The symbols of the European Union — Full text

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Introduction

Every social group and every organised political society acquires the symbols (or signs) it needs to identify, distinguish and represent itself. As we know, the term ‘symbol’ comes from the Greek ‘συμβάλλω’ (to bring together, to cause to coincide) which gives ‘σύμβολον’, made up of ‘σύν’ (together) and ‘βάλλω’ (throw). Literally, it is the token of recognition formed by the detached part of a severed wooden, ceramic or metal object that perfectly fits the remainder. A symbol, therefore, acts as a means of identification, as a sign of recognition between people or among the members of a social group.

Nowadays, a symbol is usually taken to be a sign that, when perceived, reflects something else, to which it is linked by an ontological or merely conventional relationship, and that may in some ways stand for it or make it intuitively recognisable. In other words, when an image, or a set of letters (abbreviation), a word or a phrase, a sound or a musical melody has an evocative meaning, it is a symbol. The meaning of whatever the symbol portrays therefore has to be recognised in order to evoke something intangible in the mind of the person looking at, hearing or using that symbol. A symbol generally portrays a sign, an image or a subject representing something else with which it is connected.

The political symbols of a State (flag, emblem, motto, anthem, currency, national public holiday) therefore clearly serve to identify it.

They crystallise national identity by making it tangible; in other words, they codify the subjective nature of the nation. The nation is an invisible concept and so has to be symbolised if it is to be seen and acclaimed if it is to be loved. It is precisely in this way that the symbol provides identity: it shows citizens what is theirs and generates loyalty, *affectio societatis*, to the sign representing the nation. The use of symbols, therefore, has a unifying and federating power.

When they sing the same anthem, honour the same flag, use the same currency or celebrate the same public holiday, citizens are all sharing a common sentiment. Every political symbol is a tangible sign of identity codifying the shared values that the symbol represents and that are generally detailed in a constitution.

As in the case of nations, political symbols serve an identifying function for the European Union as well. They are the external signs of that constitutional patriotism — as defined by Jürgens Habermas, to be precise — through which European citizens, aware of their belonging, can be influenced to set aside their differences and act in the common public good and, therefore, to perceive the European Union as their home or *Heimat*.

In this sense, symbols may help to consolidate the fledgling European *demos*. They should undoubtedly not do so in opposition to national *demoi* but as a distillation of the specific shared values of a highly integrated area such as the European Union. The Community methods and participative democracy launched by the Constitutional Treaty could help the European Union to emerge as a new post-national political system based precisely on shared values, where the national interest coincides with the European interest. Political symbols such as the flag, the anthem, the motto, the currency and Europe Day may therefore contribute, by creating emotive images and rites, even subliminally, towards making the European Union more legitimate in the eyes of its citizens and help them to identify with the plan for a common destiny. In other words, they help to construct a political identity, so that a set of values that identify us as belonging to the same community are felt to be binding.

Among the Union’s symbols mentioned in Article I-8 of the Constitutional Treaty, the flag with 12 golden stars on a blue background, the *Ode to Joy* from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony

(symbols that the Community took over from the Council of Europe) and 9 May as Europe Day are already part of the tradition of the Community and the Union, but have never been set out in provisions of primary law; the euro is the common currency of those Member States taking part, without derogations, in the third phase of European economic and monetary union. Over and above their constitutionalisation, the motto therefore seems to be the only new symbol introduced by the Constitutional Treaty.

As mentioned, the founding treaties of the European Communities and the European Union contain no provisions on the flag, the motto, the anthem or Europe Day. As the treaties are silent on the subject, the institutions have had to use their powers of self-organisation to adopt those measures needed to ensure the functioning of the Communities and the Union and to pursue the objectives that the treaties have assigned to the institutions. If a body is to pursue its objectives it may well need to acquire symbols that can identify it as an organisation with autonomy, capacity and legal personality.

Article I-8 of the Constitutional Treaty, headed ‘The symbols of the Union’, as well as introducing the new motto, provides the symbols with a sound basis. Their inclusion in the Constitution obviously makes the provisions on them inflexible. If it were wished, for instance, to change the design of the flag or the music of the anthem or the date of Europe Day, the revision procedure set out in this Treaty would have to be used. It should nevertheless be borne in mind that Article I-8, like similar provisions in some national constitutions, in no way makes the symbols, and the flag in particular, into constitutionally protected legal property. In the Union’s legal order, as in domestic law, the symbols will have to be protected by implementing provisions to be adopted by the Union and enforced by the Member States. Even if the Union did not act, the Member States would nevertheless have to provide for effective protection of the symbols, especially the flag, in their own areas of jurisdiction, given their duty of constitutional cooperation set out in Article I-5 of the Constitutional Treaty and as already incumbent upon them under Article 10 (formerly 5) of the EC Treaty, which sanctions the general principle of loyal cooperation between the Member States and the European Community. According to this principle, the Member States must in practice comply with measures decided by the Community institutions when exercising their power of self-organisation and, in particular, allow the European flag to be flown from their buildings.

I. The flag of the European Union

Among the Union’s symbols, the flag with a circle of 12 golden stars on a blue background, adopted by the Council of Europe on 8 December 1955 and taken up by the Community in 1986, is obviously a symbol of identity *par excellence*. Any interpretation of the symbolism of the flag has to start from its symbolic and heraldic description. Its symbolic description states that ‘against the background of blue sky, twelve golden stars form a circle representing the union of the peoples of Europe. The number of stars is fixed, twelve being the symbol of perfection and unity.’ The heraldic description states: ‘on an azure field, a circle of twelve golden mullets, their points not touching.’

The symbolic components to be considered are therefore: (a) the circle; (b) the stars, including their number and shape; (c) the colours.

The *circle* first of all. A circle has no beginning or end, no direction or orientation, and is homogeneous, perfect and indivisible. A circle leads back to itself and is therefore a symbol of unity, of the absolute and of perfection. In a circle, all the points of the circumference are equidistant from the centre. For this reason it is a good illustration of the union of the peoples of Europe to which the official symbolic description refers. However, it is just as good an illustration of the parity of the Member States. Second, the *stars*. They light the night sky and orbit around the

polar star and are therefore perceived as symbols of the cosmic order.

In flags, the star illustrates independence, unity, liberty, renewal and hope. It is not by chance that the flags of many former colonies contain stars, together, in many Islamic countries, with the crescent. When there is more than one star, they generally represent a unit of measurement, i.e. they number federal states (United States), provinces (Costa Rica, Venezuela), geographical areas (Philippines), parishes (Grenada), islands (Comoros, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe) and peoples (Burundi, Burma).

One of the features of the stars of the European flag is that they have *five points* which do not touch one another; they are also known as pentagrams or pentacles. Since five-pointed stars can be drawn with a single, unbroken closed line, the Pythagoreans gave them a mystical meaning of perfection. In the European flag, the pentagram fits in well with the circle, which is also a symbol of perfection. The five-pointed star is also the symbol of man as an individual possessing five fingers and toes, five senses and five limbs. If the points of the stars do not touch, this means that the circle is open. Symbolically, therefore, the European Union is not a closed society; it is not, as is often said with a negative connotation, a fortress; on the contrary, the European Union is above all open to the accession of the States of Europe and is an active member of the international community, being open to the outside world and playing its part in the life of international relations.

The *number of stars* is fixed and was set at 12 in 1955.

Twelve is considered to be an ideal number. It provided the foundation of the Babylonian numerical system (called duodecimal for that reason). There are 12 signs of the zodiac, which therefore represent the universe. There are 12 months of the year, 12 hours of the day and 12 hours of the night, 12 Egyptian gods, 12 Olympian deities who formed the Greek pantheon from the 5th century BC, 12 laps in the chariot races of ancient Greece, 12 labours of Hercules in Greek mythology, 12 tables making up the first codification of Roman law, 12 knights of King Arthur's Round Table in Celtic tradition and 12 gates of Paradise in Scandinavia.

Twelve is also a number in Judaeo-Christian symbolism. The tree of life has 12 fruits; there are 12 sons of Jacob, 12 patriarchs, 12 tribes of Israel and 12 gates of the New Jerusalem. Moses sent 12 explorers to the lands of Canaan, the bread multiplied by Jesus was placed in 12 baskets and Jesus speaks of 12 legions of angels after the kiss of Judas; lastly, there are 12 apostles. The number 12 is also the product of multiplying three, always a divine number (the trinity), by four, the number of the earth with its four cardinal points; 12 is therefore the symbol 'of the union between the divine and the terrestrial world', which, as we know, embodies the central mystery of Christianity.

The number twelve together with stars, the crown of stars, reflects the vision of the Virgin Mary of the *Book of Revelation* (12:1) and is the symbol *par excellence* of popular Marian iconography.

Lastly, the *colours*. The colours have their own expressive and symbolic value.

The rectangle of the flag is *blue*, the colour of the sky and the universe. Blue is also traditionally the colour of the European continent. Many parliamentarians referred to this symbolism when the Council of Europe was preparing to adopt the flag. Lastly, blue is the colour of the Virgin. Mary's stone is the blue sapphire which, again in the *Book of Revelation* (21:19), adorns the foundation of the walls of the New Jerusalem; blue is the colour of Mary's mantle.

The European flag — it has been observed — therefore satisfies all the requirements of an ideal emblem: its good symbolism is simple and easy to interpret and is easily recognisable; it is harmonious, original and also simple to produce. It is therefore a perfect flag from a geometric,

symbolic and political point of view.

II. The European Union anthem

The European anthem is the prelude to the *Ode to Joy*, the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. If we are to understand Beethoven's art, we need to know something about the moment of history in which he was writing. While this is true of any artist, it is of crucial importance in Beethoven's case because he straddled the end of one period of history and the beginning of another. Music and its conception also reflect changing ways of thinking and living. Politically, therefore, the period in which Beethoven was writing saw the French revolution, Napoleonic expansion and the Restoration. Socially, the bourgeoisie grew in importance and, spiritually, the substantial growth of German philosophy and literature and the initial and most original aspects of romanticism were a major influence. Beethoven was not just a musician like Mozart and, especially, Haydn, but was also a deep thinker who was concerned with social problems and new ideas; the French revolution left a strong and powerful mark on his thinking. For him, music did not just exist *per se*, but was pregnant with meaning and almost always embodied an idea. Most of his compositions, especially those written in his mature years and at the end of his life, are not just the expression of an amorphous sentiment, but genuine musical poems that reflect the various currents of thought and their stages, and often give life to a theme. While this was in some ways in keeping with the spirit of the times, Beethoven's music is strongly imbued with his character and his genius. Beethoven is a musician of the internal world, the realm of the mind, freeing music from any formal constraints, the idea being all-important. Beethoven's tendency to detach himself from the material became ever more accentuated when his deafness distanced him from the external world and isolated him. It was then that Beethoven entered a plane of absolute and intangible contemplation, in which the sentiment of ultimate reconciliation was a consolation for the severity of his physical condition. Seriousness is the predominant feature of Beethoven, but this very seriousness may, even fleetingly, be transformed into joy, as in the Ninth Symphony.

The melody of the *Ode to Joy* is simple, almost elementary, and of an approachable and clear musicality to which it is easy to listen. Beethoven's main concern was to strike a perfect balance between unity (and exact repetition) and variety, in a readily memorable form. In the passages commemorating the values of truth, liberty, universal fraternity and human happiness, man emerges victorious over all his physical and moral oppressions. Throughout his life, and even in its happier periods, Beethoven was beset by the torments of his deafness, financial straits, unhappiness in love and the agonies of life. The Kantian ideals of the enlightenment culture of the time, which provided a focus for Beethoven's knowledge and internal life, are brought to life and sublimated through the interweaving of music and poetry. It is precisely this exhortation to fraternity and friendship, to love and to peace, of which the *Ode* is a highly figurative symbol, that explains why the Council of Europe and then the European Communities decided to take as their official anthem a hymn to fraternity going beyond the confines of nations and beyond the differences between peoples in order to bring about something more sublime and exceptional in European society.

III. The European Union motto

The motto of the Union is 'united in diversity'. Like the other symbols, the motto clearly highlights the sense of European identity that is the birthright of every citizen of the Union, over and above the actual European Union. The preamble to the Treaty, in which the term 'united in diversity' is used in the fifth recital, goes some way towards interpreting the meaning of the motto set out in Article I-8 of the Constitutional Treaty. Let us consider the two words used in the European Union motto: 'united' and 'diversity'.

The term 'united in diversity' refers to Europe, its values and its cultural, religious and humanist heritage. These are values that place two protagonists at the centre of social life: on the one hand, man and his rights and, on the other, the respect for law. For the purposes of interpreting the motto, the most illuminating passage of the preamble is to be found in the fourth recital, which states that the peoples of Europe, while remaining proud of their own national identities and history, are determined to transcend their former divisions and, united ever more closely, to forge a common destiny.

This phrase clearly explains both the notion of unity and the notion of diversity. The concepts expressing unity are not new. They recall, and appropriately take up, the formula of ‘ever closer union’ included in the preamble to the Treaty on European Union. The path towards ever closer ties is gradual and proceeds — as heralded right from the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950 — from concrete achievements that create actual solidarity. However, ‘unity’ is not an end in itself but has a specific goal: forging a ‘common destiny’. The notion of ‘diversity’ is nevertheless also explained. It lies in the strong call for peoples to be proud of their national identities and history and for the respect of everyone’s rights.

For a full understanding of what the motto actually means, the stress has to be placed on the values common to the Member States and, therefore, the founding values of the European Union. Article I-2 of the Constitutional Treaty lists six values: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. These values are shared in a European society, which in turn is based on pluralism, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination. Further elements helping to explain the motto can be drawn from Article I-2. The reference to both ‘unity’ (Union, community, society) and ‘diversity’ (pluralism, tolerance) stands out.

Striking a balance between unity and diversity is crucial. Too much unity would run the risk of standardisation and therefore the destruction of national identities. Too much diversity could easily prevent intentions from converging and, in the long term, undermine the construction of a re-united Europe. Jack Lang understood this very well when he said that ‘diversity is not division (…), difference is not indifference, union is not uniformity.’ It is seen as crucial to seek unity in basic values and the combined presence of unity and difference. At the end of the 1920s, José Ortega y Gasset coined a metaphor in this respect that has become rightly famous: ‘Europe is a swarm: many bees and a single flight’. The risks of implosion may nevertheless also be within the system. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing has pointed out that the dominant culture within the institutions in Brussels systematically underestimates diversity, viewing it as an obstacle to the further standardisation of Europe. Standardisation is, moreover, one of the objectives that this culture has set itself the task of achieving in practice by trying to impose it from above through standardising rules and pressures on mechanisms of identity. In Giscard d’Estaing’s view, however, diversity is the genetic heritage of our continent in which unifying factors such as a single language, a common religion or a central power able to impose a uniform European model are lacking. As he points out, 50 years of integration have not managed to standardise Europeans’ way of life. As it is not possible to rely on the assimilation brought about by a common language (as in the United States, which is nevertheless becoming a multilingual country along the lines of Europe) or a dominant people (as in China, where 80 % of the population is from the Han ethnic group), Europe has to be organised on the basis of its diversity and not against its diversity. A reasonable balance therefore has to be struck between the needs of diversity and the need to form a coherent whole.

IV. The currency of the European Union

As we know, money has always been a powerful means of communication, as it can transmit messages over a virtually unlimited area of reception. Money talks, and its message is federating, as it is the lowest common denominator of the group using it. This makes it a highly effective and

important instrument of identity, one that has become so customary, through its continuous use for 2 400 years, that its role has been more or less forgotten. This explains — from the oldest currencies to the most recent banknotes — why images of the sovereign or of republican symbols are portrayed as a sign of political identity or belonging. Such figurative signs, as we will see, are not lacking in the euro. Money is also a strong symbol of social ties. It carries with it faith, solidarity and expectations of guarantees; every currency reflects the trust of citizens in the role of the state as a guarantor of national cohesion, of the protection of citizens and of the improvement of their standard of living.

At the beginning of 2002, the euro became the currency of a union of states and peoples and unequivocally took on an institutional function.

The iconography on the banknotes includes, on the reverse, arches, vaults, pillars and columns, doors and windows. The door and the bridge. These two images take us back to Georg Simmel's famous metaphor. Money is a door and a bridge, Simmel tells us. It is a bridge because it helps trade to be interdependent, and a door because it is completely impersonal and abstract. Every institution is both a door and a bridge, everything created by man, as a social being, tends to become crystallised, to become an institution. The euro is here to stay: it is therefore an institution. It is perhaps the institution closest to citizens, as it is in our pockets and in our thoughts. It is a door and a bridge. It is a door because it opens out to an unknown world, an uncertain future, which causes anxiety. It is a bridge, however, since by fully respecting the typical vocation of monetary circulation, it unites Europeans and helps to make them aware that they belong to the same economic and monetary area and is a clear point of reference for Europe in its quest for an identity. Seen in this way, the euro acts for European citizens as a 'factor of reconciliation of their identity', both by strengthening their sense of belonging and serving as a border between the peoples of Europe and the rest of the world.

The chosen theme of monuments of different architectural styles also pays tribute to the capacity of human labour to create great works and to improve them over time, and is a visual image of the stability of the currency. In order to highlight 'the very potential of design', any direct portrayal of existing works is avoided. It has been rightly deduced from this that the message that these banknotes convey to European citizens is an exhortation to design and achieve, because any object, through technical and creative innovation, may be redesigned and recreated, so that, according to a semiotic interpretation, further progress with the grand design of the European Union is closely linked to the ability to design and redesign things and events.

It has also been rightly pointed out that the iconography of the banknotes undoubtedly returns to the allegorical motifs of the currency of the 19th century, but interpreted differently. The portrayal of monumental works arising from man's labour expresses the desire to construct a solid and lasting whole of stone and iron, which is not dependent on economic and political contingencies but which mirrors the eternity linked to the motifs of classical culture. Moreover, the absence of people and geographical references is in keeping with monetarist theories whose rules are based on universality and intertemporality.

V. Europe Day

In all the Member States 9 May is celebrated as Europe Day. As we know, with the advent of monarchies, feast days of a civil or dynastic nature began to be celebrated, although many included a religious element (coronations, a sovereign's wedding, birth of an heir to the throne, etc.). These feast days were generally accompanied by tournaments, jousts, cavalcades and hunting parties. After the French revolution, however, civic feast days of a popular and national type began to become important in celebrating the achievement of freedom from domestic privilege (France) or from subjection to foreign rule (in the case of the Americas). In the Member

States, one day is set aside for national celebrations. Civic holidays are a significant way of preserving memory, and help periodically to naturalise an eclectic heritage, to keep awareness of the past alive and to unify relational networks.

The national public holiday is often the day on which the State became independent, and in some cases it celebrates the patron saint or an event that is particularly meaningful for the nation.

The Constitutional Treaty sets 9 May as Europe Day in memory of the Declaration made by the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, on 9 May 1950, which is conventionally seen as the date on which the building of Europe began.

The celebration of 9 May is not just the celebration of the founding document of European integration. It also provides an opportunity to reflect on the current and real situation which changes daily. It celebrates the realities of life in a European Union based on the principles of the rule of law, a Union that possesses a democratic order founded on popular sovereignty and on values that are now accepted and shared by the vast majority of European people. The meaning of the celebration lies in its commemoration of the path that had to be taken to consolidate these principles and values, without taking for granted the victories won.

Europe Day on 9 May offers a yearly opportunity to bring Europe closer to its citizens. It is a day of information, guidance and discussion of European Union themes, especially, but not just, in schools and universities, with events of a particular cultural and educational content. Europe Day must also be an opportunity to forge closer ties among the citizens of Europe and overcome the sense of distance, indifference and even disaffection that they feel for the European institutions. It is a time at which the most can be made of the Union's symbols. As in the case of a national day, what is needed is a good display of European flags, not only at places at which events are being held but also, and in particular, at windows. Lastly, 9 May should be a public holiday when men and women from different cities, regions and countries of our Europe can meet.

Conclusion

The role of symbols in forging an awareness and an identity of the European Union as a political community is therefore crucial. It is in practice true that most of the basic categories and concepts relating to European integration and, in particular, those breathing life into the notion of belonging, are represented by symbols that make the very notion of citizenship tangible, real and comprehensive. Leaving aside the symbols listed in the Constitution, I am thinking of Europe's buildings (from the Berlaymont to the Justus Lipsius), the European passport, vehicle number plates, cities of culture, etc.

Far from performing a 'cosmetic' function that is secondary in importance to the function of the four freedoms or of Community policies, the symbols express the deep-seated values of the European Union. They can also mobilise the sentiments of European public opinion. They do not just breathe life into the notion of belonging, but contribute actively to support it, thereby helping the fledgling European *demos* to put down roots.