EU democracy should be based on the principle of respecting diverse identities, not uniting through the creation of a European demos

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Is the development of a European 'demos' necessary for the EU to be democratic? **Daniel Innerarity** *writes that while a shared demos is often put forward as a fundamental aspect of democracy, it also entails certain negative developments, such as a tendency toward excluding those from outside of the group. He argues that the EU should be seen as an opportunity to build a community based on respecting the complex nature of European identification, rather than producing a single identity shared by all EU citizens.*

Democratic decisions, we are assured, take place at the heart of political communities that are based on confidence and solidarity, while nothing similar exists within a transnational political community. Against those who consider Europe cannot be truly democratic because it has no demos, I think that 1) these types of solidarities can be constructed on a level that presents different characteristics of state space and, furthermore, 2) they have a constructive or emerging character that does not stem so much from old identifications as from practices shared through time and future expectations.

The sceptical point of view over-estimates the values that collective action would require (these values are not that substantive or unattainable and can be created by intense cooperation) while simultaneously under-estimating the force of reasons in the coordination of actions. History shows us the extent to which identities and solidarities are constructed; noting this contingency allows us to understand them as something that can erode and even disappear, but that can also spring up and increase through collaborative processes. Why not in the European Union? Why can there not be *community building* – creating confidence and solidarity – where there once was *nation building*, at least the creation of the minimum community that would be required by the solidarity that current circumstances demand? The Eurobarometer is a measuring tool, not a normative institution.

Instead of complaining that Europe has no *demos*, we should be asking ourselves what good would come from having one and what functions can be achieved by other methods. Even more importantly: whether this functional equivalent at the European level could be conceived without the inconveniences that the concept of the *demos* has for democracy, its genealogical logic, its tendency to exclusion, its resistance to porousness, its inconsiderateness towards anything that is different from it.

The post-national concept of the people would instead point towards the community of those who are affected, the "stakeholders," which is potentially more democratic than the community of the authors or members. Therefore, the democratic question should not be presented as *from what group of perfectly identified and delimited people does all power originate,* but *what type of communitarisation should we shape* when matters that should be governed with some institutional innovation arise. In some ways, we have moved from thinking about "community that gives itself a government in order to resolve certain problems" to "problems for which we must create a structure of government and thus configure a community."

When we speak of democracy and, concretely, about the relationship between society, polity, and decision-making, the first question we should ask is: what community for what democracy? It is essential to clarify the type of *demos* that is required by the type of democracy we are considering, in this case, the one that suits a polity such as the European Union. To tackle this question properly, we must reject heroic conceptions of identity, pre-political rigidity, and the tendency to think of identity as a homogeneous reality. In short: we must begin to understand it

primordially as a practice.

But furthermore, taking the nation state as a model implies some degree of idealisation of contingent historical processes that are not particularly exemplary in many ways. It makes no sense to project our communitarian frustrations onto an idealisation – implicit or explicit – of the nation states, many of which imagined an ethnically defined homogeneity, a culture of precise contours, a common destiny, and unconditional state power.

The preconception that democracy and the constitution can only exist within a delimited *demos*, within a homogeneous ("relatively homogeneous" is what the German Constitutional Court decision on Maastricht says) and united nation state is still very much with us. However, the democratic nations do not necessarily have that degree of homogeneity nor should we assume that it is impossible to configure a democratic constitutionalism without that emphatic unity.

EU democracy – Guy Verhofstadt voting during the election of the next President of the European Parliament on 1 July 2014, Credit: © European Union 2014 – European Parliament (CC-BY-SA-NC-ND-3.0)

Why not think of the European Union as an opportunity to create a community based upon a conception of polity that is more respectful with its complexity and less obsessed with producing its unity as homogeneity? In the same way as European integration is a challenge for the very idea of constitutional law, for its legal monopoly, and its hierarchical organisation, it also represents an excellent opportunity to understand collective identities in another fashion. It is, thanks to the European experiment, possible to completely dissociate the idea of community from any reference to a determinant past and a homogeneous identity. It is an opportunity for identities to be balanced by reflexivity, to be weaker and self-limited, under the common principle of shared humanity.

The European Union is a refutation of the idea that the nation state is the only site of community and identity politics. A uniform national identity is not a requirement for democracy or for solidarity. Not even liberal inter-governmentalism, with its assumptions of rational choice, nor neo-functionalism with its idea of a spill-over process have been able to explain how non-coercive integration has come about and, especially, how it can continue developing under new conditions with actors with such varied interests.

What should be explained empirically and normatively is how we can configure a true European community capable of confronting the new obligations of justice, the harsh reality of which we have seen during the Eurozone crisis. The European democratic experiment consists precisely of attempting to realise a fair division of responsibilities and opportunities, of costs and benefits, without the guarantee of old-style national organic solidarity.

This article is based on a longer LEQS – 'Europe in Question' discussion paper

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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