European Political Rituals: a Challenging Tradition in the Making

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Abstract

The emergence of the European Union as a supranational political order has given rise to new political rituals. European rituals such as the dramatization of European governance via a European ceremonial, the celebration of European memory in Europe Day, the European anthem and the voting process in European elections offer various theoretical challenges. Given the difficulty today of inventing traditions in relativist and disenchanted societies, the possible obsolescence of the notion of ritual itself may be at stake. This paper argues that the development of European symbolism is more likely to follow well-established, national paths and pass via a cross-fertilization of national and supranational references. These national processes may facilitate the incorporation of the European dimension in national identities and practices but not their articulation in trans-national and/or supranational schemes. This leaves open questions on the nature of the European polity and the symbolic functions it is required to perform.

Key words: Anthem; European Union; European Identity; National identity; Political Communication; Protocol; Rituals; Symbols; Vote.

Political Anthropology at the Conquest of the European Union

Since its foundation, the European Union has frequently been presented as the product of a highly functionalist integration process in which interests were supposed to govern ideas and identities. As a “regulatory state”, the EU appears to be a very rationalized and utilitarian political body. Nevertheless, the emergence of a supranational political order has produced a number of symbolic settings (Foret 2008): political roles, events, commemorations, codified experiences and material symbols. Scenarios diverge. The production of symbols has sometimes occurred directly in European arenas and been shaped by European actors, although it remains circumscribed to elites and determined by national backgrounds and actors. It sometimes takes place in trans-national networks or in the Europeanization “from within” of national spaces.

This production of European symbols cannot be properly understood without taking into account the structural changes in contemporary political communication. Disenchanting European societies offer little raw material for any classic development and dramatization of political narratives. But there is a social demand for renewed, deinstitutionalized and individualized cultural codes. Europe is not de-ritualized if this means the absence of symbolic markers of time and formal or informal social rules that guide the political drama. Rather, the exposure of the games of power and the dramatization of the relationships between rulers and ruled follow logics based on