CYCLE ON THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPACE: "HEADING TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS"

THE EU: LOOKING FOR SYMBOLS?

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EuroCité, Europartenaires and *Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute* organised the third seminar in a cycle on the European public space entitled "Heading Towards the European Elections" on the topic of "Europe: symbols and memory(ies)" in Paris on 20 June 2013.

The conference was introduced by Jean-Noël JEANNENEY, the president of *Europartenaires*, who endeavoured to define the links between symbols, memories and the European public space. This was followed by a debate moderated by Frédéric MÉNAGER, the secretary general of *EuroCité*, in which the speakers were:

- François FORET, professor of political science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles;
- Philippe PERCHOC, a post-doctoral fellow with the CECRI, Université catholique de Louvain;
- Bernard RICHARD, a history graduate and former cultural attaché to the French Embassies in Chile, Ecuador and Egypt.

Yves BERTONCINI, the director of *Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, wound up the debate with a few concluding remarks.

1. The EU in search of symbols and a single memory

Jean-Noël JEANNENEY first discussed the special link that exists between culture, identity, symbols and memories. Culture is intrinsic to individuals and to countries, and bounds to their perception of their identity, while memories and symbols are the emblematic objects which represent that identity.

The European Union today needs to multiply those symbols, which would be added to national symbols. Yves BERTONCINI pegged this need for symbolism to the European project's ceaseless search for legitimacy, a need it shares with every political entity. Thus the EU is based on three major kinds of legitimacy. First of all, there is the legitimacy of results, given that the EU's primary goal was to ensure peace on the continent of Europe. Having now achieved that goal, the EU has set itself new objectives, but these are not indivisible; choices are made and they do not invariably garner unanimous support. Secondly, the EU's legitimacy is based on citizens' involvement, but they perceive a certain distance between themselves and the European institutions which are accused of suffering from a democracy deficit. Thirdly, the EU seeks to build its own intrinsic legitimacy, in other words the legitimacy to form a single cohesive unit. EU's quest for symbols and memories is linked to this third register.

In this time of economic crisis, the issue of symbols and memories takes on a crucial importance because the EU needs even greater legitimacy (François FORET). The economic climate is fanning the flames of the problem of ties among the people of Europe; because the crisis raises the issue of the payment of Greece's debt. The Greeks have a weak government, when over state control is a feature of Europe; the Greeks are practising Orthodox, when the predominant trend in Europe is towards secularisation; the Greeks are considered "lazy", when the EU aims to spearhead the development of the information economy. These stereotypes determine the borders of a European identity and of supranational solidarity.

The crisis is also rekindling memories of other European crises from the past. In the protests against austerity in Greece, unhappy citizens have been carrying aloft the portrait of Angela Merkel dressed in Nazi garb. Philippe PERCHOC also highlighted the fact that the crisis is bringing the issue of the interpretation of history back onto the agenda. Thus the EU is not seeking to forge a common history, but common interpretations with which the people of Europe might identify.

This is a contentious process, and it is bolstered by the question of who has the legitimacy to make such choices. While in France, for instance, it has been ruled that the state takes such memorial decisions (François FORET), no one has the necessary legitimacy to play that role at the European level. The European Parliament has been debating these memorial issues since the 1980s (Philippe PERCHOC). The Shoah was the central theme in the early years, followed by the issue of Stalinism in the 1990s. The European Parliament has gradually mastered these issues in order to forge a unified memory, yet this deliberative process is complex on account of the political use made of memories and of the personal links that they often have with the parliamentarians. Memory- and symbol-related decisions are built to make the past acceptable and to bolster ties between the citizens and the European integration. At this juncture the parliamentarians' legitimacy to make such decisions is being called into question, and the same problems have arisen at the national level.

In addition to this symbolism quest, it is also necessary to determine the means whereby these common symbols are transmitted. The new credit line entitled "New Narrative for Europe" is representative of this issue, because the European Commission uses it primarily for the purpose of communication and only secondarily to fund historical research (Philippe PERCHOC). Plans for common school textbooks are funded since, as Bernard RICHARD argued, Europe's historical bases are compatible. But when the time of adoption come, a common textbook rekindles differences of perception; and the European Parliament cannot offer its approval because the symbolic and memorial space is occupied by the member states (François FORET).

2. European symbols of today and tomorrow

While they may not appear as such in the European treaties since the rejection of the constitutional treaty in 2005, European symbols do exist. Sixteen EU member states officially recognise them thanks to Common Declaration 52 in the Lisbon Treaty.

First of all, the EU has its flag, which is used by national and European civil servants (Jean-Noël JEANNENEY) and by the citizens, as shows its appearance in some demonstrations. It is a symbol of freedom when the citizens use it to claim homosexuals' rights; a symbol of Christian Europe when they use the twelve stars to reaffirm the continent's religious roots; it is also a symbol for the countries that aspire to join the EU, in order to demonstrate their belonging to the group (François FORET).

The EU also has a motto, "United in Diversity"; a European day on May 9, day of Schuman Declaration; and an anthem, the "Ode to Joy" (Yves BERTONCINI). And finally, even if all the member states do not have it, the single currency is a symbol. In addition to the commonly accepted symbols, stereotypes are equally significant and not necessarily always negative. They are part of a collective psyche that forms a European memory (François FORET).

Europe has a multitude of resources regarding symbols and memories. There are some commonly accepted European figures, even if the actual personalities in question may vary according to the country: Marie Curie, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Victor Hugo are good examples of such figures (Jean-Noël JEANNENEY). The EU needs great men and women to embody it. These figures could be mythical ones as well, like Europa, the nymph abducted by Zeus who is said to have given her name to our continent; and Cadmus, her brother who went off after her without succeeding, could represent the EU as it constantly

moves forward without really knowing its destination. Whether we are talking about its Christian or its Greco-Roman roots, it is rich in resources. They could easily replace the impersonal bridges and architectural monuments currently depicted on our euro bank notes.

Thus the EU could follow the path of countries such as France, which built its identity around Marianne, or the United States, which built their identity around its founding fathers (Bernard RICHARD). The memory of great figures unites because they never grow old. And the same applies to animal or vegetable figures. The bull and the plane tree could be the EU's symbols, again referring to the myth of Europa's abduction.

Europe also has a large number of symbolic sites such as Alesia (Jean-Noël JEANNENEY). Unfortunately, these sites are frequently linked to the European civil wars that the continent has experienced and thus they often fail to attract unanimous support (Bernard RICHARD). In this connection the European Parliament launched a programme for awarding the European Heritage Label to European sites back in the 1980s; the Parthenon was its first beneficiary (Philippe PERCHOC).

Concerning potential European dates in history, a problem of differences of perception is added to the issue of the memory of European wars. Memory is inherently contentious because it embodies the struggle between different visions of the past (François FORET), thus there is a great deal of work to be done on memory before reconciling Europeans around their histories. While the EU performed that very task of reconciliation in the West until 1989, it now needs to do so also in the East if it wants to forge unity in diversity (Yves BERTONCINI). The example of 8 May 1945 is emblematic. The date, commonly accepted as the end of World War II in Occidental Europe, has no significance whatsoever for the Lithuanians, who continued their struggle with Russia until 1953–1955 (Philippe PERCHOC).

European history in the 20th century is a painful history, primarily because it has fallen silent. A liberation process began in 1989, accompanied by a deliberative process concerning such traumatic events as the Katyn Forest massacre. Then claims start to appear, the Poles for instance used the number of their casualties in World War II to demand a more significant role in the European institutions. This work on memory calls a sufficient time to allow those concerned to shed the symbolic weight of the events involved, and that period of time cannot be compressed. It is necessary to liberate, to organise, to set in context and even to conclude certain memorial debates through public policies, because these decisions have an impact on Europe and on its citizens (François FORET).

3. The absence of symbolism in a peaceful and depoliticised Europe

It must be noted today that European citizens have not taken these symbols on board. Given that there is currently no such thing as a European public space or as European referents, and that symbols are prisms magnifying reality, the symbolisation of the EU is perceived as being "counter-systemic" (François FORET).

One explanation may lie in the comparison between national symbols and European ones. In French history, in particular, symbols provoke equally vigorous fervour or disapproval (Bernard RICHARD). French symbols are the result of a spiritual civil war between the monarchy and the republic, as evinced in particular by the symbols of either side such as the *fleur de lys* and the Gallic rooster. France gradually became synonymous with the notion of a republic and those symbols gradually gained recognition, but only after a struggle lasting many long years. The Phrygian cap, for instance, was not accepted until 1889.

The EU, however, has had only a short life so far, whereas it takes time to build symbols and memories (Yves BERTONCINI). Moreover, the EU is peaceful in nature, it has been built on peace, and thus no European symbol provokes the same degree of fervour (Bernard RICHARD). Besides, the EU is a

post-modern construction justified by its results, a construction based on the primacy of interests which talks to individuals as consumers and as travellers, but hardly as citizens. Citizen culture, identity and participation are not part of the results. The EU is depoliticised in favour of an expert rationality. Politics is the area in which clashes are expressed and resolved, and where symbols are used to produce unity without a consensus so that each player can identify with the symbols of the groups to which they belong. The EU's very nature prevents it from developing a symbolism of its own (François FORET).

This lack of conflict comes in addition to the absence of any political will on the member states' part. While the European institutions have attempted to develop a European psyche, they cannot go beyond the mandate assigned to them. The legitimacy of the EU and of its institutions continues to rest on national legitimacies. But the member states do not want to get into that debate. Cultural and identity issues are topics in connection with the very core of their own legitimacy; that is the reason why member states have always been resistant.

Moreover, the development of a European symbolism becomes more complicated as the EU grows. Back in the days when Europe had six members, it was still possible to get to know the various member states and their people. Now that there are twenty-eight member states, getting to know another state has become a very tough task indeed because it has become nearly impossible to gain any personal experience of it. Thus the Europeans rely increasingly on *ad hoc* symbols and stereotypes, their appropriation is even more difficult since imposed by institutions with which they are not familiar (Philippe PERCHOC).

Bearing in mind the time that it would take to build a European symbolism, it is helpful to step back and use space. As Pascal Lamy often points out, the gaze that others rest on us fosters unity (Yves BERTONCINI). While from the inside, individuals fail to identify with factors that all Europeans appear to share (Jean-Noël JEANNENEY), other countries do distinguish the Europeans and Europe from the other continents on the basis of, among other things, a common past. Seen from Chile or from Singapore, the European model stands out for its determination to reconcile economic efficiency with social cohesion, the protection of the environment and democratic pluralism. A form of legitimacy can emerge from this common project pursued by European integration. The solution lies partly in the globalisation process, because that is the level at which the European model and its values take on their full meaning (Yves BERTONCINI).

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