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ON THE PATH TO A EUROPEAN PARTY SYSTEM ? A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Christophe Bouillaud¹

A. AN OLD QUESTION, A NEW ANSWER? EUROPE AS A PARTISAN PLOT OR POLICY?

If we were to ask in the mid-eighties whether a European Party System existed, the answer would be a categorical no. At the European level, both within and around the European Community's institutions, there was no stable pattern of competition and co-operation between Europe-wide parties with a clear impact on the selection of European policy-makers and the choice and implementation of European public policies. It would have been an obvious overevaluation to consider the activities of the then almost powerless European Parliament's groups as constituting a European Party System. In the wake of the direct election of the European Parliament in 1979, both politicians' and political scientists' hopes of such an exciting development were dismissed by the very shock of reality.

First of all, contrary to some expectations, the European Elections were only Europe-wide elections, which did not even take place on the same day in each national state of the European Community. At the electoral level, they were rapidly qualified as "second-order elections" (by Karlheinz Reif yet in 1980) playing on domestic themes by domestic actors with domestic outcomes. The rather fantomatic Europe-wide coalitions of parties were only able in some cases to draft rather spurious electoral manifestos, which would have no importance whatsoever in the real world of national political campaigning.

The transnational political actors and the political groups inside the Parliament seemed ideologically divided, even inside the so-called great traditional "familles politiques", socialist and social democrat, christian-democrat, liberal and conservative. The level of political linkage between the members of these families seemed as low as ever, in the old-style of socialist, liberal and christian-democrat Internationals (Devin, G., 1993, 1996; Durand, J.-D., 1995; Papini, R., 1997 [1986]). Nethertheless, the European Parliament and the political groups inside it seemed to function smoothly, in perfect isolation from the rest of European political life, doing neither good nor harm, a gentlemen's and ladies' club of young but not so ambitious

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politicians and swiftly retired mammoths. The EP voting patterns seemed quite erratic, and the very function of this so-called Parliament could deserve the "machin" definition in Gaullist terms. The integration process, not to speak of the power, seemed to stand elsewhere in the "intergovernmental" European Councils or the "functional" Commission. If any form of European political integration was to arise, on the way to a "Europolity", it could not stem from the democratically elected European Parliament. The old-fashioned national political parties would not play any role at the European level, which was merely the realm of national actors, technocrats and "eurocrates".

The absence of a European Party System and the insignificance of the European Parliament in the decisional process of the European Community were closely related. By historical standards, in the nineteenth century, modern national party systems developed by a mixture of polarization within the liberal-state parliamentary arenas and from popular mobilizations outside them. Indeed popular mobilizations generally intended to send representatives inside the parliamentary arenas, and traditional parliamentary actors searched new voters in the masses, which were given the franchise. Even in the European Council (which could be considered as a Parliament in its own right, with effective legislative powers) it was quite difficult to admit the partisanship explanation. For example, the so called "relation particulière" between France and Germany associated a Christian-Democrat or Liberal leader and a Socialist or Social-Democrat leader. The 1981-82 Mitterrand-Schmidt period was, on the contrary, a perfect illustration of the meaninglessness of European leftwing partisanship. By the same token, in 1985 when the Single European Act came on the European political agenda, Margaret Thatcher's outcry against a "Christian-Democrat plot" seemed rather unreal, since two Socialist leaders – F. Mitterrand and B. Craxi - played a central role in this development.

Today the answer isn't so easy. When we were writing the first draft of this paper, in the summer of 1998, the French press displayed great expectations that a clear-cut victory of Social Democrats in the German general election could bring a new start to Europe-wide keynesian-style growth policies. Since the unexpected victory of the French "majorité plurielle" in June 1997, the French leftwing-oriented quality press, mainly *Le Monde* and *Libération*, described a possible great four-player game between the reluctant Blairism, the leading Jospinism, and the still uncertain "Neue Mitte" of Gerhard Schröder, with a very minor Italian player, Romano Prodi and then Massimo d'Alema. In the early days of Schröder's chancellorship, it was remembered daily that the left side of the European political spectrum now has the power to act (eleven national executives to fifteen), and must act to relieve the socio-economic disarray of left-wing traditional constituencies. The old project of a new sort of demand management at the European level to fight mass

unemployment seem to be on the agenda once again (it was already the case with Delors' *White Paper* in the early nineties at the paroxysm of the economic crisis, and one could find some trace of it in academic circles since the mid-eighties, if not earlier on). The arrival of the "Grünen" to ministerial responsibilities in Germany also seemed to mean for our press that a French-German Green axis was born in Europe, and could help reinforce the Socialist axis. For some journalists or even political scientists, this new situation meant that trans-European partisanship could play from then on as important a role as sometimes attributed to the Christian-Democrat affinities in the early fifties for the very first step of the "construction européenne". Jospin, Blair, Schröder, d'Alema as in the European myths, R. Schumann, P.A. Spaak, F. De Gasperi, K. Adenauer? A Social-Democrat salvation of Europe long after an "Europe vaticane"?...

At the end of 1999, as we are finishing this same text, all these expectations are somewhat diminished, or even seem to be a new historical joke. As the reader knows, a few days before the European elections in June, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder issued their common political "Manifesto". Albeit they both had signed, in March 1999 in Milan, the Party of European Socialists' Manifesto for these same Elections. They issued a text, which was clearly a U-turn away from traditional Socialist or Social-Democrat values. While concerning day-to-day solutions the "Blair-Schröder Manifesto" is not so far away from the PSE's "Milan Manifesto"², its social philosophy underpinnings are completely incongruent with the very values of post-war socialism or social-democracy. Here, there is no real place for "ex-post" (after market successes or failures) wealth redistribution from the wealthy to the poor, and no sense whatsoever of real conflict inside civil society. The clear electoral defeat of Blair's Labour Party and Schröder's Social-Democrats a few days later helped somehow to pave the way to a smoothing out of the nascent divide inside the socialist "famille politique" that this Manifesto could create³.

This somewhat sad story tells us two things : on the one hand, the socialist « famille politique », ever the more prone to unity, remains only a very loose grouping of national parties, which react mainly according to *national* opportunities and constraints ; on the other hand, it seems clearly that ideological national hegemony must also be sustained by an European-wide or even global pledge to hegemony, so to say : "Act national, prevail global !". So the question of the existence of an European-wide party system remains, from the viewpoint of day-to-day events, quite open.

² For an analysis by the Parti Socialiste of the "Blair-Schröder Manifesto", see *Les Notes de la Fondation Jean-Jaurès*, n°13, août 1999, "Blair-Schröder. Le texte du 'manifeste'. Les analyses critiques."

³ In November 1999, the Congress of the Socialist International held in Paris didn't lead to a further clash.

To answer this question from a politist point of view, one may then refer to a new branch of literature on Party Politics and European integration, mainly born inside the English-speaking scientific community. I will summarize its findings and then give some suggestions for a critical appraisal.

B. THE THESIS OF THE NASCENT EUROPEAN PARTY SYSTEM : A SUMMARY

New literature on the subject of a nascent European Party System gives an image which is quite different from the portrait we have just drawn of the early eighties at the end of the nineties. Indeed, a large and growing literature on this subject shows that the mediatic developments are not separated from more profound realities (for accurate synthesis, see : Bertoli, D., 1995; R. Ladrech, 1996, 1997; S. Hix and C. Lord., 1997; Hix, S., 1998) To summarize its arguments in a few words :

a) The starting point is the quite unexpected consequences of the creation of a new status for full-time politicians. Prior to 1979, and since the fifties, with the creation of the ECSC's Assembly, the MEP's were members of the national Parliaments elected by their peers. The new MEP's not only had a democratic (technical) legitimacy of their own, but also they were no longer to consider the EP membership as their part-time second job. Considering the nature of the electoral process, even in countries with no proportional list representation, these new full-time jobs were - and are - at the disposal of the national party leaderships to give selective incentives to actual or would-be "professionnels de la politique". These new parliamentary elites at the EP were - and are - still unable to control their own electoral destiny, still firmly in the hands of the national parties they represent. But, apart from this enduring lack of autonomy, the impossibility of building up a direct link with a constituency of their own, there were unexpected consequences of the very existence of these new full-time politicians:

-On the one hand, these full-time politicians, with minimal decision powers in the early eighties, have tried and succeeded to build-up the power of the European Parliament (J. Smith, 1995). So it is possible to decipher the evolution of the institutions of the EC since 1985 from the Single European Act to the Amsterdam Treaty as being this particular group of professional's long fight to enhance its formal and informal powers. George Tsebelis' articles on the EP as a "conditional agenda setter" (1994) gives a theoretical foundation to this evolution, and Richard Corbett's inside story (1998) shows with some details how the intellectual input came from the MEP's fighting for their professional status in the very name of a "democratization" of Europe;

-On the other hand, these MEP's have played a role in the general alignment of their own parties on an integrationist stance. According to some authors, the conversion of the Labour Party to a Europeist view is largely due to the European conversion of its own MEP's and to their impact in the decision making in their own party. The impact is mainly informal : the specialization of MEP's in European issues give them the possibility of solving problems for their party, of giving ready answers to questions nobody else has time to study inside the feeble constitution of actual parties. This mechanism somewhat difficult to document for each party could help to explain why almost all government parties in Europe are now integrationist, which was not the case twenty years ago.

b) These enhancements of the powers of the EP, albeit apparently still limited in comparison to ordinary national Parliaments, have created a strong institutional constraint for the MEP's as a professional group if they want to play any effective role in the decision-making process of the EU (Attinà, F., 1990; Hix S. and Lord C., 1997; Hosli, M.O, 1997). Especially because of the majority of the members rule for every important decision to be taken, and of the interinstitutional bargaining that the EP can only sustain with a large inner consensus, there is a strong impetus to the formation and perpetuation of large political groups, which enable the consensus-building process to function as smoothly as possible in a Parliament with 15 nationalities and more than 80 party delegations. Some authors (Hix S., 1996; L. Bardi, 1996; Hix S. and Lord C., 1997) consider that the EP is now characterised by a political system, with two "core" political actors, the PSE (Party of European Socialists) and the EPP (European People's Party), one medium-size permanent actor, the party of ELDR (European Liberals, Democrats and Reformers), a small albeit would-be permanent actor the European Greens (the European Federation of Green Parties), and fluctuating groupings of "outsiders" mainly situated on the right side of a left-right dimension now articulating this one-dimensional political system. We may also note that there is a middle-term trend towards a further "corization" of the EP : in 1979, the MEP's of PSE and PPE represented together yet 53,6% of all MEP's and in 1999 66,3%, with a maximum of 69,1% in 1993⁴.

c) Another dramatic development which could allow us to speak of a European Party System is the new success of the partisan pre-summit prior to European Council meetings, and the involvement on a partisan basis of European Commissioners in such meetings. The enlarged European Council, functioning more often with a majority rule since the Single European Act, could thus be described as a classical Parliament with partisan majorities, opposing on a left-right divide the PSE members and the PPE and rightwing members. So the actual fuzz about Jospin, Blair, Schröder, D'Alema, would only be the emergence in the mass media of a decennial

⁴According to P. Delwit, J-M. De Waele, P.Magnette, 1999, p.225.

evolution. The European Economic and Monetary Union could also be retrospectively interpreted as the success of a Europe-wide rightwing coalition, and not as a part of a geopolitical deal between France and Germany.

d) By the same token, the European Commission has been more and more of a high profile politicians body. The technical "alibi" is fading away rapidly. We may call this aspect the Delors' legacy. And the new nomination process of the Commission and the synchronization of its duration with the five-year mandate of the EP first tested in 1994-99 (see Hix, S. and Lord C., 1996 on Santer's confirmation) are clearly giving an overt political colour to the Commission, which tends to look like an ordinary executive body with a two Chambers' (Council and EP) confidence obligation.

e) The fantomatic Europe-wide federation of parties is progressively replaced by European Parties, recognised in the article 138 B of Maastricht Treaty (D. Hanley, 1994; Lightfoot, S., 1996; Newman, M., 1996; Jansen, T., 1998). Since then, the EP groups have renamed themselves as the EP's group of the corresponding extra-institutional European party. They still are at best indirect parties with no direct membership, and exiguous organizations (for example less than 15 people worked full-time for the Party of European Socialists as such in 1998), and they do not dominate in any sense of the term their members, the national parties, and their EP's group, but they are helping to homogenize national party culture via the bargaining exercises of congresses, programmes and manifestos. Now each great "famille politique" is able to present its political manifesto and programme on a regular basis, as it has been seen again for the European elections of June 99. Such an exercise is facilitated by the Europe-wide tendency of government parties on each side of the classical left-right political divide to consider only mild options on socio-economic issues. The blurring of ideological specificities in the established government parties, on the right and on the left, can only lead to agreement at the European level inside each "famille politique". Especially on the left, the Socialist, Labour and Social-Democratic parties tend to lose national specificities (Prosche, G., 1991; Delwit, P. 1995; Grunberg, G., 1997). In the seventies or even in the eighties, they did not have much in common. Now, as one may note, they are mainly dominated by a leader whose very name tends for the outside world to become more and more synonymous with the socio-political aims of the party... And, in practical terms, their actual policies are not as far away from each other, as it may seem. On the right side, the general secularization means that the centuries-old difference between secular conservatism, radicalism and liberalism and christian-democratism is fading away. One may thus imagine, on a post-"rokkanian" basis, the formation of a stable - and grounded in long-term European history - rightist alliance based on the homology of national fundamental - but modernized - cleavages. With this

prospect in mind, the EP would be a test zone, with little price to pay for testing an affinity, for these homologies (cf. the alliance between the secularized CDU-CSU and the secular Conservatives).

f) Lastly, if European elections are still “ second-order elections ” fought on national terms, as it was clearly the case again in 1999, there was a tendency towards a more European agenda during these elections in some countries (J. Smith, 1996), and the aftermath of these elections began to be identified with some personified choices, mainly the confirmation of Jacques Santer as President of the European Commission in 1994. The so-called “ proposition Delors ” (each “ famille politique ” can choose its official candidate at the Commission’s presidency before the European elections) would have been a strong step towards such an Europeanization. We may note that such a development has been long advocated by some authors, whom we can consider as the scientific prophets of a “ Europolity ”. As we know, the early and undignified end of Santer’s Commission with the subsequent emergency nomination of Romano Prodi as his designated successor barred the path for five more years to such a development. Incidentally, we may note that Santer’s defeat did not so much play on party lines as on national lines, and that Prodi’s nomination illustrates perfectly the domination of the EP by its “ core ” parties, since Prodi is a liberal Christian-Democrat, who has led a government mainly sustained in Italy by the moderate Left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra).

On the whole one could argue:

1°) the European Party System is beginning to exist and rapidly encompass the decision-making process of the European Union's institutions. These institutions could not actually function without the so-called Europarties as their coordinating mechanisms. This European Political System can be likened to all functioning democracies based on parties as aggregative mechanisms, combining a strong consensual aspect and a real political space structuration on left-right issues ;

2°) of the three functions of political parties (selection of the rulers, choice of policies, linkage between Society and State), two have been deeply modified to adapt to the European process, the selection function and the policy-making function. Long from being a dead end for political careers, European experience now plays a great role. A successful five-year “ stage ” in the EP is a good career path to further national or European success, or a mandate as Commissioner is a highly valued reward for classical politicians lacking in technical “ alibis ”. The national policy-making function interferes profoundly with the European policy-making function, as all studies on public policies seem to show. As long as politicians still play a role in policy-making and “ party governments ” rule all over Europe at a national level, their day-to-day activity is affected by this dimension. The “ party-in-government ” is, so to speak, by necessity dealing with the European dimension as an opportunity,

a constraint or a resource. This last remark is only a reminder of this evidence : with very few exceptions, all national governmental actors in Europe are partisan actors.

C. SOME LIMITS OF THIS EVOLUTION : AN "EUROPARTITOCRACY" ?

It would be difficult to cast doubts on all these empirical developments (see Andeweg, R., 1995, for a less optimistic view on the same data). But we would like to point out some of the limits inherent in the idea of a nascent Europarty system (Bogdanor, V, 1996; Wallace, William, 1996):

a)

a.1) The reasoning in this literature is primarily based on the upheaval in the policy-making functions of the EP. Interestingly enough, English literature insists on this point while French literature⁵ remains obsessed by the Commission (see the special issue of *Revue française de science politique* in 1996 on this subject) or by the intergovernmental bargaining process, and some French authors still consider the EP to be entirely powerless or even nonsensical (Seiler, D., 1998). These points of view raise a true difficulty which remains to be elucidated : does the EP really have a policy-making role⁶? Moreover, with the Treaty of Amsterdam, new changes will arise, which will reopen the question of EP's power. From this perspective we can ask for instance, the true meaning of the term " co-decision " power?

a.2) These authors also seem to forget that the Maastricht Treaty (even with its Amsterdam corrections) created an incredibly complex system in which the term « European Union » included the Communities and two new intergovernmental pillars (for external and internal security), and inside the Community part of the Union, an autonomous body, the European System of Central Banks. Even so Europeist an author as Jean-Louis Quermonne recognizes this new complexity (J.L. Quermonne, 1998) : here the EP can play no role at all... or at most a very subdued one.

⁵ This Anglo-French disagreement is specular with the very situation to French MEP's in the EP: the French MEP's have failed on ever side of the left-right divide to constitute one of the national sub-groups which constitutes the core of each great transnational political group. Interestingly enough, with the Italian MEP's, the French MEP's constitute in the 1994-99 Assembly most of the periphery's members. Only the PS can play a significant, but subdued, role in the PSE. Our politicians seem to believe still less than our political scientists to the powers of the EP.

⁶ On this question, see P. Delwit, J-M. De Waele, P.Magnette, 1999. They give no clear cut answer, but they give elements to show that, if these powers do exist, they are used quite autonomously of party logic. It seems that parties-in-parliament's interests are subdued to parliament-as-a-whole's interests.

b)

b.1) Apart from the very question of the veritable role of the EP in the actual European decision-making process after Maastricht and Amsterdam, it seems to us that there is a contradiction between the so-called enhancement of the EP's powers as a primary source of a European Party System and the long-documented general tendency of Parliaments throughout Europe to lose decision power. Even in Italy, the home country of hard parliamentarism, some authors argue that an evident trend to executive domination is clearly on the way since the eighties ; not to speak of France...

If there is such a thing as a nascent European Party System to discover, it would be better to focus our attention on the pre-summits held by each partisan side prior to the European Council.

b.2) But even here, at the summit phase of the so-called Europolity, is it possible to argue that a common partisanship has a stronger effect than national constraints or than the effect of agenda building? The question remains entirely open.

If this aspect happens to be of importance, we may note that the informal links outside these partisan pre-summits must also be studied. Even if it is clearly difficult to open the "boîte noire" of these relationships between national leaders, and national leaders' advisers, the literature on a nascent European Party System concentrates too exclusively on formal issues. One may frequently attend partisan pre-summits, and nevertheless choose to react on the basis of national interest. The euro-partisanship factor is not proven by the mere existence and attendance at these pre-summits. In a way this literature clearly proves that the organs exist, but it is unable to show with historical data that euro-partisanship has had an impact on actual decisions. (The same problem can be found on the EP level, where the literature cannot identify a partisan impact over many decisions. Of course this is quite self-evident since the EP can only function on a consensual basis...).

In a way, this partisan factor at the summit can only be established by events still to come, and then it could be generalized by the competition effect. If for instance the left-side of the political divide was able in the next years to act collectively with team-spirit and sacrificing national interest to the successful attainment of higher Euro-partisan objectives, a polarization could be on the way...

c) The hope of a "Europe des Partis" was strongly linked with the hope of a more democratic European construction. In all the evolutions summarized here, it is quite the contrary : this nascent European Party System is totally detached from popular impetus, *if from popular consent in a technical sense*. It would be foolish to pretend that the political groups in the EP have established a direct linkage with mobilized

social groups in the national parties they stand for. On the contrary, this European Party System centred around the EP and the Council seems to be a further step of a “cartelization” of European Parties (Lightfoot, 1996). “Cartelization” refers to the “ideal-type” proposed by Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair in their seminal article of 1995. A “cartel party” at the national level is a party strongly linked to a group of parties which recognize each other as legitimate players against illegitimate players. These “cartel parties” are mainly constituted of “professionnels de la politique” and highly specialized professionals, in an historical context where, in developed capitalist societies, the modern functions of stabilization, regulation, and redistribution of the State are already well established. These parties derive most of their financial resources from the State, legally or illegally. When they are not making use of State's functions to give selective incentives to their “clientèles”, they mobilize their electoral mass mainly by a non-legal, yet situational privileged access to mass media. No doubt, this model has a strong critical aspect since it is a generalization to European politics, based on the Italian “Partitocrazia” and the German “Parteinstitut”. Pushed to its limits, this ideal-type signifies that it is not the party which is an intermediate between State's public policies and civil society's demands, but that it is the State, with the economic and positional means it offers, which is the medium between civil society's demands and the self-interest of an autonomous professional body. “Cartelization” does not necessarily imply centrist policies, desideologization, and personalization, but these aspects are strongly related since the “cartel party” is mainly a “parti d'électeurs” under “spatial” constraints in the age of a mass-media.

So the actual shape of Europe-wide politics tends to a further “cartelization”:

-From a narrow financial point of view, we could remark that the very activity of this nascent European party system is financed mostly by public funds, directly through the groups of the EP, or indirectly through the public fundings which pay all these “professionnels de la politique” involved in the governmental bodies or which now fund most national parties. Not much money or time are poured into this new system which did not arise from state funds.

-It is all too easy to repeat how much professionalization and specialization the European political arena implies, and how much the behavioural acculturation of new MEP's, Commissioners or even Heads-of-State tends to be biased to a consensual style of policy-making. Only Margaret Thatcher seemed to have played for long a different game (i.e. the famous “I want my money back!” slogan). The European arena is actually biased towards a kind of overt “cartelization”.

-The European arena constraints seem to force every actual or would-be government party to become a member of these new gentlemen's game of legitimate (europeist) players against illegitimate (nationalist, populist, extremist) players. With the creation of the so-called European Party System, no national political party can have a role in the two-level national-European game which has been creating itself in the nineties 1) while there are no specialists in these matters : the complexity of the European polity demands its professionals, no dilettantism is tolerated; 2) if it is not part of - or affiliated to - one of the Europarties. It can only be rational to join the club, as it is rational for former members to recruit for the club. This is the case, for example with the British Conservatives, Forza Italia, and even now the French RPR (on the British Conservatives-EPP alliance, see : K. M. Johansson, 1997). Since there are only two or three Europarties, which exists, and since they are institutionally constrained to a consensual procedure, any member of the party is also constrained to further accommodate its position. Some contradictions could be tolerated between the two-levels, as between local politics and national politics, but they cannot go completely unattended. The European political arena gives a further strong impetus to a centrist choice, even if a contradiction can be maintained for some time.

-We could even consider that political alternatives are likely to become more and more rigid : no party can be a government party if it cannot join one of these Europeist groupings. Interestingly enough, the formulation of the "party article" of the Maastricht Treaty seems to imply that European parties have no other role than to mobilize the electorate in a europeist sense. This disposition could imply from a legal point of view that a party mobilizing against Europe is illegal at the Union level. (NB. Art. 138A, Treaty of Maastricht: "Political parties at the European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to *forming a European awareness* and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union", I underline).

d) One aspect of the national parties' europeanization is completely forgotten by this (polite) literature : the Europe-wide aspect of political corruption. As the "Appel de Genève" of 1996 has underlined, the very impunity of political corruption in Europe has its refuge in actual judiciary boundaries inside the European Union (Luxembourg, Guernesey-Jersey, Isle of Man, etc.) and not only on the existence of offshore fiscal paradises or non-member uncooperative states (Switzerland). Apart some lip-service, the national politicians have shown no sign of a revolution on this point. We may note also that a southern Socialist axis of corruption has appeared in full light since the early nineties : concerning the "Augusta Affair", and Bettino Craxi's bank account "Protezione", with its French and Spanish ramifications. Political science is unarmed to study these aspects with accuracy, but it cannot ignore them as being a part of europeanization.

e) When it comes to the problem of accountability, this nascent European Party System seems to have rather strange and unexpected consequences.

e.1) The European Elections still play on a national basis, even in 1994 and 1999, most were generally mid-term elections. In a national electoral cycle, the electorate tends to sanction their ruling national party/ies with better results for the opposition party/ies. Since the same political family is not ruling nationally all over Europe at the same time, the aggregate results of European elections tend to be rather stable. The political equilibrium of the European Party System is more stable than the electoral equilibrium of the national party systems which constitute it at the grass roots . If we consider the strange role played by the British uninominal system in the 1994 Elections it is also known that the victory of the Labour party was a compensation for loss of the PSE elsewhere in Europe ; on the contrary, the change in the electoral system in the UK has amplified the “ defeat ” of the PSE in 1999, which is first of all the defeat of New Labour. In particular, the two big europarties PSE and PPE cannot be sanctioned as such ; their integrationist bias and their socio-economic policy consensus-building cannot be challenged. As long as the overall European electorate does not vote on a similar European agenda, and as long there is no correspondence of political orientations between the majorities in different countries, this prospect will continue. Even with different European agendas in several countries this stabilizing effect will continue. Although in Denmark since 1979 there has been a special party system for European Elections centred around specific European issues, this national sub-system has had no effect on the European party system since there is no clear resemblance with other national sub-systems, not to speak of electoral coordination. We may even argue that with the actual tendency in the Amsterdam Treaty towards a perfect European bicameralism between the European Council and the EP on many subjects, the Europarties could be totally unaccountable for any electoral sanction. A clear majority in the Council could be counterbalanced by a majority of their coalised national opponents in the European Parliament, ending in a centrist consensus in actual decisions. We may even ask if these subtle compensation mechanisms are not already being instrumentalised by the nascent Europarties.

e.2) It has long been stated that the Maastricht debate put an end to the “ tacit consensus ” around European integration in the early nineties, and that the method of “ unification by stealth ” inherited from Jean Monnet no longer had a future (Jack Hayward, 1996). The “ democratic deficit ” was an official theme ten years ago, and the development of the Europarties was considered as a means of developing democratic accountability. But we must note that this has not been the case. Quite paradoxically, the institutional developments, especially since the Maastricht Treaty,

have created a decision-making system so complex that no particular national party or nascent Europarty can be deemed directly responsible of any single act or public policy that the European Union produces. Only on the basis of political distrust, can one attribute responsibility to one side or another. One may only say that the opposing fringes of the EP are not accountable, and that the "core actors" of the EP and the national government of whatever political creed it may be, are collectively accountable. However, on actual electoral terms this is meaningless, and can only lead the ordinary voter to a populist attitude.

It has long been stated by the French historian Pierre Gerbet that the European construction process did meet with success because it offered national governments an easy device for socio-economic modernization by overpassing popular consent and making Brussels' technocrats responsible for any misgivings internal actors would have to suffer. The national governments thus consented to appearing as the advocates of their own victims. The Europarty device could entail the same mechanism with a more democratically legitimate façade.

The paradox in our hypothesis is that it is then difficult to explain why some main stream actors - such as Jacques Delors - are fighting for a more accountable European Union political system, based on the definition of a man-in-charge. If the electorate could be aware of who is really in charge of EU decisions, the PSE and its allies or the PPE and its allies, no doubt the risk of sanction on the parties identified Union-wide as the game's real players would be extremely high. But we may note that Jacques Delors is no longer, at least for the time being, a partisan actor. It may also be that the Europe-wide professional self-interest of policy-makers in favour of integration is a poor equivalent for federalist convictions, which also support integration ...

f) A final problem, which from the classical democratic point of view, shows that the very idea of a European Party System is quite unreal concerns cognitive aspects of the idea itself. In this respect, the construction of the EPS has several important deficiencies.

f.1) There are no real European media. For the time being, this European Party System is still, at best, a way of designating the equilibrium inside a special set of institutions, and its effects on some professional actors, who are recognized only among highly specialized people - the readership of *Agence Europe* production, perhaps. An ordinary party system is also a set of representations in the minds of ordinary people. The most one may say here is that this aspect is embryonic, perhaps even in the minds of ordinary opinion-makers. It suffices to read the European press : the French press has a deeply distorted view of Italian politics and the Italian press of

French politics. Some argue that, as with historical national experiences, the political system in Parliaments (the EP and the Councils) will in the long run mobilize the electorate on the issues which are prevalent inside it. Today, we remain very far from this point. The political play is still enacted in fifteen *plus one* different theaters.

f.2) At the citizenship level, the idea that the enduring cleavages of European national politics could be considered as homologous and summarized by the actual EP's structure is actually quite absurd. Here, we are clearly faced with an artefact or a conscious construction of reality (even from the post-“ rokkanian ” point of view of Daniel-Louis Seiler, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The idea of a European Party System may explain some important transformations in the many worlds of the “ professionnels de la politique ” in many places in Europe, but for the time-being, it has no role at a citizenship level other than that of authorizing populist resentment against politicians. Inversely, the democratic weakness of this so-called European Party System could be an explanation for the role of other relations between the European institutions and civil society's interest groups, lobbies, mass action or associations, because the Europarties have no other interest to defend at a European level than their own professional interests. They can thereby be thoroughly open to any of these influences.

LIST OF INITIALS

CDU-CSU : Christian Democratic Union – Christian Social Union (Germany)

EC : European Community

ECSC : European Coal and Steel Community

ELDR : European Liberals, Democrats and Reformers

EP : European Parliament

EPP : European People's Party – same as PPE

EPS : European Party System

EU : European Union

PPE : Parti Populaire Européen – same as EPP

PS : Parti Socialiste – Socialist Party (France)

PSE : Parti des Socialistes Européens – Party of European Socialists

MEP : Member of European Parliament

RPR : Rassemblement Pour la République (France)

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