

The EU's existential aim was to create Europeans. In this, it has failed

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In the second of two extracts from a new Theos report, *A Soul for the Union*, **Ben Ryan** asks how the EU can become a less elite project – one in which citizens share a common identity that transcends economic performance and the inevitable national loyalties.



The European project has become – perhaps has always been – largely an elite-driven, technocratic project. In Jürgen Habermas's words, "in its current form, the European Union owes its existence to the efforts of political elites who could count on the passive consent of their more or less indifferent populations."¹

That this is a problem has long been recognised at both ends of the political spectrum. The 'democratic deficit' as an issue has been addressed by countless academic books and articles and has also concerned European leaders. The efforts in the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties to improve the democratic situation (by increasing the power of the European parliament and by directly electing MEPs, Members of the European Parliament) were sincere, although they have been undermined during the debt crisis, which has been dominated by the European Council (made up of European heads of government) and particularly by the leadership of the French Presidents and German Chancellor.

Existential problem

What much of the academic discourse seems to miss is that the problem is not simply technical – it is not just that democratic accountability in some roles is imperfect, or that the difficulties in responsiveness and representation have not yet been worked out. The issue is the deeper existential problem that the EU has not successfully created Europeans. There is a missing identity.

The academic Larry Siedentop identifies this as a problem which has come from elites pressing forward too rapidly with their technical solutions and leaving public opinion and accountability behind. In *Democracy in Europe* he argued:

Some European nations continue to speak a 'purer' language of federalism, notably the Germans and the Dutch. But that language no longer carries conviction throughout Europe, where public opinion, dazed by the speed with which monetary union is being imposed, and uncertain about its implications, has a growing sense that the elites of Europe have left public opinion far behind... In their pronouncements the elites of Europe have fallen victims to the tyranny of economic language at the expense of political values such as the dispersal of power and democratic accountability.²

If that seemed pressing in 2000 it has surely been brought home all the more by the increasingly desperate efforts to allay the Euro crisis, not least in Greece, where the national democratic will has simply been ignored. For Siedentop, the weakness of the European system is that there can be no reliable rule of law (or indeed functioning political mechanisms) unless rooted in popular habits and attitudes.³ The only way that the EU can be sustained is if it rests on these popular habits and attitudes that depend, in turn, on shared beliefs – the moral identity of Europe.⁴

This focus on rebuilding the identity and morality of the European project among citizens is surely correct. Without

that popular solidarity the EU will continue to rest only on support deriving from successful national economic performance. Jürgen Habermas's vision for accomplishing that aim (of limiting the EU's more elite technocratic trends and creating a more popular and democratic system – an aim shared with Siedentop) is to use an idea of “constitutional patriotism” (in German, *Verfassungspatriotismus*).

Essentially the idea is that by having a democratic constitution that embodies the norms of a plural, democratic society, the citizens of Europe will be able to develop political support and affection for Europe. In other words, Habermas's solution, despite his dislike of technocracy, is fundamentally technical. It relies on a new legal instrument that Habermas hopes will embody the legal norms and values of Europeans in a manner that mirrors the American constitution (a document which undoubtedly carries popular appeal and legitimately embodies something of what it is to be American).

The flaw in the plan is that Europe's previous attempt at a constitution was rejected in referenda in the Netherlands and France. It failed precisely because it was seen as an elite project that did not reflect the values and identity of European citizens. There is little reason to believe, and plenty of reasons to be sceptical, that things have changed today. The fundamental issue is that Habermas assumes that there already actually are underlying values and norms among European citizens that can be expressed in a constitution. In fact, it has been so long since there was a collective identity and moral mission to Europe there are no readily available values on which to draw. Before a constitution or further political institutions are adopted, we first need to build that collective sense of identity and values. We need what Habermas has rejected – a real emotional and pre-political sense of purpose with which to underpin a European project.

Syriza's vision

To date the most prominent efforts to create such a movement have tended to come from Europe's far left. Alexis Tsiparis, whose remarkable rise from little-known left wing fringe party leader to the man who became Greek Prime Minister and for a moment seemed like the man who would hold the whole Union to ransom, is typical of that trend. In 2013, he summarised the task for the future of Europe as restoring political and moral values above the economic:

In the years since 1989, the morality of the economy has fully prevailed over the ethics of politics and democracy... Today our task is to restore the dominance of political and social moral values, as opposed to the logic of profit.⁵

Realpolitik took its toll, however, and Tsiparis ultimately buckled to German and EU demands to accept austerity. He has been re-elected (as of September 2015) but it is unclear what the future holds for his party, Syriza. There is not yet any compelling evidence that a Syriza-style vision can win over the European debate. A solidarity and identity based only in protest and resistance to economic austerity is probably no more sustainable in the long-term than one that is based on economic success. It only functions so long as austerity economics is in place during the crisis, and has no other uniting factors, no deeper sense of identity or morality such as Siedentop calls for.

Warring identities

The process of integration will, necessarily, be a long-term one. It is important to remember that the 60 years of peace enjoyed in Western Europe are a significant departure from the norm of European history. Divisions between peoples and nations run deep and, indeed, national identity is often closely bound precisely in opposition to another European nation. London's most prominent public square and one of its largest railway stations are named after victories over the French (Trafalgar and Waterloo). One of Paris's largest stations is Austerlitz, named for Napoleon's greatest victory, while one of France's most famous symbols, the Arc de Triomphe, is a monument to his campaigns.

The list could go on, but the point is simple enough: centuries of opposition and conflict that define national literature, symbolism, and identity are not likely to be forgotten quickly.



Not forgotten ... The Battle of Waterloo is re-enacted in June 2015 in Belgium. Photo: [Uwe Brodrecht](#) via a [Creative Commons 2.0 licence](#)

Building integration ought to have been made easier by the free movement of people enshrined in the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#). In theory, the ability to move from state to state for work, education and tourism ought to have built a sense of common identity. In practice, the difficulty with this is that the movement of labour has remained one of extremes. Those that move are either drawn from a small mobile elite of Europeans, often working in the financial or legal sectors, or by a larger group of largely unskilled or low-skilled (and low-paid) workers.

The former group is too small to have much impact on the general population's views of other nations; the latter have a tendency to cause resentment and are perceived as either taking jobs from the poorest sections of society or as being a drain on welfare states. One challenge for fostering integration is simply to find ways of making that large middle section, which falls between the two current migrant groups, come to encounter other Europeans.

It is difficult to propose policies as to how this might be done. There are relatively successful university exchange programmes that might bear fruit in the long-term, though, of course, they are only ever going to affect those who go on to study at university (and, indeed, a tiny minority even of those who actually go on the schemes). Ultimately this is a process that is probably best left to grow organically. In practice, there has been a gradual increase (helped by the internet and social media) in interest in foreign sports leagues and the nature of the Euro crisis has ironically fostered a greater interest in politics in other European states.⁶ These are organic processes which will continue in all likelihood regardless of any policy.

Recognising and respecting that there are 'organic processes' necessary to the future of Europe, does not mean the EU ought to do nothing. Rather it ought to learn from its history and recall the words of the [Schuman Declaration](#) that led to the original European Coal and Steel Community: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity." Critically these concrete achievements need to be focused on actively building real loyalty, identity and re-establishing the moral purpose of Europe.

It should be noted that there is a danger in this of mistaking activity for action. Given the difficulties at present faced by the EU in seeming overly centralised and dictatorial, care needs to be taken not simply to advance more and

more policies and institutions which would merely increase that perception. Political solutions often tend towards the assumption that something can, and therefore must, be done. In fact, this is a scenario in which the expansion of the EU's economic programme and integration in a number of areas has already exceeded what popular capital and support might have allowed. Such concrete steps as are taken from now must look to build up popular support and identification with the EU, not push such support as currently exists beyond breaking point.

Footnotes

1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy*, tr. Ciaran Cronin, (Polity, 2015), p3

2 Larry Siedentop, *Democracy in Europe*, (Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 2000), pp124-5.

3 Ibid, p225.

4 Ibid, p189

5 Foreword to Slavoj Žižek and Srećko Horvat 'What Does Europe Want?' *The Union and its Discontents*, (Istros books, 2013), p14.

6 Among many other papers see Maurits Meijers 'The Euro-crisis as a catalyst of the Europeanization of public spheres? A crosstemporal study of the Netherlands and Germany' LEQS Paper No. 62/2013 June 2013.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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