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The Idea of 'Europe' and the Origin of the European Union – A Sociological Approach

Richard Swedberg

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Abstract

According to the scholarly literature on the origin of the European Union, EU traces its beginnings to events during the years just after World War II and possibly also to various economic and political events during the interwar period. But there also exist a number of works which are often ignored in the academic debate and which claim that the European community has a very much more distant past - often stretching as far back as the Middle Ages or even to Antiquity. These works, which have developed into a discourse of their own, look at the development of what they call "the European Idea" and how this has developed over the centuries. This article presents and analyzes the discourse on the European Idea, mainly with the help of Emile Dürkheim's notion of "collective representations". It is argued that there exist interesting affinities between this discourse and the type of collective representations that Dürkheim was very interested in towards the end of his life, namely community creating collective representations. The works on the European Idea, it is claimed, often exaggerate how far back one can trace the European community. They nonetheless have an important contribution to make to the standard literature on the origin of EU through their emphasis on the role of ideas, ideals and cultural symbols.

About the article

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