

## European Integration and Citizens' Rights

by Elizabeth Meehan

British 'Euro-sceptics' often invoke the United States to demonstrate either of two prospects for a common set of rights for the peoples of the European Union. On the one hand, Europe is said to be too heterogeneous in traditions and senses of identity, compared to the US, for the spontaneous development of a union that would be a deep enough basis for common citizenship. On the other hand, uniformity of values and centralisation of institutions, seemingly the prerequisites of American citizenship, would have to be forced on heterogeneous European peoples. Thus, the argument goes, European citizenship, stemming as it would from coercion, is undesirable.

Such comparisons are usually anachronistic. A more fruitful comparison is between the EU, a 'polity in construction', with the USA when the latter was, in Bonwick's phrase, 'little more than a sketch' - that is, in the period from the late 1770s to 1787. This comparison shows that, though there are certainly important differences, the US did, and the EU has to, address similar questions about how to combine the benefits of integration and the protection of rights. It suggests that the prospects for the existence of a set of tangible rights for European citizens are not self-evidently poor. America was more diverse and Europe may be less so than is usually acknowledged. In both continents there were and are strong similar motivations for integration. And both societies faced and face similar institutional puzzles about the best way simultaneously to achieve integration and protect rights.

Broadly speaking, political choices about citizenship may lead in either of two directions, or lurch between them: neo-Roman citizenship, which incorporates plural identities and institutions;

or neo-national citizenship, in which things remain much as they are but with an added European dimension.

Lord Jenkins once told an audience at the Queen's University of Belfast that, even though he ardently supported European integration, he could hardly envisage the day when Germans or Italians would say when in Japan that they were European, as Texans would say that they were American. It is well to remember that in the eighteenth century George Washington and James Madison thought of themselves as Virginian but saw no tension between this and being American, that this was unusual since most of their contemporaries identified themselves with their state, and that, two centuries later, pride in state identity remains strong. Moreover, even in modern 'consolidated' America, millions of citizens identify themselves not only by state, but also in hyphenated ways: as African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and so on.

A wide range of literature indicates that identities, including national and social ones, are not fixed but dependent on political context; hence the hyphenated Americans, and complicated variations over why Northern Irish people call themselves Irish or British, Irish and British, or men and women and Ulster. People appear increasingly willing to add 'European' to whatever other labels they apply to themselves.

Perhaps more fundamental than the empirical variability of identities is the theoretical significance of diversity to the American federalists. The existence of human diversity was as essential for republican federalism as the existence of a myriad of civil associations and multiple levels of power and authority for different policy functions and for avenues of redress. Homogeneity would have been the enemy of their republican enterprise because it would have eliminated debate, atrophied political competition, and encouraged monopolies of power.

Too often the arguments about European integration and citizenship are put in terms of the feasibility or desirability of a transformation of national citizenship on to a grander scale - the same but in a new super-state called Europe. When based on a need for homogeneity, this understanding of the argument about Europe implies that successful politics are communitarian. There could be justifiable grounds for cynicism about tangible outcomes and fear of coercion if it were true that there were no basis for politics but communitarianism - at least in its most stifling form. But politics can be *gesellschaft* as well as *gemeinschaft*. As in the United States, it is not out of the question to think of the construction of Europe as an experiment in *gesellschaft*-building in which citizens' rights - articulated through national or transnational civil associations, or through regional bodies and alliances, or through national governments - can be exercised in what Tassin calls a 'politically constituted public space' in which a plurality, not an amalgamation, of political 'interests, feelings, wills . . . judgements, decisions, and actions' come 'face to face'.

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