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Languages, Political Cultures and Solidarity in Europe

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Abstract

One crucial reason why systems of social protection have remained essentially national is that these systems are bounded empirically (by territory, history and language) and are based on 'bonds' which are essential for the actual and situated exercise of politics (citizenship law, reciprocity and identification). Politics in Europe means the use of diverse languages, and there is no imaginable way of circumventing this empirical fact of democracy. At the same time, the politicization of cross-EU matters is increasing. Hence, understanding how solidarity fares and will fare across the EU members has to be firmly based on the understanding of the social processes at the national level, and should situate them in the wider polity of European integration. It is precisely at a time – the present crisis – when élites have really started, albeit reluctantly, to try and 'jump over their shadows' ('über ihren Schatten springen', to use Jürgen Habermas' expression), that they are confronted most importantly with the language issue and the tenacious resilience of political cultures, and, so far, they have doggedly endeavoured to ignore it.

In the midst of the most serious crisis experienced since the Second World War, all the member states in the European Union are acting to deal with the dire problems affecting their economy and their population, their political system and their politics. Contrary to the assumption that nation-states and so-called “welfare states” are something of the past, recent events have demonstrated what had been already illustrated in 50 years of what is called “Social Europe”, but less clearly, namely that the European Union has remained unable to produce significant *positive steps* for fostering European-wide solidarity and social cohesion. Consequently, *what is serious* about solidarity (essentially, redistribution) has remained at the level of nation-states. If from different angles, EU Law has strengthened individual rights in some limited areas so far, it has at the same time introduced “legal insecurity” for industrial relations, labour law and systems of social protection (Barbier and Colomb 2011). At the same time, the crucial (and not single) reason why systems of social protection have remained essential and *national*, and will certainly

¹ Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne CNRS, Centre d'économie de la Sorbonne (CES). This text stems from a presentation to the Recode seminar, May 6th, 2011, CEREN, Centre for Research on Ethnic Relations and Nationalism, University of Helsinki.

not become obsolete for the foreseeable future is that these systems are both bounded empirically (by territory, history and language) and are based on “bonds” and “boundaries”, both essential to the actual and situated exercise of politics (citizenship law, reciprocity and identification). Politics in Europe means the use of diverse languages, and there is no imaginable way of circumventing this empirical fact of democracy. At the same time, the politicization of cross-EU matters is increasing. Hence, understanding how solidarity fares and will fare across the EU members has to be firmly based on the understanding of the social processes at the national level, and should situate them in the wider polity of European integration. It is precisely at a time – the present crisis – when élites have really started to try and “jump over their shadows” (“über ihren Schatten springen”²), if one uses Jürgen Habermas’s German expression, that, with utter reluctance they are confronted most importantly with the language issue and the tenacious resilience of political cultures, and, so far, they have doggedly endeavoured to ignore it.

This is why “solidarity”, a word perhaps not so frequently heard as it is now in the transnational discourse in international English, is so important to define and understand. In a second step, we will come to explaining why the only form of “genuine” solidarity – the one that implies sharing common interests and money according to social justice principles within the boundaries of a defined community, or society – has so far remained at the national and infra-national levels or “scales”. In the third part of the text, we precisely address the role of language in the building of such solidarity.

“Solidarity” from different angles

In a period when the President of the European Commission commonly uses the term “solidarity” when talking about the necessary answer to the economic and financial crisis, very different reactions with respect to it have been heard in different countries, and in the absence of one single, European cross-national *Öffentlichkeit*, debates, although formally similar, have remained extremely fragmented. Let us just take two empirical examples in Germany and France. The term “*Transferunion*”³ is a kind of spectre brandished in Germany by the enemies of a *Wirtschaftsregierung*: these people contend that any economic government (instead of economic “governance” – *Wirtschaftssteuerung* can be one of the translations) will inevitably bring with it a “*Transferunion*”, meaning that Germany will have to pay for the weakest member states.⁴ In France, by contrast, the larger part of the press has kept writing about “*solidarité*” since Greece started to experience conspicuous problems with the financial markets and its own internal finances. The same has applied more or less in Italy. Various acceptations of the term “solidarity” are involved here, especially so when political communication (spin) is present. From a sociological point of view, speaking about “solidarity” thus implies some clarification from the beginning.

Our intention is obviously not to go back to the history of the term “solidarity” across Europe, and its rich and diversified foundations across national traditions and languages and in sociological theory. It is simpler and more common to equate solidarity, as a socio-economic principle, with the ability exercised (and politically legitimated) to

² In *Die Zeit*, November 29th, 2007.

³ In April 2011, the conservative paper’s website *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* had a section “*Europe auf dem Weg in die Transferunion*”.

⁴ Among many others, see for instance the interview of Christoph Schmidt, one of the five members of the *Sachverständigenrat für Wirtschaft* (German Group of economic experts), for *Der Westen*, “*Transferunion stärkt Anti-Europäer*”, February 9th, 2011. <http://mobil.derwesten.de/dw/nachrichten/wirtschaft-und-finanzen/Transferunion-staerkt-Anti-Europaer-id4263891.html?service=mobile>, accessed on April 2nd, 2011.

share collective resources (taxes, benefits and services) among citizens or individuals, as they are part of a community: such communities may be national, regional, occupational, etc. and obviously also include families. Solidarity can also happen at a cross-national level: it is illustrated when natural catastrophes trigger the sending of relief and aid across the world. Solidarity can be seen as “genuine” when it actually involves resources, whereas when it does not it will remain rhetorical. We shall here distinguish between four meanings: solidarity between states, financial redistribution at the EU level, solidarity between individuals in a community, and solidarity as a legal EU concept.

Solidarity among states

Solidarity among states is of a substance different from solidarity between individuals and members of communities: it refers to the cooperative spirit that member states (their governments) are able to display in certain circumstances. This may include financial solidarity. However, in this case, it has to be, *at the minimum indirectly* legitimated by citizens, a key point which we will analyze later.

Take the example of President J.M. Barroso during the 2010 “Greek crisis” declaring to the *Financial Times*: “There is no stability without solidarity and no solidarity without stability”.⁵ Especially during the first stages of the “bail-out” of Greece, and later of Ireland, the project was not supposed to have a direct impact on the member states’ budgets. If the July 2011 agreement struck in Brussels about the creation of a new financial mechanism eventually is finally fully implemented by 2012, it will lead to introducing net contributions by national budgets, allowing countries in difficulties to rely on cheaper credit. For the first time, this will in the future not only be a form of solidarity between states, because national budgets will have to cover the costs of borrowing the contribution to the fund and this will turn into a form of financial redistribution at the EU level, our second category. While debate was already fierce in the Greek population and in the German ones (each one separated in their own public sphere, one speaking Greek the other German), it is not with surprise that, this debate has continued since with subsequent developments, especially in Germany and in Greece.

Financial redistribution at the EU level

As anyone knowing the EU is well aware of, the EU budget is tiny with comparison to member states’ budgets – a large part of which is devoted to expenditure earmarked for social protection in general (including education). Because member states roughly spend between one third and one half of their revenues for a “social purpose”⁶ (Barbier 2012), it is not surprising that the EU budget is dwarfed by the national ones, with its 1% of GDP current limit. A real form of financial solidarity at the EU level is nevertheless implemented through the Structural Funds, and also the Common Agricultural Policy – which has always been centred on sustaining farmers’ incomes. These two dominant items in the EU budget make for about 80% of the 1%, a realistic measure of EU solidarity. In the run-up to the second Irish referendum about the Treaty of Lisbon, in October 2009, President Barroso suddenly made a trip to Limerick in Ireland to advertise the contribution of the EU to this country, especially in the form of a special grant attributed to redundant workers in Limerick: “Solidarity is one of the defining hall marks of the EU. We all know that Ireland has benefitted hugely from its 37 years of EU membership. To the envy of many, Ireland showed that it was able to take the opportunities given with both hands and to use the good educational levels and strong creative instincts of the Irish to turn a country of emigration

⁵ March 22nd, 2010, “Barroso demands solidarity on Greece”.

⁶ Except for the poorest members, especially since the crisis has led to drastic cuts.

and low living standards into the success story that it is today.”⁷ This particular grant came from the “European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF)”. Before the recent groundbreaking decisions adopted in July and in December 2011 by the European Council, the fund was perhaps the best incarnation of the dire limits of solidarity at the EU level. The fund was agreed upon by the EU Council in December 2006, with the aim of enabling “the EU to show solidarity with and provide support to workers made redundant as a result of major structural changes in world trade patterns” [EGF amended Regulation, SEC (2008) 3056, 16.12.2008, p. 2]. In May 2009, the number of such workers was less than 15000 people. The European Commission later presented an updating of the EFG regulation as a major contribution to the fight against the economic crisis. At the time, the sheer number of persons concerned and the tiny amount of budget earmarked for their support (500 million euro, of which about 10% had been spent) vividly illustrated the true balance between the national level and the EU level of governance. While this text is being written, in the midst of an unending crisis with redundancies and extremely high level of unemployment, persisting poverty rates, the EFG has not even been spent entirely.⁸ In terms of redistribution, proper solidarity happens mainly at the national and sometimes infra-national levels, not to mention family solidarity. Could however one claim be that, with the advent of “European citizenship” introduced in the Maastricht Treaty, substantive solidarity has been making progress? And what of the role played by the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which has an entire chapter devoted to “Solidarity”?

Solidarity and EU law, EU citizenship

Since the enactment of the Treaty of Lisbon from the first of January 2009, a number of legal scholars have been announcing that the reference now made explicit to the Charter by article 6 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) was good news for European citizens. However, this has meant very little so far in terms of new references to the Treaty by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU, former ECJ), and extremely few, if any, good news for the support given to social rights. Nevertheless, the Charter has a long list of rights grouped in its chapter “Solidarity”. As it happens however, all these rights only materialize at the national level. Moreover, the Court’s brief is with economic freedoms, and increasingly, its case-law has come against the preservation of national systems of social protection (Barbier 2012; Scharpf 2010; Barbier and Colomb 2011). Given that the general principles of the Charter were drawn from already existing international conventions and national legal traditions, the prospects of solidarity extending through EU law have remained extremely limited so far.

Additionally, at the EU level, unlike at the national level, citizenship – particularly social citizenship – is effectively “embedded” into the freedom of movement of persons; a right which could at the same time be said to be economic or “fundamental” (a civil right if we use Marshall’s classification). This is why, since its inclusion in the Maastricht Treaty, European citizenship has *de facto* remained the preserve of only a limited number among the citizens of Europe: those *who are able to move*. This is very clearly illustrated in the formulation of the treaty: the only social rights presented are those of migrants (art. 21.3). In fact, one dimension that is perhaps difficult to understand for non specialists, and citizens themselves, is that EU law in the area of citizenship targets situations of movement between member states (Rodière 2008: 195; 265). A paradoxical situation may arise when, for instance, a citizen does not exercise his or her freedom of movement. Then, for instance, he or she will not be able to claim the application of EU law in the area of family reunification (*ibid.*), nor could he or she, if the movement took place within the territory of

⁷ Speech on October 19th, 2009. See http://ec.europa.eu/ireland/press_office/speeches-press_releases/barroso-limerick-city-council_en.htm, accessed on August 28th, 2011.

⁸ €54 million was spent by July 2011 and 76,000 people supported.

the member state of which they enjoy citizenship. In both cases, citizens are not really deemed to have “moved” and they will be subject to national legislation in the domain of family reunification.

The only dimension of EU citizenship which is not directly or indirectly linked to movement is that citizens have the right to vote for the European parliament. To this, protection against discrimination established in the same part of the treaty (in Part two, articles 18 and 19 deal with discrimination, just before article 20 deals with EU citizenship) may also be added – although this is not a citizenship right in the strict sense. The major aspect of this discrimination has been linked directly to movement – that is the prohibition of discrimination on “grounds of nationality”. However, the other aspect is much broader, because it concerns (article 19) all the most common grounds for discrimination (“sex, gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation”). The ambiguous and “Janus-faced” nature of rights deriving from EU citizenship is here apparent: on the one hand, they pertain to fundamental rights (also present in the list of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU), and, on the other hand, they are a consequence of the *economic* freedom of movement. All the major components of EU citizenship concern citizens who want to move: they enjoy diplomatic protection in other member states, and they enjoy the right – under certain limited conditions – to reside in any member state of their choice. The right to vote in another member state, in either municipal or European parliament elections, is also strictly linked to free movement. All in all, the major dimensions of EU citizenship, except the right to vote for the European parliament, in reality concern the tiny number of people who work or reside in another member state.⁹ The main exception in terms of significant European influence on social and labour rights has been equality between men and women, because of the unexpected spill-over effects of the initial provisions in the Treaty of Rome (namely, ex-article 119, see Davies *et al.* 1996). The great majority of legal experts we have been interviewing since the 2009 implementation of the Lisbon Treaty (Barbier and Colomb 2011) share the view that the reference to the Charter of Fundamental Rights (its article 6) will *not substantially* modify this situation in the future. As was already the case before the adoption and the reference to the Charter, in matters of human rights the Court of Justice’s case-law referred to legal sources originating in Member states’ legislation and constitutions, as well as to the European Convention of Human Rights (Council of Europe).

Last but not least, *solidarity* is precisely the legal criterion *par excellence* that protects social protection schemes from being submitted to EU law and to the overarching principle of undistorted competition, since the famous 1993 Poucet-Pistre twin decisions: ironically, solidarity is protected by Europe, but also *from Europe* (Ferrera 2005; Barbier 2012). Thus it is not in the small amount of funds devoted to correcting minuscule imbalances across the Union, nor in the protection of the rights of the European citizens that one will easily find *substantive solidarity* in Europe: it is at the other levels of communities, and mainly at the national one. *Real*, i.e. *positive*¹⁰ decisions, struggles, negotiations and compromises take place at the national level. Classic solidarity is mainly the stuff of the ordinary public debate at these other levels, whereas its realm seems to be confined to good words and spin at the EU level (Barbier 2011). This situation has many explanatory factors of which we will mention in more detail. The well-known argument by W. Streeck (1998), according to whom there exists an asymmetry between the capacity of business interests and workers’ organizations has certainly retained much of its significance today. More generally, the reluctance of national governments to abandon sovereignty over themes which are essential to the defending of their power positions is also to be considered. But both these empirically grounded arguments cannot bypass the fact that

⁹ Currently estimated at between 1 and 2% of the working age population.

¹⁰ In the sense of the attribution of substantive and *justiciable* rights.

social protection and industrial relations systems have been preserved through continuous and conflicting negotiations at the national level. *They were made possible at this particular level* because voters and negotiators, in the general case speaking the same national language,¹¹ felt part of a polity that had the duty (or could not escape the obligation) to discuss social justice and reciprocity within its borders. We are of course talking here about formal politics, and we are conscious that many other forms of politics happen in other spheres and give different meanings to political cultures (Cefai 2001). No equivalents of a national language or of a European polity in a fully-fledged sense have however existed so far. Although the assumption might be seen as far-fetched, I contend that little progress in the process of more federalization and pooling of social rights and obligations will be possible unless national political cultures and national boundaries of political communities are challenged by cultural policies. In this sense, any future extension of social Europe, *because it is a cross-national political question*, has first to be considered from a political culture perspective (Barbier 2012). Social protection (and solidarity) are not a simple and functional accumulation of programmes but they form a system of social, political and economic relationships embedded into an explicitly cultural dimension, and a “moral and political logic” (Rothstein 1998); hence there are cultural and linguistic preconditions for the future of any federal programmes in the area (see also Kraus 2008).

Trust and reciprocity, nations and political cultures

At the EU level, what is precisely lacking at present as an indispensable support is the complex and popular web of culture, practice and institutions that make solidarity (at least some solidarity) possible within national communities. This solidarity is also made of exclusion, bringing with it a contradiction that has many consequences on European integration, not only with regard to the “external” relations of the EU, but also with respect to implicit or explicit contradictions between restricted forms of solidarity (for instance family, or professional, or national) and “universal solidarity” (for instance the scope for fundamental rights). As it has been organized in Europe, social protection/solidarity was always based upon trust and reciprocity; the nation states provided the only relevant political forms to be able to achieve this in a modern and extensive way, leading to the birth of a complex nexus of social relationships in society that constitute social protection (linking family, the economy and politics – Barbier and Théret 2009). Moreover, the political community allows the exercise of *formal politics* in one language (with a few exceptions where a variety of languages exist at sub-national levels – Kraus 2011). This has meant the birth of integrative political cultures with one specialty of welfare cultures (social justice), and communities closed by language, however close they are to each other¹² (Van Oorschot *et al.* 2008).

The sociological nation and social protection

We should first address the question of the *sociological characteristics of nations* that explain why they are so resilient in the area of solidarity. This step leads to acknowledging the importance of “political cultures” for systems of social protection, which have come to

¹¹ Obviously many countries in Europe are pluri-lingual/multilingual. Apart from the Belgian case, which has now amply demonstrated the political importance of language, while having retained (although precariously) its federal system of social protection so far, Spain stands out with its various languages and the power of Catalan in particular. Compensation mechanisms nevertheless link the regional elements of the systems and Spanish Castilian is the official national language, via which, at the end of the day, redistribution and social justice has to be discussed *in formal politics at the national level, for national funded politics*.

¹² To the point that even parallel debates take place without the others knowing and participating: an excellent example is ethnic populism.

provide an essential, if not *the* essential substance of formal politics today in Europe. Far from solutions to be expected from normative premises, the reasons why national activities keep being essential in a Europeanized context are empirical and language is a key ingredient of the explanation.

It is perhaps not useless to first recall that the very concept of “nation”¹³ has remained difficult to handle and controversial in sociology. D. Schnapper once rightly wrote that “*le national*” (what is national) had a bad reputation [*“le national est marqué du péché du national-socialisme, du Front national ou des excès nationalistes, responsables des guerres du XXème siècle”*] (1991: 26), because it was intrinsically associated with empirical nationalisms and the wars they helped to foster. Some, such as R. Brubaker (1996), or more recently the “cosmopolitans” (Beck and Grande 2005) seem to deny the possibility of a distinct analytical substance to the term.¹⁴ Brubaker systematically added brackets when he wrote ‘nation’, a “putative” category, which for him could describe neither a substantive community nor an empirical entity. He suggested distinguishing between ‘nationness’, ‘nationhood’ and ‘nation’, three words that do not translate easily into French, or into German for that matter. If ‘nationhood’ may be seen as an approximate equivalent of the French *nation* or *nationalité*, when one takes it as “an institutionalized cultural and political form”, ‘nationness’ might be an equivalent of *identité (identification) nationale* (or national identity/identification), as a process which leads people to experiencing some sentiment of belonging to a nation, but, for Brubaker, this is “a contingent event or happening” (1996: 21).

In the real world, the main empirical base of contemporary communities is indeed social protection, including education, which lies at the core of political legitimacy of governments (Schnapper 1991: 321). The common sentiment of belonging and the subsequent basis it may provide for legitimizing solidarity and redistribution should not however be taken as automatic: it is always an empirical question to be documented. Moreover, as M. Weber, and later, B. Anderson have shown, democratic participation, economic solidarity and culture are closely linked with language. A key empirical element of the modern nation is that it has always been an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), because “*In the mind of each lives the image of their communion*” (ibid: 15). In this respect, ‘nation-ness’ is a subjective sentiment, a sharing of imagination empirically linked to language, the access to education and literacy, and it is not determined, as “culturalists” would have it, by ethnicity. Yet, if ‘nation-ness’ can be empirically observed, those who infer that its solidaristic dimension can be automatically deducted are wrong, as Weber stressed: “In the face of these value concepts of the ‘idea of the nation’ which empirically are entirely ambiguous, a sociological typology would have to analyze all sorts of community sentiments of solidarity in their genetic conditions and in their consequences for the concerned action of the participants.” (Gerth and Wright Mills 1998 [1948]: 171–179).

Surprisingly, when it comes to analyzing systems of social protection, their national closure is only exceptionally taken seriously by social scientists (Ferrera 2005) and it is most often taken for granted, as an *implicit fact*. Yet, a *relative* closure of social protection has remained a clear characteristic of the building of solidarity since the beginnings of modern systems in the late 19th century. The “bounding” dimension is

¹³ As a sociological concept, ‘nation’ can be defined as a “*communauté culturelle formée d’individus qui ne se connaissent pas et ne sont reliés ni par la parenté ni par une initiation spécifique du type traditionnelle*” which may have “*fondements divers, ethnique, linguistique, religieux ou purement historique*” [A cultural community grouping individuals who don’t know one another and are not linked by kinship or any traditional specific initiation rites (...), which may have various foundations, ethnic, linguistic, religious or merely historical] (Leca 1992: 653–654) (my translation).

¹⁴ Going even further, Ulrich Beck skilfully organized a methodological *coup-de-force* in apparently persuading many researchers that there was such a value-free concept as “methodological nationalism”. On the contrary, despite the very desirable goal of escaping the limits of a narrow national approach, the use of the concept is overwhelmingly made in order to allow for a unilateral discarding of all things national.

associated with the “bonding” of citizens, and the possibility of ‘sharing’ something between them. Many characteristics that pertain to the nation, as a bounded community, are indispensable for solidarity to merely exist: territory, nationality (or nationhood) – in the sense of *nationalité*, or *Bürgerschaft* – residence, language, citizenship, identity – as the shared sentiment of belonging to a community, and identification – as the process of identifying with such a ‘collectivity’ (*collectivité historique*, to use Schnapper’s vocabulary). The propensity to share between its members is at the same time individual and collectively constructed (Rothstein 1998).

First, nations provide *frameworks for the daily legitimating of choices* and collective actions aimed at the collection, the allocation and the redistribution of public money, linked to a complex process of identification of individuals. Despite the Europeanization of politics under many guises, as is empirically obvious, these choices are only distantly affected by what happens at the EU level. As has been shown by many studies, support for redistribution ultimately lies in the possibility for individuals to appraise the “moral” justification of their contribution, including the sentiment of reciprocity. Individual assessments would be impossible were the existence of a (national) political community not granted, with *actual* institutions for a debate usually conducted in *one* language. Moreover, the building processes of solidarity in societies involve the role of *identifications* with the national political systems that provide an indispensable and pragmatic support – i.e. sentiments of formal belonging to a particular community, notwithstanding the multiple identifications that individuals may acquire. For social protection decisions to be taken and legitimated, individual and collective (from parties, associations, from the unions, from the business associations) support is needed, be it implicit or explicit. A public sphere – to use Habermas’s *Öffentlichkeit* concept – along with specific policy community forums and decisional arenas are necessary to debate these.

Secondly, *citizenship matters immensely for social justice*. Access to social protection is (at least notionally) extended to permanent and regular residents (or denizens), among whom some are close to acquiring fully-fledged rights (and obligations) if they gain full citizenship. Thirdly, the *very possibility of solidarity and sharing* has remained national in another, trivial, sense, and from a triple perspective: the sharing of a national language (in exceptional federal cases inter-comprehensible languages); a firm anchoring into a national territory with formal institutions and organizations; a legal system, which – despite its subordination to a higher European legal order – remains national-specific and links citizenship, nationality, rights and obligations (in a national legal system). A trivial aspect of social protection *in practice* is generally overlooked: there is no such thing as social protection without an administration, and every administration speaks one national language – or, exceptionally, a handful of official languages. Law (national) is not only a way of ascribing an identity to individuals. It provides the ultimate and formal way of stating and confirming the legitimacy of the particular arrangements that decide that such and such a category is eligible to such and such protection or support. No equivalent procedures can be imagined at the EU level, and this explains, although to various extents, why voters rejected the documents they were asked to approve in successive referendums: in the Danish case in 1992, in the Dutch and French cases in 2005, and in the Irish case in 2008. In the near future, this situation will remain unchanged, and will provide a potent constraint for the possible developments of any new layer of social protection at the EU level, a problem that now begins to be considered as crucial even by the classic enemies of federalism.¹⁵ Indeed all this should not come as a surprise when one looks back to the length of time over which the closure of national systems of social protection and of industrial relations has been in force, since the end of the 19th century (Ferrera 2005: 37–52). There exists a basic rationale for systems to remain national, both *in terms of*

¹⁵ *The Economist* has started to ponder about what it calls “a convergence of social contracts” in the European Union [“The euro’s existential worries”, May 8th, 2010, p. 34].

legitimacy and in terms of practical feasibility. The situation can be further explored through looking at the importance of “traditions” that belong to political cultures (Barbier 2012). The empirical approach of the elements of sociological nations that are relevant to understand the contemporary bases of solidarity at various levels is purposely underestimated by scholars who like to describe themselves as “cosmopolitans”. However, sociologists, for professional reasons, should be faithful to their field work: that they take seriously the sociological characteristics they observe does certainly not justify their being thrown into the dreaded category of retarded nationalists and unreconstructed particularists. Similarly, “cosmopolitan” sociologists cannot lay claim to superior enlightenment as an excuse for trying to sell their normative preferences as sociological truth.

Solidarity and the politics of languages

To our knowledge, however, no researcher has denied the fact that language is essential for politics. No politics can happen without exchanging words and arguments in a particular language: this empirical fact is so evident that it is often taken for granted.¹⁶ Additionally and conversely, European élites – all sufficiently proficient to speak English on top of their *langue maternelle*, if not able to speak more languages – tend to forget two things: (a) that ordinary citizens are prone to experience difficulties to understand political issues in other languages than their own *Muttersprache*, and (b) that various types of politics exist within the borders of the EU, one being “national politics” happening in national *Öffentlichkeiten* (public spaces) bounded by language, and another one being “European politics”, taking place in trans-national forums and arenas at the EU level: within the limits of these arenas and forums, only élites do participate. At the same time in communities that are part of federations, in “regions” or “states”, languages different from the formal national idiom do play a central role. Far from reinforcing the assumption that language does not matter for politics, they tell the opposite.

What we will stress and illustrate in this last section is that, despite the fact that languages are close to each other, the discussion of solidarity (or social justice) cannot happen without two empirical conditions, which are (perhaps, unfortunately) indispensable: discussing social justice means identifying the type and number of “others” that one shares with, and this discussion, in order to be actual, has to happen in one language. The only other alternative would be to discuss about social justice in English, not only in the UK or Ireland, but across all Europe. This is an impossible circumstance for various reasons that we will now review. The dire impossibility of discussing social justice/solidarity questions at the EU level has had the consequence that these discussions have been constantly avoided since the beginning of the European communities.

The recent debates that started in many countries with the “Greek crisis” have vividly illustrated the side effects of what can be seen as *an exercise in denegation (or denial) by élites*¹⁷ and again demonstrated that, in the absence of other public policies, such debates will not be possible. Two among many symptoms of this situation are the parallel rise of a discourse about “populism”, as a form of elite-inspired critique depreciating a variety of reactions among voters, on the one hand, and, on the other, the problematic increase of actual votes for the far-right parties, and especially for ethnic-based populist

¹⁶ Interestingly, Calhoun (2007), who seems to discover that “even English is not neutral” (p.17) rightly notes that the use of a language is a process often devoid of intention (ibid.: 22).

¹⁷ Among others one of the best illustrations of such denial was the negotiation about the preamble to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Whereas the French wanted to oppose the insertion of any mention of religion, the French translation talks about the “*patrimoine spirituel et moral*”; the English “the moral and spiritual heritage”; but the German decided to keep religion and persuaded the linguists-jurists of the Council of the EU: “*ihres geistig-religiösen und sittlichen Erbes*”.

parties – like the *Front national* in France, the *Dansk Folkeparti* in Denmark, or the *Perussuomalaiset* (True Finns/The Finns) in Finland. We will illustrate this point briefly by some examples taken from the “implicitly” trans-national debates held about the question of “bailing-out” other EU countries: though actually, except among a tiny élite of activists and networks, the debates were never trans-national, but just happening at the same time in different settings.

The problem has never lied in the fact that languages, especially in Europe, are so different from one another. Linguistics and literature are here to teach us that the reality is exactly the opposite. The ever and ever documented possibility of translation here provides a very strong testimony (Eco 2003). Writers and specialists of translation even often postulate that languages are ontologically related. This is for instance the case of F. Hölderlin, who writes in *die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*: “*es besteht darin, dass die Sprachen einander nicht fremd, sondern a priori und von allen historischen Beziehungen abgesehen einander in dem verwandt sind, was sie sagen wollen*”.¹⁸ By analogy, within the boundaries of Europe, the situation is similar with regard to political cultures, and with European values, as I have shown elsewhere (Barbier 2012). As a consequence, all arguments are perfectly sound that claim that the various nations that make the EU discuss similar questions, and basically ground these discussions upon very similar values. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Swedes never discuss directly with French people, and do not decide collectively with German people about what is, for example, the “fair” age for retiring, precisely the question that the financial crisis has put on the table between Greece and Germany, and in the EU as a whole. But, largely due to the absence of a common language to discuss, the impossibility of transcending the actuality of different political cultures and institutions, today’s European Union appears as stymied in a catch-22 situation.

If solidarity is so rarely discussed at the EU level, it is because discussion conducted in an international language – whether a lingua franca as English is today, Esperanto, or any other *volapük* – is still impossible, except among minuscule groups, some activists, experts and elite politicians. Obstacles regarding the possibility of discussing solidarity in English in Europe are the more manifest today, notwithstanding the tenacious efforts of Van Parijs (2002) and de Swann (in *Raisons Pratiques* 2001), two among the most famous proponents of the generalization of English for *economic* reasons. With an (apparent) ignorance of the invaluable treasures of human productions brought forward by the diversity of languages, Van Parijs (2002) evaluates languages from the point of view of utilitarianism.¹⁹ This leads him to state that there exist “wrong languages” (2002: 60) and to ponder what sort of “rent associated with having one type of linguistic competence” *homo oeconomicus* might want to invest in. His theory is that the generalization of English is the most cost-effective strategy, and he contends that “the collective value of undoing the multilingual outcome of the Babel fiasco is significantly less than that of maintaining a significant degree of linguistic diversity” (ibid.: 63). However, despite the lack of interest from mainstream economists for the topic, this view has been successfully challenged by some economists. F. Grin (2005) is among them, who has constantly argued both that languages are not to be seen as merely economic resources, and, that the “all-English” solution is not the most cost-effective, to use utilitarian vocabulary. Economic analysis does not automatically lead to the conclusion that multilingualism amounts to “economic handicaps” (Van Parijs 2004: 17), or that the future is exclusively reserved for “super-

¹⁸ The quote is from Antoine Berman (1999: 96).

¹⁹ P. Van Parijs (2011) has considerably enlarged his approach toward languages in his latest book about what he calls “linguistic justice”. However, this does not alter his basic utilitarian economic approach of languages and his preference for English as “a solution, not a problem”.

central” languages like Chinese and a “hyper-central” one like English. Therefore, it does not seem unrealistic to reject the argument that, since “widespread multilingualism” would be reserved for “a limited elite composed of highly educated individuals”, what is needed is “a language of communication”, namely English, “because democracy in Europe . . . seems to demand it” (de Swaan in *Raisons pratiques*, 2001: 51–54). Eventually, because he is aware that much injustice goes with the mere extension of English as one single language in Europe, P. Van Parijs (2010, 2011) proposed to settle the matter by “allowing” Europeans to keep talking to their mother and father in their mother-tongue, and enjoy the protection of “territoriality regimes”, provided that people across Europe would be using English in the most important, sophisticated and international aspects of life, including of course at university. We are unfortunately not able to discuss the credibility of this thesis here. However, leaving aside the enormously important issue of “linguistic injustice” for politics at the EU level, many invalidating empirical obstacles exist that prevent organizing political debate in English.²⁰ Two essential arguments should be mentioned here. One is linguistic competence, the other is the intrinsic inability of English as a universal language to cater for the variety of meanings that politics need across Europe, and for that matter, across the world.

Regarding linguistic incompetence, there are basically two contrasted assessments. The first, “rosy”, one is disseminated by the mainstream political communication instrument of the European Commission, i.e. the Eurobarometer. This instrument is used by all scholars, including the present author, as they have few alternative comparative data. It is on the basis of such data that “optimistic” and superficial assessments are continuously published, among them for instance N. Fligstein’s recent book (2008) (for a critique see Streeck 2009). Other studies however explore the proficiency of Europeans more in-depth.

Even in the “rosy” version (latest figures to our knowledge stem from Eurobarometer 2006, Special EB: 243), where 56% of Europeans are deemed to speak at least another language, we have shown that this mean value hides immense inequality (Barbier 2012): among the most conspicuous, one can recall that only 9% of those that ended their education at 15 “know” a second language, as against those that left education after 20; 18% of persons living at home (mostly women) are reported as “knowing” another language; just as 20% of workers with a comparison of 47% of “managers”. Huge differences also exist between countries. However, in the “dark” version, one is not satisfied with a definition of “knowing” that means being able to watch TV in English and use English for holidays abroad – the two main situations quoted by people who told Eurobarometer interviewers that they “knew” another language. With surveys that endeavour to measure whether people master English in a proficient manner, things look very different. Even leaving apart “old people” (i.e. after 64), only 13% of “adults” (25–64) are considered “proficient” by Eurostat statistics: in Bulgaria, they are 6.5% and 5.8% in Hungary, while in France they are 5.1% and in Germany 21.3%. Optimistic people will add people who are considered “good” according to Eurostat standards,²¹ and the EU mean will then be 30%. This figure is indeed very different from the rosy one. All in all, the essential fact remains that for one to fully participate in politics one has to be proficient in the language of the exercise: even admitting that people who can “fairly” describe events can be seen as able to do politics – which is of course extremely far-fetched, that figure means that two thirds of Europeans would be excluded if debates and polls were held in English. This is amply sufficient for ruling out English as a possible candidate for the exercise of

²⁰ Not to mention its purported variant called international English. François Grin rightly notes that, contrary to some allegations, English variants are still English (Grin 2011). The argument also provides a strong refutation of de Swann’s (2001) argument according to which English could be “de-Englified”, an argument that also seemed to convince Bourdieu once upon a time.

²¹ These possess “the ability to describe experiences and events fairly fluently and able to produce a simple text” (Eurostat, newsrelease, September 24th, 2010, STAT/10/139).

politics in the EU, and one is back to considering that politics will still go on in the various languages, even in the likely case that young people will be increasingly English-speaking in the future.²²

A third obstacle for the future of any political processes to happen in English at the EU level – or, for that matter, in any of the languages of Europe that are spoken significantly outside their country of origin – is the fact that politics is an activity that is intrinsically based on the very complexity of language and meanings, on the common use of connotation, affective undertones, wit and humour. Witty politicians or politicians who convey affective meanings toward their voters are often able to be elected, even able to capture the votes of voters who – despite a relatively low level education background – fully share a variety of political experiences, connotations, words, taboo words and mythical ones. If one assumes that this linguistic experience constitutes an indispensable ingredient of politics, one is bound to think that *naming and misnaming* things is a key element of political activity. The real importance and resilience of multilingualism/plurilingualism in federal countries, in particular, is a further testimony of this reality.

Lessons of the “Greek and the Irish crises” for European solidarity

Let us end up this discussion with the mention of a handful of examples to finally illustrate the dysfunction of the present EU polity, and its radical inability to provide instruments for genuine political exchange between European citizens, European parties, and European nations. In the present circumstances, the life of a political community is marked by collective references to public debates that are constantly related to meanings accumulated in history. Many meanings indeed travel and are translated. However, while it would be preposterous to equate the substance of politics with public debates present in the press, in the media, and on the internet, these debates function as key and shared signals that organize the *ordinary formal life of a political community*. They convey images, aspirations, ideas, concepts, parts of narratives, milestones.

The Greek and the Irish “crises” have provided numerous instances of the importance of languages and the concurrent (and unfortunate) impossibility of European people to speak to each other, either individually or collectively, as political actors. Recently, the most controversial situation certainly arose between “the Greeks” and “the Germans”: actually it was as if the debate was conducted between blind and dumb people: German papers printed utterly depreciative statements about “the Greeks” (“*Betrüger in der Eurofamilie*” was one common line), while Greek papers were accusing “Germany’s fourth economic Reich” (“*4ou Páix*”). The basic controversial point is precisely the issue discussed here, i.e. the possibility of building solidarity, of sharing. In the period started in January 2010, well after “the Greeks” were forced to suffer and accept a harsh austerity programme, a significant proportion of the German population did not accept to share with “the Greeks” and believed that “the Greeks” retired about ten years earlier than “the Germans”: despite the well established inaccuracy of such beliefs, they are the stuff of politics, and both people, the Greeks and the Germans had no way of speaking to one another. They were left with a single solution: speaking with their own folks and holding their government to account (Greece and Germany are democracies and voters are able to be heard regularly). While in repetitive polls, more than three quarters of the Germans and the British people were seen hostile to any “bail-out” of Greece, French people were favourable in their great majority (66%).²³ Convincing the Germans, the Greeks or the

²² This is indeed a questionable assumption, because it is based on the hypothesis that young people will retain their linguistic skills when they grow older. The assumption that they will be more mobile in the future, thus fostering more knowledge of English and of languages in general is not however substantiated by the example of Erasmus students.

²³ The French figure is from an IFOP survey (May 2010). The German and British figures are from a survey published in March 2010 by the *Fondation pour l’innovation politique*.

French is a process that eventually falls on their respective government, and where the impact of the European Commission is marginal.

Conclusion: democracy and multilingualism

It took the Greek, Irish and Portuguese “crises”, and their repetitive illustration of an impossibility of communication between the peoples of Europe to disturb only some high level officials and politicians in Europe and to remind them that language matters were still important. Apparently, it was recently Jacques Delors’s case. In an interview, the former President of the Commission said that the agreement between A. Merkel and N.Sarkozy was unfortunately superficial; he contended that for the French-German “*entente*” to be effective: “*L’essentiel c’est avant tout que les Français et les Allemands se comprennent, acceptant leurs personnalités différentes, et arrivent à les additionner pour le meilleur. Ce qui implique davantage de pratique des deux langues des deux côtés de la frontière, ce qui implique plus de jumelages entre les écoles, les universités, les communes, les régions et ce qui implique un langage franc, mettant les choses sur la table. Et on ne demande pas à l’autre d’être comme nous*”²⁴ [It is essential that the French and the Germans understand each other and succeed in combining their different national characters for the best. This implies the increased practice of German and French on both sides of the borders, twinning together towns and schools, universities and regions. This will not be achieved without openness and candidness of language between peoples that should not expect to be exactly similar to one another]. If Jacques Delors’s view is right, it leads us to the normative recommendation in favour of multilingualism (see Kraus 2008) and of learning languages. What is necessary for the French and the Germans according to him is also obviously necessary for the other peoples of Europe. Unfortunately, élites in Brussels and in the capitals of Europe have shown few signs of having met their *chemin de Damas* (Damascus conversion) in matters of language politics and their attitude has remained an *implicit denial* of the problem. True, difficulties lying ahead are enormous. Imagine that, instead of the toothless and hollow communication “English” professional translators are obliged to use for the Commission’s website, they had to explain the complex substance of politics in many languages. To the French, for instance, they would have to explain that a *gouvernement économique* is not economic governance, and certainly more than *Steuerung*; they would have to explain that *Wirtschaftsregierung* in Germany is a matter of fierce debate; nuances would be needed, and time, to explain to the French or the Italian people the subtlety of the German differences between a *bundesstaatliche Ordnung* and a *bundesstaatliche Regierung*,²⁵ they would also have to explain to British people what a *Transferunion*, and to the French what a “superstate” and a “nanny state” are; accordingly astonished readers in Britain would perhaps discover that *l’Europe sociale* is not a four-letter word. They also would have to explain to M. Erdoğan that “assimilation” has not the same meaning in French and in Turkish, and that when he compares it to “a crime against humanity” in German, he should explain more²⁶. In any case, such processes will take a very long time. National governments will remain in charge of convincing their citizens that some form of solidarity is necessary in Europe, but they will have to convince them each *in their own languages and within their separated political communities and*

²⁴ Euractiv web site, interview, April 7th, 2011, “Jacques Delors: l’alliance franco-allemande est ‘l’arbre de vie’ de l’UE”, www.euractiv.com, accessed April 9th, 2011.

²⁵ On this see for instance the discussion in *Die Zeit*, March 31st, 2010.

²⁶ “*Asimilasyon bir insanlık suçudur*” were his words when he visited Köln in February 2008. In April 2010, the Turkish Prime minister made controversial declarations in the Council of Europe’s assembly, implying that *laiklik* was better than *laïcité*... and making a claim for the initial French IIIrd Republic’s conception.

institutions. This is what Wolfgang Schaüble recently stated with great realism: “*Es sei möglich, dass als Lehre aus der Euro-Schuldenkrise die Notwendigkeit einer weiteren Integration hin zu einer politischen Union erkannt werde. Davon müsste dann aber erst die Bevölkerung überzeugt werden*”.²⁷ Precisely when European élites seem to have walked giant steps in the direction of more consistent federalism, they will inevitably stumble upon the question that they have their own *Bevölkerung* to convince.

As specialists of languages have long demonstrated, there exists close links between politics, language and solidarity at the level of national political cultures today. If language offers the basis for all political activity, logically, an idiom should also provide the foundation for a European political activity which was not limited to the strategic functioning of the “oligarchic” inter-state control that has been exercised for the past fifty years by essentially English-speaking administrative and political élites. The language of democratic politics allowing the participation of all citizens cannot be unique.²⁸ Rather, it must be a plural idiom (i.e. with a multiplicity of languages varying according to geographical situations – Kraus 2008), and this rules out the instrumental facility of the sole use of “international” English as anything other than a code of functional communication. But this is another subject to explore for the future, even before English’s fate as *lingua franca* is decided with the return of Babel (Ostler 2010).

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²⁷ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 8th, 2010.

²⁸ Especially when it unilaterally and constantly benefits two member states of the EU (the UK and Ireland), in significant financial terms (Grin, 2005).

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