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The Difficult Emergence of a European People
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No demos?

When academics and journalists alike think of the ‘failures’ of European integration, one of the most usual arguments to be heard is that 60 years of European integration have yet failed to create a widely felt sense of European identity. This ‘non-identity’ thesis takes a more formal meaning in academic research, whereby scholars complain that there is no such thing as a ‘European demos’ (for example, Gabel and Anderson 2001; Scharpf 1999). For too long, the notion that there is no such thing as a European demos has been accepted as a given despite remarkably little conceptual precision and empirical evidence.

The supporters of the absence of demos argument usually dismiss it around three main ideas. They first claim that citizens of Europe do not feel European ‘but’ French, German or British instead and they are, in fact further and further away from Europe as evidenced by the success of Eurosceptic ideas in many European Union (EU) countries. They then accuse European Parliament elections of being a failure based on a turnout perceived as low and ever-declining. Finally, they suggest that democratic movements are not synchronic across Europe but instead completely country-specific. In this chapter, we question all three aspects of this argument, and provide elements that suggest that most either correspond to a very partial view of the European reality or even rely on wholly mistaken or outdated perceptions.

Understanding the extent to which a mass European identity has emerged, and whether this identification movement is centrifugal across member states or, on the contrary, places national polities on diverging identity trajectories represents important stakes, developed by Hayward (see Chapter 1 in this volume), in terms of the hiatus between
sovereignty and solidarity as proposed ways forward for the EU. Firstly, the theme of divergence is essentially exploited by those who assert that the political unification of the EU is not matched by an emerging identity but instead a threat to the sovereignty not only of states but also of people. Secondly, the theme of an underlying identity is used by those who require Europeans to engage significant economic and social sacrifices in the name of solidarity. At a time when the increasing politicisation of Europe transforms the very nature of citizen identities (Harrison and Bruter 2012), whether the salvation of Europe must stem from a return to more safeguarded national sovereignty or an increase in the institutionalisation of European political solidarity will therefore continue to determine the terms of the political debates which are exposed to citizens as the fundamental choices that will define the available routes for European integration in coming years.

Paradoxes of identity

Remember May 2005? Within a week, French and Dutch citizens voted against the ratification of the treaty which was supposed to ‘establish a Constitution for the European Union’. The interpretations of the press (and particularly the British press) were remarkably severe: there was a divorce between Europe and its citizens, Europeans wanted less Europe, not more, people simply did not feel Europeans. The reactions of politicians – including Eurocrats – followed the same logic; President Barroso suggested that citizens wanted a more ‘technical’ Europe that would deal with the economy and not with politics. We should get rid of the symbols of the EU because citizens did not identify with the EU. Such interpretations of the democratic earthquake of the spring of 2005 did not seem to rely on much serious empirical assessment of European identity, while the more serious analysis existing so far (for example, Hooghe and Marks 2006) is much more cautious in its interpretation of the referenda results.

When we look at the existing political science literature, a first body of work routinely claims that there is no such thing as a European identity and that it has never emerged (see full discussion in Bruter 2005). Direct references to a lack of identity, however, are increasingly rare in contemporary academic research, and a more preponderant claim does not revolve around identity per se but suggests, instead, that typical levels of scepticism towards European integration are not lower today than they were 10 years ago (McLaren 2007; Herrmann et al. 2004). Authors back this claim by reference to Eurobarometer results, which