The demos – the question of the condition for democratic deliberation

Presentation in the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament, 20 March 2017, Summary

To start with, it is important to underline that the concept of demos is not an answer to a question. It is a concept that makes it possible to formulate a question and identify the requirements for answering it.

We can recognize this clearly by a brief look at its modern history. During the revolutionary period of the late eighteenth century, the question of the demos arises with the shift from monarchical to popular sovereignty, often seen to be brought about by the French Revolution.

The core of the question is very simple: while the monarch is one, the people are many. For a single person it is easy to express a will. A multitude, however, needs to find ways to arrive at a common will, which cannot be taken for granted.

During the nineteenth century, the problem of the formation of a collective will within a multitude was addressed by trying to specify who "the people" is. It was generally assumed that a collective will would indeed be difficult to form if "the people" did not already have something significant in common. To underline what the difference to the current situation is, as I shall try to suggest later, let me put it strongly: The key idea was that there was something *prior* to acting politically and forming political institutions that needs to hold a democratic political order together. In this sense, the demos is seen as something *pre-political*, without which democracy is not possible.

In Europe, the most widespread idea was that it was language and culture that people needed to have in common to form a democratic political order. This assumption was the intellectual basis for the movements for "national unification", such as for Italy or Germany, or for "national liberation" of linguistic groups living together with others in imperial formations, such as in the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman Empire. It leads to the identification of "people" with "nation", which became the basis for European democratic practice institutionalized in the "nation-state".

Three additions to this observation:

First, while this was the dominant conception, it did not become the exclusive one. Belgium and Switzerland are pluri-linguistic polities; the United Kingdom includes several nations; the question of the mono- or pluri-national character of Spain is at the core of the so-called Catalan question.

Secondly, the notion of "blood ties", today often called "ethnic nationalism", was not central to most of nineteenth-century nationalism. It became more prominent towards the end of the century when nationalism became increasingly aggressive.

Thirdly, there is something like a functional equivalent to the identification of the people with the nation in the socialist/communist tradition of thought, namely the identification of the people with a social class. Here the common will is seen to reside in common interest, not in language or culture. But this was similarly a way of avoiding to confront the question about how a common will is formed.

Most generally speaking, all these approaches were attempts to see the "people" as "One" ("*le peuple-Un*", as the French political philosopher Claude Lefort put it). They found their most radical expression in the mid-twentieth-century forms of totalitarianism. While these strong views of the unity of the people are today rightly rejected, it is often forgotten that they were meant to give an

answer to a question that persists.

After the Second World War, an implicit answer was given in Western Europe: It was assumed that existing states were indeed formed by "nations", so that the question had successfully been addressed by setting the adequate boundaries. Within these boundaries, then, more space could be given to diversity of interests and preferences. The people did not necessarily have the be "One" in all respects because the boundaries of states were seen as the correct and effective boundaries of political deliberation. This is the basis of what we now call "liberal democracy".

Whatever the merits of this approach may have been in Western Europe for some decades, it does not appear to be applicable any longer, at least not as a full solution. New states have formed in Eastern Europe, quests for state formation also exist in Scotland and Catalonia, and the European Union itself re-sets political boundaries. For reasons that I cannot discuss here in detail, the question of the boundaries of political deliberation has been re-opened and that is why also the question of the demos has to be asked anew.

My proposal to do so is built on two assumptions, which are not self-evident in current public debate:

First, the question remains important. There are significant requirements for democratic political deliberation that should not be underestimated. Today, it often looks as if the combination of a wealth-producing economy with global governance and social movements is seen as sufficient to deal with all problems that may arise. For some time, it was widely assumed that the globe will become more liberal and democratic without reflecting much about the bases of democracy. But the disappearance of autocratic regimes is not the same as effective democratization. And today the again increasing references to "nationalism" and "populism" are reactions against the neglect of the requirements for democratic political deliberation.

Second, the question of the demos should no longer be answered by reference to anything prior to political deliberation. The demos is not pre-political; it can only itself emergence from political processes. In brief, I want to signal three dimensions of demos formation, with regard to past, present and future.

Even though the unity of the people should not be sought in the past, *historical experiences* are important for developing a sense of acting together as a collectivity. This is also one important reason why a global, cosmopolitan democracy is neither possible nor desirable: historical experiences in different world-regions are too diverse to be brought into close political interaction. At the same time, the past is not something stable and settled that determines our present. It needs to be *interpreted* – and often re-interpreted – to connect historical experiences to each other with a view to the present.

For this to occur, within the present, *relations of communication* among the members of a polity have to be both dense and plural. To insist on communication is not the same as saying, as one widely thought in the nineteenth century, that a common language is a requirement for a viable democracy. Political communication can succeed with a plurality of languages. What is important is the intensity of the communicative relations and their focus on interpreting the situation one finds oneself in and the problems one has to address.

Finally, a requirement for a demos to form is some degree of *orientation towards joint future action*. Again, this needs to be distinguished from an already existing common will. This orientation towards the future can start out from significant diversity. The key ingredient that is needed is the readiness to embark on the trajectories of common future action, even when the diversity of

interests and interpretation is large to begin with. (As an aside, let it be noted that this requirement entails some stability of boundaries, and thus puts limits to notions such as as an “ever larger union” or “variable geometry”.)

In all three respects, much has been done, but also much still needs to be done, for a European demos to form. Two insights are important from this perspective: First, there are *no principled obstacles* to the formation of a European demos; this is entirely possible (and in my personal view also desirable, but this leads into a different discussion). Second, such formation of a European demos can only be a process of *self-constitution*. Even though external conditions can be important, there is nothing else that creates a demos than the emerging demos itself.

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Barcelona/Brussels, 16 March 2017