections on Europe’s normative power, the EU story has consistently centred on its presence as a different kind of world power. Europe is seen as abandoning the power politics of states that have dominated the modern era and led to widespread death and destruction in the 20th century. It is a power that projects its values, seen as universal, as an organizing model for an increasingly complex and interdependent world. The crisis in the Ukraine has a different narrative emerge, one of whether and how the EU can become a strategic actor. The economic crisis has highlighted how the myth of the European social model is increasingly frayed and challenged by narratives that point to the EU as the threat to the model.

The paper argues that the sacred narratives of exceptionalism have been part of the evolution of the EU as well. Despite the claims that it eschewed national interests to forge a new kind of polity, one for which traditional concepts and categories are inadequate, to discussions of it being a post-modern polity, there have been narratives that have sought to identify the EU as a distinct and exclusive political community. We will explore whether and how political myths, especially those of exceptionalism, provide ontological security; that is, confidence in who the EU is, what it does and why. It builds on arguments by Mitzen and Steele to explore the extent to which narratives that help define identity are rooted enough to withstand challenges (Mitzen 2006a, Steele 2008). It also challenges Mitzen’s claim that the EU has a deep-rooted identity as a normative power that will guide who it is even when material conditions, such as enhanced capacity, change (Mitzen 2006b). The paper wants to present two arguments. First, that the EU is not so different from state and nation-building processes when it comes to the role of political myths in providing cognitive and normative maps to guide its actions. Second, the recent economic crisis and conflict in the Ukraine highlight the fragility of the EU’s ontological security, reflecting in part that of the political myths that help constitute it. By looking at the narrative form of political myths, and not just the content, we can identify some of the political fault-lines and challenges faced by the EU. The paper is divided into two main sections. The first provides a brief discussion of political myth and how it might contribute to the ontological security of collective actors. It also explores the question of whether the EU is sui generis when it comes to the use of political myth. The second part of the paper looks to attempts to provide a myth of the EU’s exceptionalism and how these have been affected by the economic crisis and the conflict in the Ukraine.

**1. Political Myth and Ontological Security**

The term “myth”, when used to talk about the EU is often used to denote how the “reality” is distant from the narratives used to describe it. Setting aside how the same can be said about this distance with respect to the EU member states, myth has a much more important use as a concept. We can place it within the growing “narrative turn” in the social sciences and the role that narrative plays in ordering social relations (Czarniawska 2004, Patterson and Monroe 1998). Myths are distinct narrative forms in that they are sacred narratives that are repositories of a collective representation of values, beliefs, aspirations, finality, ideals and attitudes (Bouchard 2014:38-42). Political myths provide a cognitive and normative map for understanding and making appropriate why a political community has come together as well as what is done in its name (Bottici 2007, Flood 2001).

The issue is, then, not whether myths provide an accurate reflection of reality but whether narratives become sacred and are used effectively as normative and cognitive maps that define and give meaning to a political community. The question is not whether or not the EU is “exceptional” but that there is a diffused subjective understanding that it would be right if were so. Moreover, a successful political myth is a sacred narrative that helps a political community define who, more than what, it is. There is a significant and growing literature on political myth but relatively little that helps us understand why some narratives are more successful than others in assuming the characteristics of a political myth. A notable exception is Gérard Bouchard, whose “sociology of myth” tries to set various stages in the myth-making process. He divides it into three essential stages that lead myths to distinguish themselves from other narrative forms: diffusion, ritualisation and sacralisation (Bouchard 2013, Bouchard 2014). In the first, a range of actors, including cultural elites, public intellectuals and academics, emplot events in a narrative form, giving them a structure that is understandable and consistent with existing collective representations. In the second phase, these narratives become part of social life and the basis for decisions about collective action. The narratives become political myths in the third phase when they assume a sacred quality, defining the basis for the political community. To question the myth is to raise doubts about the very identity and existence of the political community. Some of the conditions that lead to this sacredness include: a coherent definition of the community, including but perhaps not necessarily its territory; adaptability that also comes from a diversity of meanings; the ability to leech or build from existing myths; the invention of adversaries; symbolic representation of the myth (Bouchard 2014:137-52).

It is not just the content but also the form that narratives take that helps determine the extent to which they can become effective normative and cognitive maps. Whether or not political myths resonate with citizens is also partly determined by whether they are in a narrative form that is recognisable and understandable. Narratives assemble actors, actions and events in a way that makes their unfolding comprehensible and gives them meaning (Ricoeur 2010). Their success depends, in part, on the extent to which those who hear or read the stories recognise how they have been arranged (Bal 2009). The classic narrative form is Aristotle’s three-part structure, with a beginning, middle and an end. Gustav Freytag’s pyramid (1863) or five-stage narrative arc provides a useful structure for understanding how political myths are constructed as stories. Like Aristotle, he identifies a beginning, essentially an introduction or exposition that has an inciting moment which disrupts the existing status quo. This trigger is followed by rising action in which the protagonists face an intensifying number of conflicts and tensions that come to a head in the third part, the narrative’s climax; this is the peak of the pyramid, the point of greatest tension and provides a decisive turning point. Then follows the dénouement or falling action in which the consequences of the crisis or critical juncture play themselves out between the protagonists and the antagonists, leading to the fifth stage of the narrative arc, the resolution or conclusion in which a new order is established.

Successful political myths make the world understandable because they have a clear narrative arc that leads to a resolution that has an equally clear normative message. For instance, in many European states, the resistance to Fascism during the Second World War remains an important political myth with a clear narrative structure. The inciting moment was the emergence of fascism in the interwar years, leading to rising tensions and the critical turning point of war. It was the social and political forces of the resistance that led the struggle to defeat fascism and to construct a new order in the aftermath of war. The audience accepts the resolution, which is the legitimacy of the post-war settlement, in part because it understands how the story unfolded to this point. More broadly, the sacred narratives of the state and nation provide the audience with a clear picture of who the protagonists are and the forces they are up against, as well as a very clear resolution to the conflict. As will be illustrated below, the sacred narratives of the EU do not have the same clear post-crisis trajectory, although they are often based on the same pre-climax pattern.

Political myths serve a number of functions, from helping to establish political legitimacy to ensuring continuity of institutions (Schőpflin 1997). They also can serve to provide ontological security for a polity, including the EU. The debate about the *sui generis* nature of the EU centres primarily on *what* it is – confederal, post-modern, compound, federalising, etc. – more than on who it is and why. However, as a social and collective actor, the EU may also seek out ontological security; that is, practices, routines and narratives that help define who it is and why it remains as a political community (Mitzen 2006b, Steele 2008). Drawing from its use by Giddens and international relations scholars, ontological security refers to a sense of confidence of one’s identity (Berenskoetter 2014, Giddens 1991, Mitzen 2006a). Giddens claims that ontological security, “[r]efers to the confidence that most humans beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens 1990:92). Ontological security claims that social actors need basic trust in the continuity of the factors that give them their sense of identity in order for them to have agency, to set objectives, define interests and act strategically. This continuity is rooted in habit and routine (Giddens 1990:98) as well as in the stability of the environment that defines an identity. Scholars of international relations have extended the concept to argue that states seek security in ways that ensure a consistency in the narratives and stories they tells about who they are, what they do and why. Narratives, including political myths help provide this confidence. They provide a way to sequence events and the environment so that social actors can make choices in the face of uncertainty, rooted in the familiar and the understandable.

While political myths have been very much part of the nation-building experience, they have been not received a great deal of attention in trying to understand the European Union until very recently (Bostanci 2013, Bottici and Challand 2013, Della Sala 2013). Perhaps this is because myths have been associated with meta-narratives of “thick” forms of belonging such as state and ethnicity. However, if we accept that narratives – that is, the ordering of events with a beginning, middle and end (Bal 2009) - are important not only for creating a political community but also for how we understand the organisation of that community and the basis on which it is governed (Somers and Gibson 1994, Somers 1994), then we can look to European stories, including political myths, as ways of examining what the EU does, why and whether this fits into cognitive and normative schemes that make it understandable (cfr:Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002) and “ordinary”.

**2. Myths of Exceptionalism**

A feature of the argument that the EU is a *sui generis* polity is that we cannot use the same concepts and heuristic tools, including political myths, that have been applied to the modern Westphalian state (Bottici and Challand 2013:5). Without entering into the merits of the debate over the *sui generis* nature of the EU, we will argue that in least one instance, the case of the myth of exceptionalism, the EU is not so different from the modern state. The literature on the construction of modern states has pointed to a number of common political myths. These include foundational sacred narratives about the birth or re-birth of the political community, those of a territory or political space, of a civilising mission, of trials and sacred narratives centred on military values and qualities (Schőpflin 1997:28-34). While it would be hard to say to argue that there have been narratives of the EU related to military conquest, many of the other types of political myth associated with the EU are present in one form or another (Della Sala 2013).

One type of political myth, that can also be found in the case of the EU, is that of exceptionalism, the notion that the political community has been called together and perhaps even selected to carry out some kind of civilising mission because it is the repository of auniversal value that results from its history or some distinct quality (Flood 2001, Schőpflin 1997). For example, the myth of America as the “city on the hill”, of a chosen people who enshrine the principles of liberty and freedom, was crafted even before the first settlers crossed the Atlantic. John Wintrop’s, “A Model of Charity”, delivered before sailing for New England, spoke of how the “eyes of all people shall be upon us” as they set out to carry God’s mission. The invocation of the “city on the hill” and “the indispensible nation” is a narrative that continues to resonate in the collective imagination of a settler society (Hodgson 2009). But it is not just the United States that has these sacred narratives of being exceptional. The national myth in France of a nation born in the defence of human rights and republican secularism remains a powerful message used by political elites in cases such as the French intervention in Mali or the decision to ban head scarves in schools (Kuru 2008).

Exceptionalism narratives are important for setting up boundaries that define a political community. John Armstrong’s argument about the social and ideational essence of boundaries for the nation is useful for understanding the role of myths of exceptionalism. He claims, “A most significant effect of the myth recital is to arouse an intense awareness among the group members of their “common fate.” From the perspective of myth-symbol theory, common fate is simply the extent to which an episode, whether historical or “purely mythical,” arouses intense affect by stressing individuals’ solidarity against an alien force, that is, by enhancing the salience of boundary perceptions” (Armstrong 1982:9). While boundaries are very much about creating the “other”, they also require practices and narratives that help establish a sense to and meaning of “us”; and political myths are very much part of the construction of boundaries (Smith 1988). Exceptionalism myths, then, are central to the social construction of “who we are”, “what we do” and why we are a political community. The modern project of the nation-state provided a meta-narrative rooted in some construction of a thick form of belonging but this does not exclude other forms of boundary creation through exceptionalism myths for a political community. For instance, Canadian “exceptionalism” has been constructed in part in its approach to diversity as well as a series of welfare state provisions (Rich 2008).

In a transnational polity such as the European Union, national narratives of exceptionalism will have to find ways to be accommodated within a broader construction of a political community (Marcussen et al. 1999). However, this does not mean that they do not play a role in trying to establish ontological security for the EU as a distinct political community. Stemming from the exceptionalism myth is that of the EU’s missionary role to export peace and democracy, indeed its very own historical experience, to other parts of the world. It is rooted in the notion that Europe’s distinctive path to peace and stability has made it a different kind of actor on the global stage. One that is not driven by the power-driven politics of national interests that have characterised the modern era; but by the search for effective solutions to common problems through dialogue, cooperation and the rule of law. As European Commission President Romano Prodi argued in 2001:

[T]he Union has a role to play in world "governance": In relations between European States, the rule of law has replaced the crude interplay of power. After so many bloody conflicts, the Europeans have declared their "right to peace". That gives us a very special role to play: by making a success of integration we are demonstrating to the world that it is possible to create a method for peace. Within the Union the influence of individual States is not the only criterion, alliances have no role to play. In a word, power politics have lost their influence. This is a considerable achievement which could facilitate the establishment, at international level, of the ground rules that globalisation demands (Prodi 2001).

There seems to be a grand narrative here of a global order that can be forged from the unique European experience. Europe’s “power” stems not from its material capacities but from it very own experiences (Pace 2007). This is a rather powerful argument and there are signs that in some areas of its foreign policy, it has become the basis for action. European responses to crises in the Balkans, for instance, have centred on nation and state-building exercises rooted in its own experiences of seeking to find ways to create greater cooperation and interdependence between previously warring sides (Tocci 2007). For instance, let us consider this statement by Joschka Fischer, former German Foreign Minister: “Yet there is no point in fooling oneself: Only as long as the Balkan countries believe in the European Union and the benefits of membership will today’s precarious peace in the region become permanent” (Fischer 2014). Fischer is expressing the EU belief that it remains a model for how conflict-ridden regions should achieve peace and stability. Moreover, the path forward lies not only in adopting the EU as a model, but also in striving to become part of the mission through eventual membership. To question the claim that the EU is not the beacon for democracy and stability across a wider Europe is to strike at its central argument for maintaining legitimate authority within its member states.

Myths of exceptionalism and having a special role have been present from the start; for example, Monnet spoke of how states were like provinces, destined to disappear but the Community was the basis for a new worldorder (Monnet 1976:788). There are two narratives of exceptionalism have been part of the construction of Europe’s ontological security from the start that get to the core of the EU’s identity as a political community: that the EU is a different (that is, normative and civilian power) kind of international actor (Telò 2009, Tonra 2011) and that it is the bulwark or repository of a different social model that reconciles states and markets. They both serve to help define boundaries of who is the EU and how it stands with respect to other political actors and polities.

***Normative Power Europe***

From Francois Duchene’s call for a “civilian power Europe” to contemporary debates about the concept of “normative power”, there has been attention to the ways in which the EU is a different kind of international actor (Duchêne 1973, Manners 2002, Smith 2011). Whether or not the EU is indeed an actor that does not have a military dimension or is driven primarily by a commitment to the rule of law is not the central question we want to address here. What we want to explore is the extent to which there has been a narrative that has sought to define who the EU is as a social actor with respect to foreign policy and whether it has become a widely diffused political myth that is the basis for action. The narrative of Europe as a normative (or at least a non-military) power is certainly engrained in the discourse of the EU institutions as well as being widespread in the scholarly literature (Diez 2005, Maull 2005, Smith 2014). As Jennifer Mitzen argues, the fact that the EU has been gradually developing the instruments and capacity for a security and defence policy does not necessarily make the EU a different kind of actor (Mitzen 2006b). She argues that the EU’s self-identity is intimately intertwined with the notion of its civilizing mission that it will continue to act along these lines even if develops capacities to become a different kind of actor.

The EU as a normative power can be read as a narrative. As with most developments in European integration, the story begins with the formation of nation states and exclusive forms of nationalism (Manners 2010). Tensions build up culminating in the calamitous wars of the last century. The resolution to the crisis comes in the creation of a polity that not only renounces violence in relations between its members but also as a means of dealing with the rest of the international community. It is this unique experience that provides the EU with guiding principles that set it apart in the international community and are the basis for a new international order.

It is not hard to find evidence that collective actors within the EU’s institutional and political architecture identify with the narrative that the EU has a special role to play in international relations because of who it is and not what. A colourful example comes from a comic book produced by ECHO (the EU’s humanitarian and disaster relief agency) called, *Hidden Disaster*. It tells the story of the response to an earthquake in a fictional country (presumably in the Caucasus or central Asia) riven by an internal conflict between the central government and rebel forces. It focuses on the actions of EU officials, in Brussels but primarily in the field. There is never a hint that the EU might have some sort of strategic interest in the area; it’s only concern is with ensuring that aid reaches the needy in the rebel-held areas, which are out of bounds for other relief agencies as the revels do not trust those delivering aid. The very earnest protagonist, the ECHO field officer, sets out to convince the rebels to seek out relief help. She meets with their leader, who looks uncannily similar to Lenin, and convinces him that there are no hidden motives in the relief effort.

Leaving aside the public information function served by publications such as *Hidden Disaster*, we find so many of the elements of the EU’s narrative of exceptionalism. First, the strength of the EU as an international actor is that it renounces narrow interests associated with national forms of identity and belonging. For instance, the rebel leader refuses to have international aid come through because it would show that his people are not capable of governing themselves, preventing him from accepting that opening up to the international community is a positive sum outcome. Second, there are repeated references to the moral imperatives of helping those in need in the international community, but that “national” mismanagement and interests (as well as ideology as evidenced by both the reference to nationalism and leftist rebel movements in the book) often get in the way. Third, the EU, which is neither a state nor an international organisation, is the ideal type of actor to step in as the interface between the international community and those in need. Moreover, it is not this institutional ambiguity that gives the EU a special role but that it is the embodiment of values and norms that have guided its evolution.

Another example comes from a video to promote enlargement that had appeared on the Commission website but was later removed.[[2]](#footnote-2) Setting aside the alleged racist overtones that led to criticism, the video is interesting for the story that the Commission tells of who is the EU and the rest of the world. It opens in an abandoned factory building with a female dressed in a blue and yellow outfit reminiscent of the movie, *Kill Bill*. Three menacing characters – one clearly Asian, one representing the Middle East and one Africa – appear in succession that threaten “Europe”. Her response is to multiply, creating a circle of multiple but identical “Europe”, at which point the threatening figures sit down, ready to talk and negotiate. The video captures how the world of states and ethnic belonging is necessarily menacing and conflictual but the EU is different. Interestingly, it does away with its own internal ethnic and national diversity when it increases its membership, all of them clones of “Europe”. While there may be “union in diversity”, the member states are all the same when they deal with the rest of the world. More importantly, the cohesiveness of the EU centres on a set of values that favour dialogue and negotiation, not the violence that has been the hallmark of national (and ethnic) rivalries. Many of the features associated with Europe as a normative and civilian power are in evidence here: persuasive action, capacity to socialise others in the international arena to act differently in the face of the EU’s clear, consistent and coherent principles and actions.

The point here is not whether the images created by these sorts of representations are close to the reality but whether they are the basis for a sacred narrative of exceptionalism. While they may present the EU as a different kind of actor, and that this difference gives it a special role to play in international affairs, they are techniques that have been very much part of the construction of the ontological security of national states. It is less clear whether the narrative of EU exceptionalism has entrenched itself as political myth that can contribute to how the EU self-identifies, becomes the basis for its behaviour as an international actor and whether to question it would threaten the very basis of the polity.

We can assess the extent to which the political myth of the EU being a different kind of international actor helps sustain its ontological security by examining the recent crisis in the Ukraine. Even before tensions in the Ukraine escalated into an all out conflict that risked to re-write the rules-based order of post-war Europe, commentators were pointing out how it raised fundamental questions about the stories the EU told to construct its identity. For example, Jan Techau, of Carnegie Europe, wrote in December 2013:

Every liberal, open society needs the poetry of values to retain a healthy narrative of self. The EU, built on shakier, more artificial foundations, needs it twice as much. If the EU gives up too much of its values-based self, it may easily suffer irreparable damage. No wonder that it is often easier for the EU to stay on the sidelines than to get knee-deep in the geopolitical struggles in its wider neighborhood (Techau 2013).

The statement is interesting because it is not a question of capacity or capability that might keep the EU on the side-lines. Rather, the conflict with in the Ukraine and the tensions it has raised in relations with Russia put pressure on the sacred narrative of the EU as a different kind of actor. It is a question of the EU’s ontological security and the myth of an exceptional (normative) power that shapes how it will act.

What is interesting is that the EU did get drawn into geopolitical struggles without any major change in its internal institutional or policy architecture. There was (and is) concern that the narrative of “geopolitics” would tell the story of a different kind of political community than the one described by the sacred narrative of the EU as a unique international actor. A new narrative has begun to be crafted around the notion of a “European global strategy” (cfr: Dennison et al. 2013; see also the European Global Strategy project web site at: http://www.euglobalstrategy.eu/). The emphasis on “strategy” results from a discussion that has increasingly emphasised that the EU’s “soft power” might not be enough if other actors in the international system may not play by the same rules (Gowan and Witney 2014). The question that emerges is the point raised by Mitzen; that is, does being drawn into a game that is played by different rules change who the EU is and it is no longer so different. Seen along these lines, we might reach different conclusions about the effects of the crisis on the EU’s sense of self. The protestors in Maidan Square were seen as re-telling the myth of exceptionalism. As President Commission claimed, they were “writing a new narrative” for Europe (Barroso 2014:325). The EU as the beacon for political communities seeking democracy and prosperity was still seen to be a powerful narrative not only for the protestors but also for citizens of the EU member states. On the other hand, In a September 2013 speech calling for an enhanced defence policy, President Barroso spoke of how conflicts in the EU’s neighbourhood were, “powerful reminder that we have not reached the end of history” (Barroso 2014:300). Barroso’s comments suggest that the myth of exceptionalism still continues to be used. The EU is post-historical, perhaps ahead of its time as states are reverting back to practices doomed by history.

The crisis in the Ukraine has raised questions about the content of the myth of exceptionalism as much as about the form. Successful narratives, those that make events understandable and acceptable, present a resolution to a crisis. The reader may not know how the story will end but they know that it will. The Ukraine crisis highlights that sacred narratives of the EU do not have an ending; that is, not that the EU cannot resolve the conflict but that resolution is open-ended. The EU does not have fixed borders so the question of whether the Ukrainians will be able to share in the myth of exceptionalism – whether it becomes part of the Ukraine’s ontological security – is ambiguous. As Bouchard argues, successful myths need clearly defined political communities for them to resonate with cognitive and normative schemes that form the basis of collective representations. The myth of exceptionalism becomes understandable when it is clear who is part of the unique political community and why. The problem that the Ukraine crisis has highlighted for the narrative of the EU as a normative power is not that this is, as Tonra argues (Tonra 2011), largely limited to the policy and political elites. The protestors in Maidan Square suggest it may be more widespread than that. The challenge is that the policy and political elites can only provide part of the story.

***The Myth of a Social Europe***

A narrative that is as central to the EU’s ontological security is that it is the bastion of a unique approach to reconciling markets and social responsibility. The EU is “exceptional” in its approach to social and economic policy, as well as international relations. It is seen as guardian of Europe’s “social model”, an approach to governing market economies that sets it apart from the rest of the global economy (Wincott 2003). The EU White Paper on Social Policy stated that the aim of social policy was to, “[t]o give the people of Europe the unique blend of economic wellbeing, social cohesiveness and high overall quality of life which was achieved in the post-war period.” (Commission of the European Communities 1994:1-2). This firm belief that the social market economy was something exceptional to Europe was captured in the Treaties, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and is widely diffused throughout policy and political debates. Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida argued that Europe’s “domestication of global capitalism” was one of the EU’s two singular and defining achievements – “governance beyond the nation state being the other – that could serve as a model for a new global order (Habermas and Derrida 2003:294). The narrative has a foil in the form of “anglo-Saxon” capitalism that prizes short-term gains in contrast to continental forms that favour social cohesion and stability (Albert 1993).

The differences between the different types of Europe were not an obstacle to the narrative of a social Europe; they were simply another expression of the “unity in diversity” that makes the EU exceptional. For example, a recent report drafted by leading social policy figures and academic experts claimed that:

The EU is a union of welfare states, diverse in their history, architecture and achievements, but bound by shared values. In other words, we do not willingly tolerate inequalities in our societies and believe public policies should protect the vulnerable and support the development of people’s skills and education. We also share the view that social dialogue and well-organised industrial relations are crucial, and that jobs should be associated with decent conditions in terms of pay and working and living conditions… Social rights make European welfare states unique, (Europe 2015:17)

Whether European welfare states are unique or are less tolerant of inequality is less important here than the construction of a shared understanding of how to distribute wealth and deal with the consequences of a market economy. In this view, the EU is not comprised of three (or four) worlds of welfare capitalism but is a “union of welfare states” that becomes “we” in its approach to inequality. Moreover, this approach to capitalism makes the “union of welfare states” unique.

We can find a version of the social model narrative in the comic book figure, Captain Euro. While lacking the gravitas of nineteenth- century Romanticism, superheroes do convey normative and cognitive maps that trace how a community defines itself (Costello and Worcester 2014, Dittmer 2014); and the link between identity and the euro has been argued extensively (Risse 2003). Clearly, Captain Euro is modelled on Captain America, the Marvel comic book hero who fought evil that essentially paralleled first Nazism and then Communism. The same dynamic of the defender of the community’s values struggling in a hostile world is presented in trying to teach children about the single currency through Captain Euro (Frank 1998). The character, created and promoted on a dedicated website, was financed by the EU and is meant to embody the basic values of the EU. Captain Euro is Andrew Andros (the reference to a Greek island very much present in accounts of antiquity may be coincidental) in everyday life, who is a polyglot and the son of a European ambassador, thus highlighting Europe’s openness to the world. He runs an agency, “The Twelve Stars Organisation” (a reference to the EU flag), whose aim is “to defend the security of Europe and uphold the values of the Union” (<http://www.captaineuro.com/index.htm>). He vows to use, “intellect, culture and logic”, not violence, to resolve conflict, a central tenet of EU foreign policy. Aided by members of his team, such as Europa and Pythagoras, “Euro combines his acquired language and technology skills with his international 'savoir faire' and his natural investigative curiosity, to protect Europe and carry Europe's message of goodwill around the world.” More importantly, the superhero is an attempt to render the complex world of global financial markets as a simple morality tale with the euro acting as a shield to protect Europeans from evil forces such as speculators (part of a sinister organisation called the, “Baddies”). The Captain Euro series was modified in 2014 and now has the hero more directly involved with current European issues. For instance, one recent comic strip was called, “Working with Renzi to Reform Italy”. The Captain Euro story has a very clear objective: to construct the euro as part of a broader political project to ensure that basic European values are protected from global forces, and possibly to export them to other parts of the world as they clearly have universal appeal, according to the story.

Captain Euro stories have not had the widespread success, neither commercial nor social, of the Marvel Comics series in the United States, but they are an indication that the Commission feels the need to help construct a normative story to render more simple and understandable one of the EU’s most ambitious projects, the creation of a single currency. This story presents Europe as a bastion of the social market in a world of speculative finance, with the Euro as the shield to protect the homeland of humane capitalism. But it is not just comic strip characters that set up the dichotomy of a virtuous Europe that defends itself from the destructive forces of other forms of capitalism. As Jepson and Pasqual demonstrate in deconstructing the discourse of the ESM: “One important feature is the concept’s symbolic reliance on the American model, to which it implicitly or explicitly refers, while at the same time clearly assuming its own superiority” (Jepsen and Pascual 2005:232-33). They show how the discourses of both policy and academic texts construct a narrative that traces the emergence of welfare states as the resolution of the social crises unleashed by the transition to modern capitalism. Almost paralleling the narrative of the EU as the bulwark against the destructive forces of nationalism, the political myth of the social model is Europe’s unique response that has solved the seemingly inherent social conflict within capitalism economies. To challenge this story is to question not only the social model but also how the EU defines who it is.

Arguments about ontological security would lead us to examine not whether the economic crisis of the last eight years has led to a weakening of the European social model (Cafruny and Ryner 2003, Ryner 2010). Rather, the question is whether the instruments that have helped provide and define the confidence in shaping an identity around a social model continue to be effective ways for narrating the European story. The issue here is whether the myth of social Europe continues to contribute to the “political messianism” of the European ideal and is the basis for a “we” (Weiler 2012).

The narrative of Europe’s social dimension changed in content and form as the crisis progressed. When the first signs of turmoil in financial markets began to appear in the United States, it was widely assumed that it was not going to spread to Europe.[[3]](#footnote-3) There was reason to be optimistic that the financial storm would not reach Europe’s shores. The housing bubbles in Spain, Britain, and Ireland were worrying, but it was generally felt that these would not lead to any systemic risks. There was more than a little finger-wagging at reckless “American” capitalism. And for those sectors of European society that had always remained suspicious if not hostile to forms of economic liberalization, the crisis in the United States was vindication of the European model of the social market economy. However as it became apparent that the Lehman Brothers collapse was more catalyst than agent of a broader economic crisis, the discourse changed in Europe as well. When Greece’s sovereign debt problems emerged in 2009, the myth of an exceptional European approach to capitalism seemed fragile.

The narrative of the “union of welfare states” has been challenged by one that emphasises different cultural approaches to the economy and social regulation. The “unity in diversity” has turned into a different morality tale, one that pits virtuous north versus the spendthrift; what were once “Tigers” became “PIIGS”. (Brazys and Hardiman 2015). The narratives that have emerged in the wake of the crisis reveal some of the fragility of the myth of the EU’s exceptional social model. The myth worked insofar as it could construct an adversary that helped provide coherence to an otherwise divided political community. However, the narratives of the last seven years have increasingly started to identify adversaries within the political community itself. Moreover, whereas the euro was to be shield to protect the unique social model, it was increasingly seen as the source of its demise.

In an interview in which he declared that the European social model was “gone”, ECB President Mario Draghi identified the “other” as structural rigidities in some of the crisis hit member states (Blackstone, Karnitschnig and Thomson 2012). While his ringing of the death knell of the social model received a great deal of attention, what is more striking here is his construction of the virtuous and the damned. He highlighted the extent to which there were fundamental differences in how different parts of Europe managed their economies and social regulation. His comments were consistent with a decade long discussion about the viability of the social model in a global economy (Ferrera, Hemerijck and Rhodes 2001).

The issue is not whether the crisis has increased the distance between the myth and the “reality” of European welfare states. Rather, it is whether the European social model is still held as sacred narrative that binds the political community. Eurobarometer surveys show that the number of respondents that list social policy as one of the elements that defines Europe has declined from 15% in 2001 to 7% in 2014. Moreover, Draghi’s comments, which have been repeated by other European leaders, indicate that the narrative is no longer as sacred as it once was. Even Captain Euro goes on a mission to help Italian Prime Minister reform Italian labour markets and make it more “competitive.

**Conclusion**

The EU is not so different after all. There are stories that render it exceptional that are not that distant in their content from those that have emerged from nation and state building exercises. Like states, these sacred narratives help define how and why it is a political community; and it helps guide what is done in the name of the community. Despite the claims that the EU is *sui generis* actor that has gone beyond the techniques and practices that led to the meta-narratives of state and nation, it has faced the same tension of having to reconcile universal values within the constructed boundaries of a defined political community. The two narratives of the EU as a normative power and the European Social Model have tried to construct a myth of an exceptional polity that has tamed the tensions of the modern era.

However, unlike states, narratives of the EU can provide only a beginning and a middle but not an end. The fact there is no clear political destination means that even compelling myths of exceptionalism can provide only a limited amount of certainty about how things should end and why. This limits how much they can contribute to the EU’s ontological security. They cannot provide the routinized responses that contribute to collective actors sense of being whole and consistent in time. The success of a political myth requires that they resonate with existing cognitive scheme and with a political ideal that is clearly defined. The crisis in the Ukraine and the economic crisis have highlighted how the answer to the question of who is the EU requires both the narrative form and content that makes the ending understandable and acceptable.

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1. While recognising that it is a gross over-simplification, the paper will use the term “Europe” to refer to the European Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The video called, *Growing Together*, can still be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E2B\_yI8jrI. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a review of the reaction in the European press to the Lehman Brothers collapse and its aftermath, see: http://www.dw.de/european-press-review-fallout-from-the-lehman-brothers/a-3648290). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)