

Publications

The European Void: The Democratic Deficit as a Cultural Lack by Abram de Swaan

An uneasy mood reigns among the Europeans. The European Union beckons its citizens some of the time, irritates them most of the time, and bores them the rest of the time. No doubt, this is connected to the notorious democratic deficit of the Union. There is a Council of Ministers, in which the governments of the member states are represented, each supported by a freely elected parliamentary majority. There is a European Parliament, directly elected by the citizens of every country. There is a European Commission which must take into account the Parliament's majority. If, nonetheless, a democratic deficit remains, this is not so much due to the deficiencies of Europe's treaties and institutions, but rather the result of a cultural gap.

In short, there is no such thing as a European public space as yet. Europeans do not speak the same language and hence do not understand each other well enough to differ. But quite apart from the confusion of tongues, in every member state opinions take shape within a national framework. What is passionately debated in one country is not even an issue in the neighboring countries. The intellectuals in Europe are not the intellectuals of Europe. There are German intellectuals, and French, Greek, Portuguese and also Dutch intellectuals, each addressing their particular domestic public. It is very seldom that they acquire a European audience, and manifest themselves at the European level.

The European Union is bound by treaty to leave matters of culture to the member states. This follows from the founding treaties and from the principle of subsidiarity, that reserves all issues than can be dealt with by the individual countries separately for the national governments. But, as long as intellectual exchange is hampered by barriers of language and by the constraints of national frameworks, no intellectual networks can take shape in Europe, no European journals with a broad political or cultural orientation will appear. For lack of cultural facilities and opportunities, there can be no substantive democratization, no exchange of opinion that will affect Europe's citizens in sizable numbers. That is the principal democratic deficit of Europe.

This impasse is characteristic for general cultural and political exchanges, not for specific scientific, technological or commercial contacts. The more specific the theme of the network or the periodical, the more easily it is put together and kept going. On the other hand, the broader the scope of the intellectual encounter, the harder it is to create and maintain a common agenda, to define a common ground, across borders and across languages.

This is a consequence in part of the 'cultural opportunity structure' of the Union and its constituent states. There are very few career opportunities for intellectuals, writers, journalists and scholars outside their national societies. Equally scarce are the ingredients of a successful career and a major reputation: awards, subsidies, commissions, committee or jury memberships and so on. All these resources are proffered by national institutions rather than by European agencies. There are, admittedly, a few very prestigious prizes intended for laureates from all over Europe, such as the Amalfi or the Erasmus awards, and there is the European University Institute near Florence and the Europa College in Ghent.

But if intellectuals are to qualify for such opportunities, they must first win their laurels and make their reputation within their own national societies.

This inadequate cultural opportunity structure is coupled to a persistent cultural obstacle structure: the coexistence of a dozen languages within the European Union. This multiplicity greatly hampers the emergence of a public debate at the European level, and hence prevents the formation of a public space. The European Union now boasts a common currency, but so far lacks a common language. In fact, there hardly is a language policy for the European Parliament, or for the Commission's bureaucracy, let alone for 'l'Europe des citoyens', for civil society in the European Union.

The six founding members contributed four languages: Dutch, French, German and Italian, an almost manageable number. The official languages of the member states were admitted as the languages of the Community. Without much discussion, French was accepted as the working language of the Community's budding bureaucracy, as it had been the language of diplomacy until then and the sole language of the European Coal and Steel Community that preceded the EC. In those postwar years, the Germans and the Italians kept a low profile, and the Dutch (even when counting in the Dutch-speaking Flemish of Belgium) were not numerous enough to impose their linguistic interests.

The first great expansion of the European Community, in 1973, brought in the British, the Irish, (almost all of them native English speakers), and the Danes, who for the vast majority had learned English in school. As soon as England joined the EC, English became the second working language in the corridors and meeting rooms of the Commission and the Parliament. As new members joined the Community, the number of languages grew accordingly. This prospect has prompted much alarm, but so far rarely any serious debate.

Due to the expansion of secondary education, there are now more citizens in the Union who speak French, German, Spanish or Italian as a foreign language than ever before, but many more, still, have learned English: almost ninety percent of all high school students in the Union. French scores half this percentage, German a quarter and Spanish one eighth. That makes English the vehicular language of Europe in fact, if not by right.

The Union's multi-lingualism is a matter of democratic principle and fundamental treaty law. Firstly, the Union is a combination of states which all hold on to their own official language; secondly, numerous decisions taken by the Union directly affect the citizens in the member states and therefore must be couched in their own legal language. The present eleven languages are prescribed in the public meetings of the Council and the Parliament and for all decisions that immediately bear upon the citizens. Behind closed doors, however, the languages of choice are French, increasingly English and, far behind, in third place, German.

In border-crossing encounters the Europeans speak English; in the East, they use German at times and in the South sometimes French. Within each national society (excepting Ireland and the UK) English presses on as the principal foreign language, the language of business, science and technology, international sports, transport and tourism, and of the worldwide mass media. As long as each state continues to support its own language in the schools and the courts, in national politics and the

administration, English, even though widely used, does not represent an acute threat. A rather precarious equilibrium prevails between the domestic language and English, in which each one predominates in a different series of domains.

Within the prevailing cultural opportunity structure, English is the paramount medium of international exchange. But at the European level, opinion formation in English is thwarted rather than encouraged. Britain, for its part, too smug and too averse to Europe, is hardly interested in a European discourse. Other governments do not want to favor a foreign language, out of 'language jealousy', even if their own language does not stand a chance abroad. And finally, the European Union itself lacks both the competence and the courage: multi-lingualism is after all its fundamental tenet and jealous member states will not allow it to privilege one language above others.

There may be remedies. But it is more urgent to pose the problem than to propose detailed solutions. It is an open question whether the European Union should be all that democratic at the highest, the European level. So far, democracy has worked best within nation states. Only India is a major exception to the rule, as a multilingual, multinational democracy for over fifty years.

It appears that in the long run, democracy can not work if the major decisions are taken at a higher European level without political debate taking place on a corresponding European scale. If that is indeed the case, a European public space will in the end turn out to be a necessary condition for the survival of national democracies. Hence, the individual countries and the Union as a whole should improve the cultural opportunity structure at the European level. This requires European journals and newspapers, European universities and academies, European cultural meeting points and intellectual networks. It is in this manner that the material conditions may be created for a public debate, not determined by language and nation, but shaped by a joint, European agenda of dissent.

This is an edited version of Professor De Swaan's plenary speech at the Conference of Europeanists, March 15, 2002. His most recent publication is *Words of the World: The global language system* (Cambridge: Polity/Blackwell, 2001).