Analysis, criticisms and proposals for a democratic Europe

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I. *The lack of legitimacy of the European democracy: comments on its institutions.*

We can define democracy trough three main characteristics: Firstly a democratic system comes from the People which has directly or indirectly to be at the origin of the political power. Secondly, democracy requires, in its principles, an equality of influence between every citizen. We can asset, third, that in a democratic political system, the decision process must be public and submitted, at least theoretically, to the people's control.

If these principles are probably an ideal, our aim is to bring our systems as close as possible of them. But observation shows that the European political system is far from being close to this description since the working of its institutions contradicts these three characteristics.

We can say that the European Union develops, in term of democracy, a mixed system, associating representative democracy and deliberative democracy. But both appear to be rather far from the democratic objective of participation of the (whole) people to its own government.

1- The European Union as a representative democracy should be composed - concerning its bodies making legislative decisions- by elected representatives of the European population. But as we know, it is far from being the case, because the legislative power is far too much in the hands of the Commission and of the Council, two institutions which are no elected for this task. That's to say whose power is not legitimated by citizens (as required in a representative system). The European parliament is the only body corresponding to this requirement (at last theoretically, we will come back later on this). But its legislative powers are restricted to co-decision and, above all, it has no powers of proposition. This fact doesn't allow considering the EU as a representative democracy.

2- Besides this system, the European Union promotes a new and particular form of democracy: the "deliberative" or "associative" democracy, which aims at integrating the "Civil society" in the decision process. The main principle of this democratic model is that the

civil society is associated in the decision process and directly takes part in the discussions leading to directives or law proposals. The major problem of the European system here has to be found in the components of this "Civil society" associated to the decision process.

Indeed, the "civil society" is the "organized" society. In other words, it refers to the organizations which are able to be negotiating partners of European institutions, to take part to and influence the decision process. They are called influential groups or lobbies too. The first problem of this can be guessed: all the citizens are not and can not "organize" themselves in that meaning; especially the poorest and the more isolated ones.

We are dealing here with a problem of equality which is confirmed by statistics: 67%[1] of those "eurogroups" are defending private and economical interests. Moreover, this system favors the financially most powerful organizations as well as the more integrated in Brussels. In other words: economical power and social network are keys elements allowing the representation of defended interests. We find here the traditional characteristics of the elite, not of the entire population. Organizations which have international experience, financial and human means to settle permanent members in Brussels and a staff of experts will see more surely their interest represented in the decision process. And indeed, it appears that social movements have difficulties to organize themselves at the European level and to integrate European institutional landscape, where they are nearly absent. As a consequence, a large part of the population is not represented in this European deliberative democracy.

This deliberative European system show in addition a problem of accountability: no one has to be accountable here before the population (as an elected representative before his voters). Where is the citizen control of the decisional process here? But above all, this system appears to bring forth a problem of legitimacy because those groups have no other representativeness than the one they claim, and as a consequence, they have no legitimacy. There are no rules produced by European institutions to set up this phenomenon. We could have imagined, for example, a system of classification based in quantity in order to lay great stress on the organizations having more members, or based in the nature of the interest defended (private or general).

In the current situation, the European deliberative democracy understood as the participation of the influential groups in the decision process can absolutely not counterbalance the failings of the European representative democracy. It happens to be the opposite because it creates great inequalities in the participation of citizens to their own

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[1] R. Balme. D. Chabanet et V. Wright, *L'action collective en Europe,* 2002.

government. That's why this problem has to be taken seriously by the social movement because it is the current running of European institutions and because deliberative procedures have become a part of the institutional culture of Brussels.

II. *The lack of legitimacy of the European democracy: from citizen indifference to citizen involvement.*

A second element contributing to create the lack of legitimacy of the European democracy can be underlined, which is the need of politicization of European citizens. Why stressing this point?

The European political arena with its own events and stakes is difficult to reach for "ordinary" citizens. It can notably be explained by the absence of European public space. There are practically no European Medias: this doesn't allow spreading information and creating transnational debates. What's more, European parties remain very weak. Now, political parties have traditionally been the main mediators of politicization for people of democratic countries and major actors of the homogenization of political stakes at the national level in Nation-states. That's a reason why political activity, debate and stakes largely remain at the national level in every European country nowadays.

Why is it a problem?

This state of facts leads to a wide indifference of citizens towards the European Union and, often, to an ignorance of it actions or even of its existence. This is a problem for three reasons: because the EU has got strong legislative powers and acts on citizen's lives. This is a problem too because, as polls show, this is only the elite[2] of the population which support the European Union. But this is mainly a problem because it is only this elite too which participate to European democracy and because of that, the European parliament can't be said really representative. Indeed, since 1999, its members are elected by less than 50% of the population. This is a general phenomenon, happening in almost every country!

That's why the necessity of politicize citizens on Europe (that's to say to develop a political conception of Europe in the minds of the citizens) is a decisive point in order to build democratic institutions. Many of them do absolutely not know the powers of the EU. Many too, see the EU as a humanist idea bringing peoples closer together but they don't conceive the EU with a political meaning, like a mean of transformation of life and don't attribute to the

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[2] Elite has to be understood here as referring to citizens who possess social, economical and cultural capital.

EU its effects on their lives. It is important to make people consider Europe as a space of political struggle and what's more of a political struggle of right and left and not between every country's interests.

Politicize people means to develop a European public space. It is a job for media, for the parties which are one of the main agents of politicization, but for social movements too. Organizations have to spread information, try to catch public attention on European issues and struggles, offer ongoing education to their members and, when it is possible, to struggle at the European level.

III. Proposals

1. Politicization of citizen on Europe is our first proposal in order to increase a European democracy. It can be facilitated too by institutional means:

- Referendum on European issue is a very good tool to politicize people on European Union. It catches interest, gives knowledge and constrains to take a position. (Like it has been the case in France in 2005).

- European Elections have to be used in this way too. That's why we make a proposal about their organization. To give European elections a more "European meaning" and make it a real European event, it would be necessary to unify them. That means organize them the same day in every country (which would allow Europeanization of political campaigns and of media coverage). Another important point is to organize them under the same conditions. That's to say unifying electoral system in every country to reduce inequalities and respect a real important part of proportional representation.

2. To improve European institutions in order to make them more democratic we support some proposals too:

-It is necessary to increase the powers of the European parliament to give more representativeness to the institutions. Increasing its power means giving it legislative power and not only power of co-decision and negative or freezing powers[3].
Moreover, direct participation of citizens to their own government is possible and strongly desirable. We propose two tools in this objective (under conditions which have to be collectively defined):

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[3] While keeping in mind that if we want to increase the power of the European parliament, we have also to aim at increasing the representativeness of its members (by politicization of citizen) in a democratic objective.

-The possibility for European population to ask for a referendum on a European directive or a legislative proposal. This allows citizen keeping a control on the activity of their representatives. (Two kinds of referendum can be imagined here: a European vote organized by European institutions or several referendums taking place at the same time in every member states on the same issue. This last option of synchronized referendums appears, for the moment, easier to impose (because it respects the nation-state sovereignty and does not require modifications of the Treaties) and can be seen as a stage.[4]

- The right of legislative initiative for the people with constraining effects on the deciding institution (that's to say an obligation to submit the proposal to discuss and vote). Besides its important democratic interest, the proposal of legislative initiative for the people is interesting because of its effect on politicization. We can add as an argument to support it, that even when an initiative doesn't become a law project, it remains a real mean of making an issue public, to inform people about it (so to politicize people on Europe), to alert the media and to influence the political agenda, which is, as we know, a key issue.

These tools of participative democracy[5] could allow counterbalancing the known excesses of representative systems (elitism, professionalization, closure of the definition of public problem and of the agenda and at last lack of representativeness).

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[4] This tool can only be foreseen through a progressive settlement. We have to keep in mind that the referendum does not belong to the democratic culture of every member state (it is especially unwelcome in Germany for example).

[5] Finally the politicization of citizen on Europe is also important because every tool of participative democracy, including legislative initiative, has an important weakness: studies show that it allows the expression of specific categories of the population (and not of everyone); the more educated (which often means middle and upper-class). In a democratic perspective, this could be -partially- corrected by strong campaigns of politicization.