

Demos and Democracy

Is it worth dreaming of a European democracy? Is there such a thing as the ‘European people’? And if not, how come we talk about democracy without unity? The answers to these highly legitimate questions are often superficial.

by Sylvie Goulard

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For those opposed to a united Europe, there is no such thing as the people, or ‘the *demos*’. Therefore it is impossible to imagine an overarching democracy beyond sovereign states.

The historical truth is different. In Athens, belonging to a pre-existing *demos* was not a justification for exercising democratic privileges, it was the reverse: it was commonly-shared decisions that gave rise to a new *demos*. It was thanks to a far-sighted politician in the sixth century BC, Cleisthenes, who started to free Athenian politics from family ties, previously considered as ‘natural’, to finally create a new people. Of course it’s no surprise that ‘tribal’ instincts were opposed to the emergence of an open society. In a rapidly changing world, however, it is not possible to continue viewing the people as an unchanging entity, an eternally fixed point. As the French historian Pierre Rosanvallon writes, in the collective interest, to exclude “a human grouping that is only contemplated in terms of a given homogeneity (...) is not only undemocratic but is also not even political... Compared to the concept of identity, the notion of community is generally reduced to a catalogue of nostalgia and clichés. (...) This is how it becomes passive, conservative, unable to enlighten a future and give meaning to a new world”.

Viewing identity as a given is also strange when considering the history of Europe. “The majority of national histories”, wrote Emmanuel Berl, a French historian from the last century, “are mythologies, which were bestowed with an incredible lyrical power and an extraordinarily effective emotional appeal in the 19th century. Not only did they serve to glorify the nation but also to justify and rekindle rivalry between countries (...)”.

Nationalists are convinced that Europe is an “artificial” entity. As if our national histories were not literally teeming with lies and staged events. It’s not just the Italians who were ‘made’: the French and German nations also emerged thanks to propaganda peddled in schools and in the army. The purpose of two books like *Cuore [Heart]* by Edmondo De Amicis and *Le tour de France par deux enfants* by Augustine Fouillée (published under the pseudonym of G. Bruno), both published in the 1870s, was very similar.

Since we live in this context, we are convinced it will be difficult to ‘build’ Europe. In actual fact it is difficult to dismantle the enduring myths and the occasional short-sighted prejudice that blinds us to the existence of these myths. To quote Berl again, to create Europe “there is no need to hide the truth, you just need to say it out loud”. National boundaries have not

put paid to this continent’s great adventures, like the construction of the abbeys, the splendours of gothic cathedrals, the Protestant Reformation and the baroque excesses of the Counter-Reformation.

It does not make much sense to separate Flemish from Italian painting when they mutually stimulated each other. Antonello da Messina and Jan Van Eyck would have found it strange, to say the least. At the time of the French Enlightenment, exchanges between philosophers knew no national boundaries.

In any case, there is a very simple reason that should push the European people towards union: the euro. If we want to keep the single currency, if it is true that this currency necessitates convergent economic, social, fiscal and budgetary policies, then these areas of interest must also comply with democratic needs.

The Council of Europe is providing clear factual evidence that, without a democratic debate about the crucial choices to be made, without the management team being held accountable before a parliament, Europe cannot be effective and will lose legitimacy over time. The emergency of the financial crisis meant quick decisions had to be taken. But one cannot handle a social crisis over the long term, as EU Member States are trying to do.

If nothing happens in European governance, not only does Europe risk destruction, but national democracies would also be in danger too. Asking citizens to elect a national-level government where decisions are no longer taken and not allowing them to elect those making the real decisions (in this case the European Commission) can only generate frustration and populism.

I think Europe’s number one challenge is not economic, but political. **E**