

# **Communicating European Citizenship**

**London, 22 March 2010**

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# Political Symbols, Citizenship and Communication

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Paper prepared for the “Communicating European Citizenship” closing conference,  
Lancaster House, London, 22 March 2010

This conference contribution is based on a forthcoming chapter in  
Sonia Lucarelli, Furio Cerutti, Vivien Schmidt (ed)., *Debating Political Identity and Legitimacy in the  
European Union: Interdisciplinary Views*, Routledge, 2010.

*All the nations that have ever formed a confederation  
have been held together by some common interests,  
which served as the intellectual ties of association;  
but men have sentiments and principles as well as material interests.*

*(Alexis de Tocqueville, De la démocratie en Amérique, Vol. 1, chapter 8, xxiii)*

## **Symbols and Emotions**

In the last week of March 2007 there was hardly a European newspaper or magazine that did not, in at least one of its editions, carry somewhere on its cover page the well-known blue emblem with its circle of twelve golden stars. The occasion was of course the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaties of Rome celebrated with great pomp at a special summit in Berlin, and the European flag was used throughout the media spectrum to illustrate more or less sceptical assessments of the achievements of European integration over this half century.

Only three months later, the European flag, along with the other official symbols of the European Union, was discreetly ushered out from what is now known as the 'Lisbon Treaty'. In the renegotiation of the rejection 'Constitution', the symbols were sacrificed on the altar of compromise. As a matter of fact they were one of the first concessions the German presidency was ready to make to the defenders of sovereignty. Among the habitual self-congratulation after the clinching of the deal, only a few voices expressed regret at the disappearance of the symbols from the Treaty. Romano Prodi was quoted as 'profoundly hurt by the doggedness of some governments to negate every emotional aspect of Europe' (Bozonnet 2007). Unsurprisingly, he blamed the usual suspects of Euro-scepticism, namely Poland, the Czech Republic and the UK for this 'regression of the European spirit' (ibid.).

While Prodi's frustration and disappointment are perfectly understandable, it is doubtful whether the inclusion of the political symbols in the Treaty would increase their acceptance or notoriety among the European citizens. The latter have already become remarkably familiar with the most prominent of the symbols: in a 2004 Eurobarometer poll it was recognized by 94 per cent of citizens, and 82 per cent found it a good symbol for Europe (Eurobarometer 2004).

Despite the determination of some Euro-sceptics to deny the European flag any official legitimacy – such as president Vaclav Klaus's refusal to fly it at the Prague castle during the Czech presidency of 2009 – the emblem has a life of its own all the same. It has become omnipresent in

both the media – as a very convenient shortcut in article illustrations, cartoons and caricatures that need quick and unambiguous identification – and the public space, be it as a sign for yet another co-financed infrastructure construction site, in miniature on our euro banknotes, on our car number plates, or even integrated in corporate logos (Forêt 2008). The flag seems to have both legitimacy and a legitimizing power: when Nicolas Sarkozy places it next to the *Tricolore* in his official photos and in each of his numerous TV appearances, it is somewhat unclear which is supposed to legitimize which. Does the President increase the legitimacy of the European flag by raising it to the same level as the national one, or does the European flag convey more statesmanship to the President?

Symbolic representation of the European Union is of course not limited to the flag, although the twelve golden stars on their blue background are by far the most successful element. Not every symbol that the European institutions have launched – explicitly or implicitly – is as ubiquitous in our everyday lives. After all, the euro, in spite of its great notoriety worldwide, is in circulation only in slightly more than half of the member states. And many citizens would be hard pressed to explain the significance of Europe Day, identify the Ode of Joy as the European anthem or recite the official motto.

These differences in notoriety and popularity notwithstanding, political symbolism matters. It mattered to the entrepreneurs of supranationality from the very beginning of their undertaking, as unmistakably appears in the – confidential! – ‘memorandum from the Secretariat General of the Council of Europe on the European flag’. For the author of this note it goes without saying that ‘there are no ideals, however exalted in nature, which can afford to do without a symbol’ and that ‘symbols play a vital part in the ideological struggle of today’ (Council of Europe 1951; Larcher 1995).

The nature of the ideological struggles Europe is confronted with may have changed since 1951, but the consensus about the importance and vital role of political symbols in the making of the European polity seems to have remained unchallenged. For pro-Europeans and Euro-sceptics alike the symbols of the European Union are an issue – even if their attitudes towards them obviously diverge.

The focus of this paper is on the use of political symbolism by the European Union’s institutions, its emotional implications and its ambiguous impact on European citizens. It addresses the topic by analysing three different functions of symbols:

- First of all, it looks at symbols as consciously used tools of polity building and identity formation, designed and disseminated by elites to foster the political and institutional legitimacy of a new political entity. This approach inevitably establishes analogies between the history of nation building and the European integration process. It raises the question as to what extent such analogies are indeed helpful for understanding the European Union at the beginning of the 21st century.
- Secondly, it considers symbols transmitters of presumed common values and shared meanings. Ideally, they are based on some real or imaginary shared heritage. They condense, rather vaguely but with a strong capacity of suggestion, what cannot easily be expressed by rational discourse but is felt as commonly shared by all. As such, they can be said to respond to a deeply felt need of the collectivity to reassure itself about its identity and to distinguish itself as the in-group from (generally hostile) out-groups, to whom these symbols are also expected to convey a specific meaning.
- Finally, and most importantly, it assumes that political symbols are always promises. They represent high and noble purposes, aspirations, visions of the future. They say something about what is to be achieved one day by the collectivity they represent. Through this teleological dimension, they raise expectations of finality in those who are confronted with them. In this regard symbols are promises that should be kept, or at least whose plausibility and credibility must be sustained, lest the disenchantment turn back on the very existence of the polity that uses and disseminates them.

In any of these three functions symbols are about emotion. They are designed and expected to bear affective connotations, evoke spontaneous, unreflected associations and trigger emotional reactions. For this reason it is crucial to address the overarching issue of political emotions – or the lack thereof – in the European integration process.

## Political Symbols as Tools of Identity Construction

The large literature on the history of nationalism has provided us with an important insight into the process of nation building and identity formation. Despite some opposition from the so-called primordialist school of thought (see for instance Smith 1991), it has supplied ample evidence for the modernist thesis according to which the construction of modern collective identities always has been a top-down militant undertaking spurred by a political vision.

Political symbols, as invented artefacts, play an important role in what Miroslav Hroch called the phase of 'patriotic agitation' (Hroch 1985). Eric Hobsbawm sees them as directly derived from 'holy icons' used in collective religious practices (Hobsbawm 1990: 71) and stresses their role in the process of 'social engineering which enters into the making of nations' (ibid.: 10, see also Gellner 1983; Mosse 1975; Berlin 1972), while Karl Deutsch and Benedict Anderson have shown the immense impact of communicative and deliberative infrastructures in the making of what is, following Anderson's seminal book, often referred to as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983; Deutsch 1953).

In her pan-European survey, aptly entitled *La création des identités nationales*, Anne-Marie Thiesse compares the whole range of symbolic features which seem to be indispensable in the nation-building process to an 'IKEA kit', established with the help of an 'identity checklist' and assembled in countless variations, yet invariably based on the same elements (Thiesse 1999: 14).

It is always tempting to draw conclusions from the findings provided by the historians of nationalism on the process of polity building that the European Union is currently undergoing. The claim that 'the legitimization of the EU requires the top-down cultivation of symbolic categories and communicative capacities which, if successful, (...) lead to the formation of overarching political loyalties and political identifications' (Theiler 2005: 21) is regularly repeated. Given the fact that the European Union has always been an elite-driven enterprise with great difficulties in inspiring bottom-up processes of communicative and deliberative action, the call for symbolic operations simply seems to make sense.

But the direct application to European integration of lessons from a process that mainly took place in the 19th century is rather speculative, if not downright misleading. Not so much because of the argument itself seeing European integration as a kind of state-building process which is simply carried out at a higher level of abstraction than the classical nation state. After all, there are sufficient parallels to justify such an approach, and even post-nationalists like Jürgen Habermas

base their argument that a new kind of supranational constitutional patriotism is indeed possible on the very comparability of the two situations (Habermas 1998: 154).

And yet, even though the process may be similar, the context has changed dramatically. Anderson, Deutsch, Hobsbawm and Gellner have all insisted on the crucial role of the communicational environment of the 19th century in the spread of national identity. The supranational entrepreneurs of the beginning of the 21st century operate, however, in a radically different setting.

First of all, symbols need 'sedimentation', the patiently repeated interpretation work carried out by 'regulators of meaning' (Braud 1996: 101), that is, by 'social actors who are perceived as being authorized to [...] impose legitimate interpretation'. Symbols are the products of such a 'continuous social activity of sedimentation of meaning, without which emotional investments can probably not occur and would not have any collective signification anyway.' (Braud 1996: 99)

In the communicational setting and deliberative practices that prevail in the Europe of 2010, this kind of 'sedimentation' – which would in principle be necessary, given the young age of the official European symbols – is not only next to impossible, but may even turn out to be counterproductive to the intentions of the currently dominant 'regulators of meaning'. Several clearly observable tendencies in political communication underpin this thesis.

The sheer plurality – if not shrill cacophony – of the array of mass media, now doubled by an unchained and aggressive blogosphere where everybody becomes a 'regulator of meaning' in their own right, no longer allows for the steady drip-drip of sedimentation. The French *referendum* campaign in spring 2005 was a wonderful illustration of how the long-standing legitimacy of traditional 'regulators of meaning', such as political leaders, reputed editorialists or other presumed moral authorities of public life, had been eroded by the steady flow of aggressive rumours, 'Euro-myths' and outright lies. The numerous temporary discussion forums on the overall state of the European Union opened by almost all mainstream media web sites around the March 2007 commemoration provided some very depressing reading for any Euro-enthusiast and would be well worth a detailed study of their own. Launching, sustaining and patiently sedimenting any political symbol in this new environment is a difficult, if not impossible, endeavour.

Moreover, the communicational environment is polluted not only by an information overload, but also by a symbol overload. As 'receivers', we are permanently 'spammed' with logos, jingles and other symbolic elements of corporate identity of all sorts (Klein 1999; Olins 2000). In this

setting, new or relatively recent political symbols are quickly drowned out. What attention span can possibly be left for Europe Day in France, when 8th May still remains a cherished national holiday that provides a long weekend in the countryside, while 10th May has now been made into a national commemoration day for slavery and the slave trade, producing a wide echo in the public debate funnelled by minority interest groups?

Understandably, overload produces fatigue and reduces receptiveness. What is more, the work of potential 'regulators of meaning' in the sedimentation process is not only met with tired indifference, but increasingly also with distrust. It is precisely the collective European experience of the 'nationalization of the masses' of the 20th century, as well as more recent experiences with more sophisticated 'spin factories' of contemporary governments, that makes Europeans wary of anything that remotely reeks of 'propaganda', whether it comes from their national capital or from Brussels. And political symbolism is almost invariably categorized as a means of propaganda.

These different tendencies, whose impact in the mid and long term we are only starting to understand, contribute to an emerging communicational setting in which the lofty rhetoric and symbolic investment of political acts tend to trigger a backlash – or 'countervailing pressures' (Theiler 2005) – rather than increase public support for them. Again, the constitutional treaty provides an excellent illustration of such a 'boomerang effect'. It can be argued that the need initially felt for symbolic underpinning significantly contributed to its failure (Moravcsik 2005, 2006): it is now generally acknowledged that it was highly counterproductive to raise unrealistic expectations by solemnly naming 'Constitution' a new treaty whose major purpose was to adapt the functioning of the institutions to the new scope of the Union. The term 'treaty' – or even a second 'single act' for that matter – might have done just fine, sounding like another important step, but not the ultimate, definitive settlement. A treaty is a text; a constitution is more than a text, it is a symbol (Siedentop 2000: 93-9). And as such, contrary to what the pro-constitutionalists pretended during the *referendum* campaigns, it is indeed 'carved in stone' in public perception. Precisely because there was no consensus on the finality of the whole undertaking, there was no need to overload the project's symbolic dimension.

A similar symbolic overload may occur in the future with the newly appointed 'European Council President'. The creation of this post does not change fundamentally the workings of the Council, but is explicitly based on the wish to give the European Union a clearly identifiable 'face', that is, to give European citizens another political symbol. Again, such symbolism will be very likely to raise false expectations, which in turn are not likely to be fulfilled.

To sum up the arguments above, however tempting it is to draw an analogy between the undoubtedly successful use of political symbols as tools of identity construction in the nation-building process of the 19th century and the European integration process at its current stage and in its contemporary communicational setting, it is misleading. On the other hand, it seems difficult to conceive of other, new ways of identity construction: the very entrepreneurs of supranationality of our times, who are of course perfectly aware of the singularities of the *sui generis* polity that in many aspects the European Union represents, appear to have trouble extracting themselves from the mindset and recipes of the 19th century when it comes to addressing the 'provinces of the mind' (Siedentop, 2000) of their contemporaries. They are trying to build a whole new architecture ... with the same old IKEA kit.

### **Transmitters of Values and Self-Perception**

The link between the symbols and the values that they are supposed to give a tangible form to is an almost mandatory reference in pro-European political discourse. Given that the official symbols, 'far from playing a cosmetic function', are assumed to 'express the deep-seated values of the European Union' (Curti Gialdino 2005), it is not surprising that not one of the series of short speeches given at the fiftieth anniversary celebrations for the European flag on 16 November 2005 in Strasbourg<sup>1</sup> omitted to refer to these 'values'.

Contrary to the almost exclusively top-down process of identity construction recapitulated above, the value issue raises the question as to the bottom-up dynamics of this process. Even if almost all authors, in the wake of Hobsbawm, have recognized that elite-crafted symbols can only be successful if they do indeed crystallize (and give an outlet to) pre-existing, if often unconscious and diffuse, 'needs, longings and interests of ordinary people' (Hobsbawm 1990: 10; Jurt 1993), little consideration has been given to the importance of spontaneously emerging symbols felt by citizens to have strong emblematic salience for certain values the collectivity does or wishes to stand for: popular heroes and narratives, representations and myths, the *lieux de mémoire* of popular culture (Sonntag 2008).

It can indeed be argued that a stable polity's symbolic portfolio cannot only consist of official symbols created in an elite-driven process, but that it also needs a certain number of complementary, less abstract and easily accessible elements capable of making a link between collective self-perception and the target identity defined and imposed by the elite.

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<sup>1</sup> Speeches by René van der Linden, Joaquim Duarte, Josep Borell, Terry Davis and José Manuel Barroso, available online at <http://www.ena.lu/mce.cfm>.

It is important here to distinguish between, on the one hand, the classical revival of forgotten folklore elements of local culture orchestrated by 19th-century nation-building elites and subsequently internalized by the populations and, on the other hand, icons that have spontaneously emerged in the 20th century from realms of contemporary popular culture and have undergone the sedimentation process through a consistent bottom-up discourse. Surprisingly, the areas such popular icons emerge in, such as football, popular cinema and rock music, which occupy a very large – some would say disproportionate – place in people's lives and have a considerable repercussion on patterns of collective self-perception and hetero-perception, have for a long time been neglected or even disdained by scholarly research. Yet it would be worthwhile exploring these 'parallel pantheons' (Sonntag *et al.* 2009), this unofficial collective memory that has been accumulated over time, especially in a Western Europe in which pacified nation states no longer draw their collective identity from hostile confrontation with each other and in which elite-driven mass mobilization for political and military purposes plays a much lesser role than during the height of nationalism.

But such unofficial, popular symbols are precisely what the European Union lacks and will be lacking for the foreseeable future. European institutions only have official top-down symbolism to offer, and these symbols are weakened by the absence of complementary bottom-up emblems that are capable of condensing values and patterns of self-perception.

A good example to illustrate this dilemma is the ongoing debate about the common European narrative or, rather, the absence thereof. Former Commissioner Margot Wallström, who repeatedly expressed her regret that 'the EU lacks a story' and that a new one would have to be found (see for instance Wallström 2007), seems to have well understood that it would be an error to impose any type of official 'top-down narrative' in the present communicational environment. After having placed the narrative issue high on her initial agenda in 2004-5, the term had already completely disappeared in the *White Paper on a European Communication Strategy* published in February 2006 (European Commission 2006).

The appropriateness of such cautious hesitation over any new 'top-down' initiative was confirmed on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, which as the first pan-European commemoration of a distinctly European event provided a tempting landmark to put forward such a narrative. In this perspective the German presidency had placed high hopes on the project of a solemn declaration that was finally made public under the name of the 'Berlin

Declaration'.<sup>2</sup> As it turned out, however, 'the heavy struggles about the concrete content of the text among the EU member states in the run-up to the Declaration's publication dashed the hope to find a comprehensive formula of the EU's unique nature.' (Seeger 2007). As a matter of fact, 'the text represented the least common denominator of how the history and sense of European integration can be interpreted' (ibid.) It was quickly evident that the long-awaited Berlin Declaration was hardly likely to serve as a tentative starting point for a new European narrative.

Also in 2007, in a very different approach, Timothy Garton Ash attempted to stir up a bottom-up debate about a shared narrative. His interesting participatory Internet initiative launched on the web site [www.europeanstory.net](http://www.europeanstory.net) in the wake of a programmatic article calling for 'Europe's True Stories' (Garton Ash 2007) offered as a potential new European narrative 'an honest, self-critical account of progress (...) from different pasts towards shared goals which could constitute a common future' (ibid.). Today the website counts a mere 44 contributions, the last one being added in 2008...

Credible collective narratives are based on collective memory and need at the same time a certain willingness to forget, as Ernest Renan famously pointed out in his Sorbonne speech of 1882 (Renan 1996). But the national narratives that are woven together in the European memorial patchwork are almost by definition antagonistic narratives, whose purpose was always to define singularity and difference from neighbours, rather than stress commonality (Ricoeur 2000: 99). And the need to be different, as Isaiah Berlin has very convincingly argued, is one of the strongest urges of the human psyche (Berlin 1972; Gardels 1991). It seems that today's European citizens are neither willing nor capable of revisiting their national narratives in order to bring them together to make a truly 'European' story.

And even the one good story Europe has to tell – the long road from war to peace which the European Community has helped to pave and which is certainly one of the major political achievements in world history – is losing its power to sustain the integration process like it did in the post-war decades. Not only because it is inapplicable in an enlarged Union of 27, in spite of the suggestive, but somewhat helpless and curiously inapt slogan for the fiftieth anniversary commemoration: 'Together since 1957'. But mainly because, as many observers have stressed, peace is simply taken for granted anyway by the younger generations. The narrative dilemma was expressed wonderfully in a drawing published by the Swiss cartoonist Chappatte in the Geneva newspaper *Le Temps* on occasion of the 2007 commemorations: it shows an old man on a park

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<sup>2</sup> Downloadable under [http://www.eu2007.de/de/News/download\\_docs/Maerz/0324-RAA/English.pdf](http://www.eu2007.de/de/News/download_docs/Maerz/0324-RAA/English.pdf).

bench next to a Berlaymont-like building telling his grandson that ‘for 50 years, Europe has meant peace’, but the only answer he gets from the young man is a sigh of boredom ...

### **Risky Promises and Unfulfilled Expectations**

But political symbols are not only transmitters of pre-existing values and narratives, they are also promises about the future of the polity, supporting an implicit teleological vision. They take part in the polity’s permanent reconstruction through mostly unconscious and tacit ‘daily plebiscites’ in the sense meant by Renan (Renan 1996). The European Union, which has by definition always been a future-oriented and deliberately open-ended project, relies even more than existing national polities on this pledge for a common future, and it is only logical that its very name already possesses (and conveys) an aspirational dimension rather than a merely descriptive one.

Promises of community, in that they answer fundamental psychosocial needs and desires, and condense massively shared hopes and expectations, are categories of social communication that are almost entirely dominated by emotion (Ansart 1999). And political symbols are designed precisely to carry strong affective connotations and trigger emotional reactions. They contribute – or at least are expected to contribute – to inducing the crucial affective dimension of the Greek concept of citizenship, the Aristotelian notion of *philia*, the desire to live together, considered essential for the sustainable functioning of the polity. The quote from Tocqueville that has been set as an epigraph above these reflections confirms this view, as does Renan’s famous insistence on the fact that ‘a *Zollverein* is not a fatherland’ (Renan 1996).

It is obvious that the EU is currently unable to draw on this type of affective attachment to the collectivity it represents. Its ‘emotional deficit’ is a serious handicap, since it can reasonably be argued that at the beginning of the 21st century the role of emotion in everyday life is even more important than in Renan and Tocqueville’s days (Lacroix 2001). This is due to the evolution of the communicational environment in which emotion takes an ever increasing role, in both news coverage and comment. It is no secret to any observer of political life that public opinion – and ultimately, people’s political decisions – are framed to a large extent by emotions stirred up through all kinds of channels of communication (Menand 2004).

Of course, this ‘emotionalization’ of politics (Scherer 2002) is not an entirely new phenomenon. ‘Staging’ and ‘dramatizing’ political programmes or performances with the intention to win over the public through the emotional enhancement of the issues at stake has always been

an essential element of political communication, from Pontius Pilate to Joseph Goebbels. Yet, the rapid evolution of the mass media landscape – especially since the mid 1980s – has given this phenomenon an entirely new dimension. The agenda-setting power has changed hands. Both through the selection of newsworthy items and the choice of attraction-enhancing, emotionalizing forms of presentation, media have indeed accomplished a ‘colonization of politics’ (Meyer 2001).

For the European institutions, this development does not make communication any easier. Moreover, the mass media are still diffused and received in almost hermetically closed national frameworks. Even the few transnational exceptions such as CNN, BBC World or Al Jazeera visibly remain very much biased by the cultural setting they were initially created and developed in. While it may be true that the massive emotionalization of events through the mass media actually contributes to turning them into truly global events – such as the Tsunami disaster, or the death of Lady Di or John Paul II – a closer look at the reception of these events reveals that this ‘globalization of emotions’ (Laidi 1998; Beck 2002) is actually quite superficial. Emotions, especially political emotions, are almost always staged in national settings, and so-called global events still carry a distinct national stamp. Even the Tsunami catastrophe of 2004-5 – like almost all other natural disasters, plane crashes, terrorist acts, etc. – had a distinctly national coverage, according to the number of compatriots counted as victims, the performance of national institutions (ministries, embassies, humanitarian support units, etc.), and even the degree of generosity shown. The same goes for the big transnational sport events such as the Olympics or the football World Cup which can even be said to undergo deliberate ‘re-nationalization’ through the media perspective and discourse (Gebauer 1994). To sum it up briefly: in Europe as everywhere else, news and events are diffused, perceived and interpreted through the national prism. As a result, emotions are mainly shared within national cultural spaces.

It is therefore justified to speak of the ‘emotional monopoly’ held by the nation state. It is a monopoly that was created with the emergence of the mass media and reinforced by its recent development. Today, in an era of seemingly contradictory, but mutually reinforcing, disintegrating societal processes such as economic and cultural globalization, increasing individualization and tribalization, contemporary nation states draw a large part of their remaining cohesion from the emotional power they wield. Peter Sloterdijk’s thesis of the ‘stress community’ modern nation states consist of is a very pertinent metaphor of this dependency (Sloterdijk 1998). And, as Tobias Theiler notes, national political elites are aware of this: they refuse ‘to share their monopoly over the symbolic tools of political legitimization and community-building because they do not see

European integration as a socially, culturally and psychologically state-transcending undertaking in the first place' (Theiler 2005: 150). Arguably, the citizens they govern rather seem to confirm them in this attitude: it appears that globalization has produced an environment of uncertainty in which the affective bond Europeans have forged with their traditional national symbols has actually been strongly enhanced. The massive public exhibition of collective feelings of belonging that can be observed during events of popular culture such as the football World Cup or the Eurovision song contest bear witness to this trend, as does their omnipresence in the public space of proto-national entities such as Catalunya, Flanders, Scotland or even England, whose recent rediscovery and widespread popular re-adoption of the long-forgotten Saint George's cross is clearly an emotional response to the intense pressure of a changing psychosocial environment.

The collective behaviour of European citizens seems very close to what Norbert Elias, in one of his last texts, described as the 'fossilization of social habitus': the recurrent 'constellation in which the dynamic of unplanned social processes is tending to advance beyond a given stage towards another while the people affected by this change cling to the earlier stage in their personality structure' (Elias 1997: 274). The outcome of such a constellation of cognitive dissonance between the desirable level of social integration and the inertia of the collective mind conditioned at another level depends on whether the dynamic of the social evolution 'brings about a more or less radical restructuring of this habitus, or whether the social habitus of individuals successfully opposes the social dynamic, either by slowing it down or blocking it entirely' (ibid.).

It does not seem exaggerated or far-fetched to see in Elias's reflections on the collective programming of the mind a surprisingly accurate description of the behaviour patterns that underpin the European parliamentary elections or *referendum* campaigns. There is little hope that 'milestones' like the Berlin Declaration or the Lisbon Treaty may be capable of bringing about the 'restructuring' of the social habitus, which would give a new impetus to the European integration process. In such a configuration of competition for the *affectio societatis*, the European Union's use of political symbols is likely to produce counterproductive side effects. This is a market in which the EU is nothing more than a hesitating new challenger, confronting a powerful monopolist that has been in place for centuries.

As the French *referendum* campaign in particular highlighted, it may well be that the European Union has entered a vicious circle of selective perception from which it will be very difficult to escape. Political symbolism, accompanied by lofty rhetoric about different 'European models' (social, cultural, environmental, etc.), has raised false expectations about the Union's real

potential. Unable to keep the promises implied in its name and official symbols, it will probably now have to put up with all the estrangement, disenchantment and frustration accumulated in the wake of such unfulfilled expectations.

## Conclusion

For European policy-makers it has become a priority but extremely delicate task to break this vicious circle.

It is beyond the scope and ambition of this paper to forward advice to communication professionals, but considering the preceding reflections on political symbols and their emotional weight, it might be worthwhile reconsidering the semantics of the whole debate and assume the emotional deficit of the European Union as consubstantial, intrinsically given and irremediable.

Perhaps it would be wise to stop engaging in fruitless attempts to challenge the emotional monopoly of the nation state. Asking whether the EU 'can win the *love* of Europeans' (Bowley 2004), complaining that 'The EU has never been *loved*' (Leonard 2006), publishing lists of '50 reasons to *love* the EU' (The Independent 2007)<sup>3</sup> or dictionaries that are supposed to induce citizens 'to *love* Europe' before parliamentary elections (de Sarnez 2009), may be yet another 'category error' (Moravcsik 2005).

Even an improved and very efficient '*Zollverein*' will never be 'a fatherland', but, come to think of it, need it be? Must something really be done about it? The EU has a strong emotional deficit – so what?

Perhaps it would be a good idea to openly, almost aggressively, assume the boring side of European politics and abandon attempts to 'brand' the EU with an objective to create affective connotations and 'brand loyalty' (van Ham 2001; Olins 2000). It might make more sense to communicate on its complexity, its inevitable tendency to technocratic bias and its intrinsic characteristics of the painstaking endeavour to seek compromise: boring, unsexy and slow, but necessary.

Such an approach would of course also imply limiting the use of political symbols to the strict minimum in order to avoid suggesting that a kind of nation-building process is being carried out in a manipulative top-down manner. As this contribution has attempted to point out, symbols raise

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<sup>3</sup> In comparison, *Time Magazine* was satisfied with a mere '20 reasons to love the EU' (*Time Magazine*, European edition, 14 March 2007).

false expectations – both with Euro-enthusiasts and Euro-sceptics – which this incomplete polity is by definition unable to fulfil in the foreseeable future.

The European Union has neither the means nor the vocation to challenge the emotional monopoly of the nation state. Parallels with the symbolism and pathos of nation states are misleading and counterproductive.

It is an anachronism to claim that:

‘the European project, trapped between the two original ideal-types of legitimate state formation – the nation-state and empires – is, more than any other political project, needing symbols to assert its own originality, its own specificity, and its ethical meaning.’ (Bruter 2005: 80)

It is useless to make unrealistic suggestions to introduce new and better communicated symbols (Toulemon 2007), which would be nothing more than an improved version of already discredited top-down social engineering.

It is finally downright naive to believe that the EU’s political symbols will ‘help, by creating emotive images and rites, even subliminally, to make the European Union more legitimate in the eyes of its citizens and help them to identify with the plan for a common destiny’ (Curti Gialdino 2005).

The concept of ‘constitutional patriotism’ framed by Habermas has often been derided as wishful thinking, but apart from its awkward link to the semantics of ‘patriotism’ which it is precisely aimed at overcoming, it provides a promising opening for the European Union’s current dilemma. According to Habermas the advent of a truly ‘post-national constellation’ would be concomitant with the individual’s capacity to operate a distinction between the civic and cultural dimensions of their political identity, leaving emotional celebrations of belonging to national or subnational groups of socialization, while developing supranational solidarity out of rational interest (Habermas 1998). Of course, such an identity evolution requires a considerable ‘leap of abstraction’, but it is perhaps a less unrealistic vision than Habermas’s opponents would acknowledge.

A Europe-wide simultaneous *referendum*, asking citizens for approval of membership in a different setting from the Eurobarometer opinion polls, would be likely to provide evidence as to the extent to which today’s Europeans are already capable of such abstraction. This idea, which has received repeated backing since the days of the Convention on the Future for Europe, has little chance of being put into practice, precisely because national governments know of, and fear, its

symbolic power. It would, however, be an excellent opportunity for an information campaign without symbolic and emotional over-investment, for a realistic account of what the EU is and is not, and for a tentative escape from the vicious circle of false expectations in which it is becoming increasingly trapped.

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