Explaining the Domesticisation Deficit

The twin deficit of domesticisation (lack of identity) and politicisation (lack of agonistic conflict) substitutes in my approach the concept of “communications deficit”. Rather than considering Eurosceptic media and uncooperative national politicians as the source of the lack of popular political engagement with European politics, I move the target away from the senders and mediators (politicians and journalists) and put the focus on the cultural and systemic constraints of the EU: the absence of a European demos and the curious mixture of neocorporatism, functionalism and diplomatic rule that inspires the government of the pseudoconfederation that the EU is today.

The domesticisation deficit is defined as the incomplete or absent identification between the government and the governed. Domesticisation, like politicisation, can be seen as a continuum. At one extreme a total lack of domesticisation means that government institutions are seen as alien intruders. At the other extreme, government institutions would be seen as an appropriate and convenient channel for the representation of the will of the community. The UK would be placed close to the low domesticisation pole. Spain would be far from that extreme but not close to the opposite side either, as European institutions are accepted but not yet seen as the right vehicle for popular sovereignty. The EU is not fully domestic (a home, family reality) in Spain. The EU is only domestic to the community of actors closely involved in its policies. Hence my claim that the most European thing in Europe is the network of EU actors themselves.

As noted in the content analysis chapter, domesticisation and politicisation are closely related to each other. A high degree of positive domesticisation should lead to agonistic politicisation (there is an agreement on the representivity of the institutions, so political conflict
is geared towards achieving temporal hegemony over the community), whereas negative domesticisation would be related to antagonistic politicisation (if institutions are not felt to be the right vehicle for popular sovereignty, their legitimacy will be contested and the political fight will not be between or among community members but between members of different communities).

My concern with the domesticisation of EU political institutions is inspired by Carl Schmitt’s claim that democracies are, in essence, a regime of identity between the ruler and the ruled (Schmitt, 2008 [1926], 2009 [1932]). If in a democracy the ultimate power-holder is the demos, the government must be seen as representative of that political community, to the point that the demos feels that it is being governed by itself. In the case of the EU, the distance between the governing institutions and the people is so wide that, according to Eurobarometer figures, half of Europeans ignore the fact that the EP is a popularly elected institution (Farrell and Scully, 2007).

The constant clash between Europhiles and Eurosceptics in the UK obscures the fact that full identification with the EU is not a matter of positive or negative feelings towards their institutions or towards the idea of Europe. In Spain, the EU is positively regarded, but it is still seen as remote and distant. There seems to be a glass ceiling of identification and politicisation with regard to the EU. It can never be felt as domestic, as a home reality; nor can it be easily politicised on a left versus right axis. The reason is disappointingly simple, and has been much debated in the political science literature but frequently ignored by communications scholars: the no demos problem, or the absence of a European people.

In this chapter, I draw on interviews and observations with the EU network of political actors to report on the cases where I found positive and negative domesticisation of the EU (see the Methodological Appendix II for details of the selection of informants). A sense of failed domestication prevails, even among the pro-EU Galician actors. My informants have some indigenous explanations for this: the elusive European identity, the lack of a common language and the inexistence of a European space of communication. Interestingly, I detected some instances of a conscious separation of the civic and cultural identity, which offers dim prospects for a European democracy but a stable basis for the current managerial state whose legitimacy is grounded on efficiency and delivery rather than on direct popular sovereignty.

To some MEPs, and also to some relevant EU scholars such as Andrew Moravcsik (1998), the remoteness of European institutions is