

Ago, ergo sum: new ideological perspectives in the discursive construal of institutional identity

From its outset, the European Union has devoted a considerable effort to institutionalize its ambition of integration and legitimate its governance. In the constant endeavour to connect better to its citizens, the EU has attained undeniably impressive achievements, although opposition remains strong in numerous quarters and many citizens are still sceptical of its political rationale (Calhoun 2003; Keohane / Nye 2003). This legitimacy deficit cannot be ascribed to one specific cause of discontent, but tends to be associated to the EU's atypical structure (Citrin / Sides 2004; Schmitter 1996), its expanding and unstable borders (Taylor 2008), the lack of a common ethnic identity (Etzioni 2007) and its alleged technocratic nature (Goldsmith 2003).

In its early days, the European Economic Community (EEC) was an organization constituted on purely economic grounds which aimed at setting up a common market and a customs union. As the EEC gradually evolved into what is today the European Union, Community institutions became increasingly interested in engaging the citizen in the activities of the EU. Still today, in an attempt to gain recognition and legitimacy, the European Union is eager to present its construction as a process of common growth, rather than a mere economic convergence. However, in the desired transition from the 'Europe of the markets' to the 'Europe of the people', the Union is facing one the hardest challenges in its history: becoming real to the citizens and making the EU project a participatory experience.

In this respect, political scientist E. O. Eriksen (2009: 22-23) makes a highly interesting claim when he remarks that, in order to be conceived as a participatory and "collective enterprise", the EU should explicitly offer citizens a justification of its mission, and become salient to their personal lives. In doing so, he envisages three possible strategies through which the EU can create its identity, justify its actions and, at the same time, repair its alleged legitimacy deficit. These three possible strategies of legitimation are based on utility, common values and rights, as summarized below:

TYPE OF ENTITY	CONCEPTION OF RATIONALITY	MODE OF LEGITIMATION	TYPE OF CITIZENSHIP
Problem-solving entity	Instrumental (Legitimacy depends on the ability to solve problems effectively and to offer discernible benefits)	Efficiency	Economic
Value-based community	Contextual (Legitimacy depends on the ability to create a framework of shared common values)	Collective self-understanding	Social and cultural
Rights-based union	Communicative (Legitimacy depends on the ability to empower citizens and confer upon them a set of rights)	Justice and norms of fairness	Political

Table 1: Three logics of polity formation (adapted from Eriksen 2009: 61)

Following Eriksen (2009:22-23), identification and acceptance of the EU as a political entity will be analyzed using three items of the identification scale:

- (i) advantages and benefits that derive from EU membership;

- (ii) EU values;
- (iii) citizen's rights and legal entitlements.

By emphasizing certain actions and priorities, such as solving citizens' problems, creating a framework of shared values, and empowering citizens by conferring rights upon them, the EU constructs its political identity and positions itself around three functional models: (i) "the EU as a problem-solver", (ii) "the EU as a provider of common values", (iii) "the EU as a provider of rights". In this paper, I argue that the emergence of these new identity roles is related to processes of discursive change which can be clearly traced in EU texts addressing the general public (informative publications on EU policies and activities issued over a time span of ten years).

This study gives necessary, and thus far neglected, emphasis to the way institutional actions to pursue legitimacy and consensus can take the shape of communicative strategies and events which directly affect the way citizens perceive the EU as a political entity. Although extremely topical, this aspect has only recently and partially been addressed from a discourse-oriented perspective (Wodak 2007; Krzy anowski and Oberhuber 2007) and still lacks sufficient critical literature. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study sets off to investigate the discursive construction of the EU as a social actor in instances of symmetrical and asymmetrical interaction with the citizens.

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