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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Peoplehood, dissensus, and partisanship. The European Union as a case study

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Abstract

This article discusses critically the consensus-based account of peoplehood, inherited from Hobbes and Rousseau, whose central tenet is that scattered individuals coalesce into a people when subjected to a single will. It claims that, because this account of peoplehood is indexed on unity, it is difficult to reconcile with a democratic perspective. The article contends that Rancière's dissensus-based account of peoplehood—according to which the people is constituted through the staging of its internal division—is more in line with democratic expectations. To further buttress this claim, it addresses a recurrent critique: since dissensus is episodic, it would prove unable to provide a people with a sustained democratic agency. It turns to Lea Ypi and Jonathan White's discussion of partisanship practices and presents them as a possible institutionalization of dissensus. The article's second section showcases the relevance of the dissensus-based account of peoplehood by applying it to the claim that the lack of support for the European Union is due to the absence of a European people. It argues that the dissensus-based account of peoplehood breaks the current conceptual deadlock regarding whether (or not) the European Union can rely on a European people by shifting the critical focus on the lack of venues and mechanisms to express dissent within the EU.

Keywords Dissensus · Peoplehood · Transnational partisanship · Political integration · Rancière · *Demos*

Introduction

In the public debate, the concept of peoplehood is ubiquitous, but its use is often restricted to vague incantations. There is talk of giving the "power to the people", of lifting the people out of its oppression, of emancipating it from the rule of the elites,

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of restoring it to its past glory, or of recovering its intrinsic morality to confront the corrupt political class (Müller 2016; Ogien and Lauger, 2017). But the exact composition, the general outline, or the underlying motives of cohesion of the people remain shrouded in mystery. Public appeals to "the people" refrain from offering any specifics as to *who* that people is, *where* one should draw its boundaries, or what weaves its social fabric (Tarragoni 2019: 31–52). In the scientific literature, this conceptual indeterminacy prompted more and more scholars to approach the concept with caution, or even to discard it. Since peoplehood is loaded with heavy normative connotations and only ever used performatively (Errejon and Mouffe 2015), it could not be turned usefully into an analytical category. Peoplehood would prove unable to describe, make sense of, or explain contingent political realities (Fassin 2017).

This recusal of peoplehood is, however, surprising in many respects. Granted that politics is inherently conflictual, it comes as no surprise that political ideas will be subjected to competing and even contradictory definitions. Peoplehood is far from unique in this regard. Democracy, justice, equality, republic, citizenship (just to name a few) have experienced a similar fate. The lack of consensus about their exact meaning did not bring them into disrepute and no scholar calls for their removal from our analytical categories. This rejection of peoplehood is made even more intriguing by the fact that one can find several sophisticated philosophical accounts of the concept, notably in Thomas Hobbes' and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's works. The latter invalidates at the very least the thesis according to which no author would have ever attempted to provide peoplehood with a rigorous conceptual foundation. However, one should be free to consider that those accounts are ill suited or unconvincing and suggest alternatives. As a matter of fact, this article aims to do just that.

In what follows, I will address critically a prominent account of peoplehood whose central tenet is that the distinctive feature that turns a collective body into a people is its ability to overcome its internal differences by subjecting them to a single will. While influential, this account of peoplehood is also hard to square with a democratic perspective. Because it is adamant that peoplehood is indexed on unity, it makes it impossible to define democracy as being both the political regime that grants power to the people *and* the regime which rests on a regulated competition between competing claims to the temporary exercise of power, and thus on its internal divisions. I will suggest that, to solve this conundrum, one could turn to an alternative account of peoplehood, arguably more in line with democracy's expectation of internal pluralism.

In the first section of this article, this question will be discussed at a conceptual level. After having highlighted the key aspects of the prominent account of peoplehood we inherited from Hobbes and Rousseau, I will present Jacques Rancière's idiosyncratic definition of peoplehood. The latter insists on the unavoidable discrepancy between the representation of the people as a unified political subject and the empirical reality of its sociological divisions. On that account, a people never fully coincides with itself and, as a result, unity and consensus cannot be turned into its organizing principles. To the contrary, it is by staging its internal dissensus that a people makes itself apparent and paradoxically gives substance to itself.

Since this dissensus-based account of peoplehood is alien to the prominent tradition in which a people is shaped by its subjection to a single will, it must wage an

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uphill conceptual battle. I will thus conclude this first section by taking issue with a powerful but not (in my view) decisive critique frequently addressed to Rancière. Since the people-constituting dissensus is expressed through occasional outbursts of social unrest, it amounts to fleeting events. Consequently, the people is not a full-fledged political subject, but at best an intermittent social actor. And no democratic regime could be built on those fickle foundations. To address this critique, I will argue that it is indeed necessary to qualify further Rancière's account of peoplehood. I will suggest that we would be better off regarding the people as engaging into "partisanship" practices, as those have recently been redefined by Lea Ypi and Jonathan White. On this condition, a people shaped by its internal dissensus can nevertheless sustain its political agency over time. AQ2

In the article's second section, I will make the case that this alternative account of peoplehood proves more suited than the traditional one to understand our evolving political realities. To make this point, I will focus on a puzzling case study: the European Union and it alleged lack of popular foundation. Drawing on the literature in European studies, I will show that the dissensus-based understanding of peoplehood has the potential to break the current conceptual deadlock regarding whether (or not) the attempt to build a democracy at the European level can claim to rely on a European people.

To sum up, the goal of this article is ultimately to argue a) that Rancière offers an innovative account of peoplehood, which brings significant theoretical revisions to the way we envision what founds and constitutes a people. Furthermore, I will defend b) that Rancière's account of peoplehood can be meaningfully articulated with the concept of partisanship to respond to the recurrent critique regarding its fickleness and c) that it offers an enlightening theoretical answer to the question of European peoplehood.

Consensus- and dissensus-based accounts of peoplehood

The people, as the sovereign's subject

In his *De Cive*, Hobbes offers a powerful philosophical account of peoplehood. Its conceptual legacy stands so tall that arguably it still casts a shadow on the way peoplehood is understood today. According to him, the people defines itself in a stark contrast with the multitude. (Hobbes 1949: 71) The critical flaw of the multitude, which prevents it from coalescing into a polity, is its plurality. The multitude "is not any one body, but many men, whereof each one hath his own will and his peculiar judgment." (Hobbes 1949: 70) An embodiment of anarchy and disorder, the multitude can neither come to a consensual agreement, nor act in its own name (Berns and Carré, 2013) since its constitutive individuals are not subjected to an organizing principle: "[one cannot] ascribe any action to the multitude, as its own, but (if all or more of them do agree) it will not be an action, but as many actions as men." (Hobbes 1949: 70) The multitude remains thus stuck in the state of nature in which prevails a fierce struggle of all against all. Consequently, the people is not so much the antithesis of the multitude as its dialectical superseding. (Hobbes 1998: 117).

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It is through the unconditional subjection of a diversity of opinions to a single will that the multitude is turned into a people. The people find in this representative sovereign the artifice to overcome its divisions and embody its unity. Hobbes pushes to its logical extreme this subjection of the people to a unifying principle and therefore advocates for granting the sovereign with absolute power, for the spectre of the multitude keeps haunting the people. An unexpected challenge to the sovereign's authority, or an expression of dissent could at any moment shatter the hard-won unity of the people and reintroduce disorder. (Hobbes 1998: 115–122).

The people as both object and subject of sovereignty

Rousseau produces a scathing critique, in his *Social Contract*, of the plausibility of such a founding social pact resting on a trade-off between unity and freedom. (Rousseau 2002: 162) Because Hobbes conflates a pact of association and a pact of subjection, three issues profoundly undermine its definition of the people in Rousseau's view (Spector 2015: 67–68).

First, the sovereign's absolute authority over its subjects leads to their atomization, not to their unification. The subjects' representation by a single sovereign amounts to an "aggregation" of individuals but fails to create a genuine "association" that would ultimately culminate in a body politic. Furthermore, since the sovereign is distinct from the people, the same goes for their respective interests. Granted that the sovereign does not owe anything to anyone, not even accountability, Hobbes' sovereign can only be expected to rule for himself, and not for the well-being of its people. Hence Rousseau's claim that it is misleading to depict the sovereign as a "ruler" when it is more akin to a slave "master". Last and not least, Hobbes would commit a logical fallacy since his argument postulates what it purportedly aims to prove: "before examining the act by which a people elects a king, it would be well to examine the act by which a people becomes a people; for this act, being necessarily anterior to the other, is the real foundation of the society." (Rousseau 2002: 162) The fact that in the original French text the turn of the phrase "l'acte par lequel un peuple est un peuple" (literally "the act by which a people is a people") is written in the present indicative is no accident. For the people's self-foundation occurs simultaneously with the creation of the body politic (Rousseau 2001: 195).

From Hobbes to Rousseau, the conceptual stakes of the definition of the people have thus drifted. The goal is no longer to melt the people into a consistent whole by means of its subjection to an external authority. Now, it is about thinking in immanent terms "the act by which a people becomes a people." (Balibar 1997) The solution to that political puzzle is to be found, according to Rousseau, in the perfect overlap between the object and the subject of power. If the body politics created by this act is none other than the community of citizens, then each and every individual is equally a constitutive part of the sovereign, and nobody could consider themselves subdued. Each individual transfers all its natural rights to

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the political association in order to get them back as political rights.(Rousseau 2002: 163) But, this definition of the political association is excessively demanding since it requires the community of citizens and the community of the subjects to match perfectly. (Balibar 1997: 103).

This presumed identity between subject and citizen is an issue. Not only should the constitutive members of the legislator correspond to those subjected to its laws, but individuals are also expected to behave as citizens—which implies to subordinate their private interests to an overarching general interest, expressed in the general will (Rousseau 2002: 164). There is, however, no assurance that all private interests can converge and articulate themselves harmoniously within this presupposed general will (Althusser 1967). Hence Rousseau's vehement condemnation of the "factions and partial associations" (Rousseau 2002: 172). They betray the unavoidable and conflictual fragmentation of the general will along the lines of irreconcilable social positions. A discrepancy appears, in spite of Rousseau's best efforts, between the people understood as a political subject and the people understood as a social collective (Balibar 1997: 104; Kelsen 2004; Colliot-Thélène 2010). The persistence of this inner gap proves the impossibility of ever representing the people as one, that is as a united whole.

A dissensus-based account of peoplehood

Far from lamenting the existence of an inner gap within the people, Jacques Rancière elevates it to the status of democracy's condition of possibility (Rancière 2010, 1995). In a theoretical move that has had a huge influence on democratic theory (Breaugh 2007; Dupuis-Déri 2016), Rancière celebrates the mismatch of the people with itself and presents it as the crux of democratic practices. According to Rancière, Hobbes, and Rousseau's attempts to represent the people as one were bound to fail. For the "people" betrays a semantic confusion, from which one can draw a political conclusion: it refers to both the *whole* and a *part* of the political community. It can be used interchangeably to indicate the totality of the members of a community *or* to single out those within that community that can lay claim to no specific quality, skill, or entitlement to the exercise of power. The very same comment could be made about the Greek concept of *demos*, which refers to the whole community of the active participants to democratic life as well as the poorest class within the archaic Greek city.

The people are thus at times a political subject (the political community as a whole) and in other circumstances a subset of a social collective (the lower ranks in the pyramid of social places and positions). "The people is thus always more or less than itself. […] The *demos* is the majority instead of the assembly, the assembly instead of the community, the poor in the name of the city"(Rancière 1995: 29–30 [*my translation*]). This inner discrepancy signals a more fundamental dispute between institutional politics and democracy. Institutional politics, whose key tenet is the establishment of order and that Rancière therefore refers to as "the police", relies on an unequal distribution of the "parts", that is, of the fundamental social goods and political positions (1995: 43–67). The hierarchical configuration of the

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political space requires, according to Rancière, the introduction of a modicum of inequality. For, to have rulers, you need first to have obedient subjects.

However, this inequality suffers from a flaw that triggers its ceaseless challenge. Indeed, the quintessential assertion of inequality is to be found in the ability to command. But whoever issues an order can only expect to be obeyed if the listener is able to understand the instruction. The inequality inherent to political domination therefore rests awkwardly on the premise of a communication between equals (Rancière 1995: 37–39). Which amounts to saying, first, that equality is fundamental while inequality is a socio-political device (Fjeld 2018) and, second, that the sentient community of equals—that is, those who can speak and understand each other—is nevertheless split by an inegalitarian division, between those who use language to issue orders and command, and those who obey them.

According to Rancière, politics occurs if and only if those who are discarded—the plebs, the rabble, the undocumented, etc.—challenge the widespread corruption of this original equality into an institutional inequality. It is *in the name of this lack of title and quality*, which makes it the generic embodiment of political community, that the people (a subset of the social collective) claims to be the authentic people (the political subject). This fundamental democratic act amounts to the claim of a "count of the uncounted" (Rancière 1995: 31). Consequently, the people can only be conceived as the staging of a dispute which brings to light the mismatch of the political community with itself. "The essence of politics is the manifestation of *dissensus* as the presence of two worlds in one." (Rancière 2010: 37).

Although Rancière and Rousseau both come to the defence of equality, the contrast between their understandings of peoplehood could not be sharper. According to Rousseau, only an unmediated matching between the community of subjects and the community of citizens can grant both freedom and equality to the individuals, since it ensures that everyone is subjected to laws that it can regard as having authored. According to Rancière, it is in the name of the partitioning of the people between its representation as a united political subject and the empirical reality of its sociological divisions that it is legitimate for the uncounted to challenge institutional authority and to claim their right to take part in the exercise of power. Which ultimately allows Rancière to argue that: "the 'people' does not exist. What exists are diverse, and sometimes antagonistic, representations of peoplehood, constructed by favouring certain modes of gathering." (2013: 139 [*my translation*]) Unlike Rousseau's account of the relation between people and self-government, the people will take part in democracy on the condition that it stages its own inner discrepancy. AQ3

Peoplehood and partisanship

One objection is frequently raised against the dissensus-based account of peoplehood. If the people manifests itself by thwarting the inequality embedded in socio-political institutions, does that imply that the people has a fleeting existence and no sustained political agency? On Rancière's account of peoplehood, the uncounted would coalesce into a people for a fugitive democratic moment (Wolin 1994) and would disband as soon as its egalitarian challenge is over. In that perspective, the

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people is a revolutionary subject, as spontaneous as it is ephemeral, whose very *raison d'être*—the claim to political equality—is proven wrong by its embedding into institutions relying on hierarchical distributions of the social goods and positions (May 2008). The people would only last as long as the dissensus it stages. Samuel Chambers convincingly argues that this reading of Rancière's account of peoplehood springs from an oversimplification (2011). According to him, Rancière does not depict democratic regimes as being torn between corrupting institutions and pure claims to equality. Rancière is keenly aware that a Manichean opposition between *police* on one hand and *politics* on the other is meaningless. For political claims to equality do not occur in a vacuum. They are supported by institutionalized actors who direct them at other institutionalized actors. In this sense, there is no neat distinction between police and politics, between inequality and equality. Those two dynamics are always already overlapping and entangled (Deranty 2003). In other words, there is no *pure* politics that could take place outside of the institutions. It is from within the unequal world of institutions that claims to equality must be asserted.

Jonathan White and Lea Ypi have developed their own idiosyncratic account of peoplehood, which plugs some of the theoretical gaps of Rancière's dissensus-based account. While retaining the centrality of conflict in their definition of peoplehood, they tie it more closely with an institutional actor whose agency is not restricted to episodic revolutionary outbursts. According to them, the people—which they define as "the agent in the name of whom power should be exercised if it is to be considered justified" in a democratic regime (2017: 439)—is traditionally approached from two prominent perspectives. First, one could consider that the scope of the people's membership should be defined by a norm. Hobbes and Rousseau would both fall in that category. For Hobbes, the norm would be that whoever is subjected to the sovereign representative belongs to the people. To Rousseau, whoever is an equal coparticipant to the expression of the general will belong to the people. But both political thinkers leave untouched the idea that the drawing of the legitimate boundaries of peoplehood should be underpinned by a normative principle. Both lend the flank to a criticism, namely that they turn the people into the passive recipient of an externally defined norm. The normative accounts also fail to provide an explanation as to how and why the boundaries of peoplehood evolve over time. (White and Ypi 2017: 443).

Hence the second perspective on peoplehood which stresses its *adversarial* nature. This approach reminds us that the boundaries of the people, regardless of how naturalized they may be, should never be taken for granted and are periodically subjected to fierce contestations which force their redrawing. But, while the first approach would depoliticize peoplehood by indexing it on a normative underpinning, the second runs the risk of over-politicizing it. A contestation of peoplehood conducted for contestation's sake, without advocating for any norm or raising any claim to further justice or inclusion, would prove of little democratic relevance and would fail to explain why an alternative constitution of the people should be preferred. (Näsström, 2017).

Note that Rancière's concept of the people appears to fall between the crack of this binary distinction. Though he insists that there are no normative

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prerequisites—no specific skill, title, or status—required to be part of the people and argues that democracy is founded on its absence of normative foundation (Rancière 1998: 229–231), he nonetheless describes dissensus as a quintessentially democratic event during which the norm of equality is leveraged to challenge institutionalized relations of domination and contest the boundaries between those who count and those who are uncounted. It could thus be reasonably argued that Rancière grants a normative foundation to the democratic people but that this norm, far from having a stabilizing effect, fuels the contest of its own boundaries. Thus understood, Rancière reconciles innovatively the adversarial and the normative approaches of peoplehood.

Interestingly, White and Ypi are also keen to reconcile those two contradictory approaches of peoplehood. Though they never refer themselves to Rancière, their own approach resonates powerfully with the latter's idea of a people united by its shared dissensus. In White and Ypi's view, peoplehood results—somewhat counter-intuitively—from the process of partisan competition. They present partisanship as "an associative practice involving an institutionally mediated, coordinated and continuous effort by political agents to shape collective life in accordance with principled views of what power is and how it should be exercised." (2017: 448). To the extent that partisans claim to act in the name of the people, they can present themselves as forming a party aimed at promoting a certain vision of the public good rather than as a faction defending some private interests (2017: 440). This partisan competition sets the stage for the expression of dissent with regard to the composition of the people, allowing marginalized groups to try and harness institutional power to revise the criteria of access to citizenship rights, the boundaries of enfranchisement, the distribution of administrative statuses, etc.

This approach of peoplehood is reminiscent of Rancière's argument that the dissensus is empowering and that it constitutes and (re)shapes the people. But while it retains the thesis according to which a people is founded on its internal division, it presents the advantage of sketching in much more detail the ways in which dissensus can be operationalized institutionally. First, White and Ypi insist on the fact that partisanship requires a sustained political commitment. Partisanship is a practice mediated by institutions (political parties obviously, but also unions, associations, networks, etc.) meant to last and therefore prepared to bridge the exceptional moments (such as the apex of the dissensus) with the more mundane day to day routine of a collective organization (2017: 451).

Second, Jonathan White (2014) and Fabio Wolkenstein (2017) concur that, since partisanship challenges the boundaries constitutive of a people, it is transformative and thus less constrained by pre-existing political contexts. Partisanship, they argue, can be and has already been transnational, for instance. White discusses several historical examples of political formations creating a people out of a yet unintegrated population, or challenging the exclusive boundaries of enfranchisement, to promote and defend a certain view of the public good (White 2015). He mentions the Jacobins in France, the Federalists in the USA or Mazzini's Young Italy but one could add to this list the loosely coordinated struggle of Socialist parties for the universal suffrage, or the pan-African solidarity between political forces fighting colonization and claiming a right to self-determination, etc. Those historical examples attest that it is not uncommon for partisan practices to rely on transnational cooperation and

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cross-border efforts to reinforce each other while also raising a claim to speak in the name of a people that is yet to be brought into existence.

The case of the missing European people

The misleading alternative between various national peoples and an overarching European people

Let us now consider an intriguing theoretical puzzle to show why a dissensus-based account of peoplehood may prove better suited to understand contemporary political developments. The European Union is a political experiment which challenges the established boundaries of peoplehood. It is for that very reason an apt and fascinating case study on which to test the relevance of our account of peoplehood.

For some authors, if the European Union fails to elicit any form of enthusiasm—and many elements concur to paint a gloomy picture of the EU's popular appreciation, such as the very low electoral turnouts for the European elections[1] or the multiple national referendums which have put a stop to further European integration, not to mention Brexit—this would be due to the absence of a *European people* (Weiler 1997). In stark contrast with the process that led to the integration of the scattered population into a national people throughout the nineteenth century, the process of European unification cannot be *completed* (Weiler 1995). Nation-States have historically resorted to violent methods to unify politically and homogenize culturally their population (Tilly 1994). Such a prospect is of course inconceivable within the Union. Moreover, Member States making up the Union are sovereign and have every wish to remain so. The Union can thus never overstep the boundary beyond which the latter would no longer be the masters of their own fate (Magnette 2017). Since the European Union cannot merge definitively national peoples into a single European people, some authors come to the conclusion it could not claim to be a genuine political community (Manent 2006; Miller 2008; for a critical discussion of this thesis, see Lacroix 2004). The European project would be at best an efficient supranational technocracy, reliably delivering public goods such as peace and a steady economic growth to its peoples (Majone 1998), but unable to generate a wide popular support.

Since there is a consensus on the lack of a European people, advocates of further political integration in Europe must square the circle: how can one accommodate the enduring diversity of national peoples within a supranational polity without leaping to a homogenizing integration into a European people? Many thought-provoking and sophisticated theoretical proposals have sprung from this search of a third way between, on one hand, the *status quo* of an European intergovernmental diplomacy

[1] In 2019, only 51% of the European citizens had voted in the European elections. A significant increase in comparison with 2014, at which point that figure had fallen to 43%. URL: https://europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/fr/participation/0019.png, consulté le 11 février 2020.

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which would remain dominated by the national peoples and, on the other, a full-fledged transition towards a supranational European people.

The advocates of a 'cosmopolitan European' have argued that it is possible to supersede the national peoples while nevertheless preserving them within a so-called 'postnational' European political constellation (Beck and Grande 2007; Ferry 2006; Habermas 2000). The latter would not dissolve the national peoples into a hypothetical European people but would rather complement the pre-existing national memberships with a qualitatively distinct European citizenship. Whereas citizenship had originally been attached to nationhood within the framework of the Nation-State and depended consequently on a shared cultural trove (Schnapper 1994), European citizenship would rely on a constitutional patriotism anchored in a critical and informed commitment to the universal principles of rule of law, democracy and human rights (Habermas 1992). While national citizenship implied a bounded community materialized by its borders, European citizenship would prove to be potentially universal.[2]

Another sophisticated suggestion considers the European Union as a *demoicracy*, that is as a plural democracy made of diverse national spaces, in which national peoples would govern in close coordination without turning into a supranational community (Bellamy 2017; Nicolaidis 2013). Reluctant to integrate national subjects into an overarching community (even if it remained a thin community deprived of a cultural substratum, as suggested by the supporters of a cosmopolitan Europe), those thinkers push for a *horizontal* political integration driven by an interlocking of their interests but also of their public spaces. National peoples would stop looking at themselves as sealed monads and would open themselves to the concerns and debates animating other European peoples. A network connecting the various national parliaments of the Member States would institutionalize this horizontal integration.

Although those suggestions open innovating theoretical perspectives for the future of European integration, they invariably rely on the prominent account of peoplehood which depicts it as a united whole. Be it the national peoples or the hypothetical European people to come, those models take for granted that, for a population to reach the political status of a people, it must subject its internal differences to an organizing and single will. This account of peoplehood leads to an unintended and unfortunate consequence. For, what sets European integration apart from national integration is that it recognizes both atomized individuals and sovereign political communities as constitutive units (Patberg 2020). Insofar as a consensus-based account of peoplehood grants a monopoly for the representation of the national peoples to their respective ruling classes (Balibar 2016: 121–139), it silences the dissenting voices within the political opposition or minority groups. If the end goal of European integration is to accommodate a plurality of popular

[2] This cosmopolitan Europe does, however, not live up to its universal commitments when it comes to its treatment of third-country nationals. For a critical examination of the normative foundations of EU's migration policies, see Aubert, I., Aubert and Deleixhe (2021), A New Idea(l) for Europe. Report on the Future of Cosmopolitanism in Europe, NoVaMigra Policy Brief or Kundnani (2023) EuroWhiteness. Culture, Empire, and Race in the European Project. London: Hurst.

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wills understood as *national* wills, then it leaves little room for the various political oppositions active in their respective Member States to make themselves heard at the European level (Mair 2013). In doing so, it turns the phenomenon of political opposition—a necessary component of any genuine democratic life (Dahl 1966: xiii) and a constitutive element of both dissensus and partisanship—into a second-order issue. The European Parliament is meant to remedy this flaw and act as an echo chamber for those minority voices. However, it has been dominated until the early 2010s by a relatively stable coalition between two Europarties (the socio-democrats and the Christian democrats), therefore reducing drastically the ability of the other European federations of political parties to have a say on its legislative outputs (Hix et al. 2005).

As a result, many EU scholars point out the lack of space granted by the European Union to political contestation. Because of its numerous political cleavages and their complex overlap, the European Union is institutionally geared primarily towards achieving consensus. As a result, it leaves very little room to dissent or partisanship practices. Nowhere is it more apparent than in the way in which the EU attempts to depoliticize most public issues by either presenting them as purely technical questions calling for urgent practical solutions (White 2019), or as constitutional matters which have already been addressed in the European treaties and can therefore no longer be submitted to a democratic debate (Wilkinson 2021). If the opportunities to voice dissent are reduced to a bare minimum, partisan minorities can no longer fulfil their oppositional role and exert influence over the design of European public policies. Consequently, a growing number of political actors would turn to a principled opposition to European integration itself and could depict the exit of the Union as the only viable political alternative (Van Middelaar 2018: 325–396).

Dissensus as *transnational* partisanship

Adopting a dissensus-based account of peoplehood allows to sidestep the framing of peoplehood on the European stage as an alternative between either a myriad of national peoples or a single overarching European people. This approach is impossible to pin down within the binary distinction between traditional political opposition (whose role should be restricted to scrutinizing the public policies put forward by the political majority) and a principled opposition to the polity as a whole, that is the project of European integration (Brack and Coman 2025). It sketches a possible third way for political opposition: the staging of a pan-European dissensus by transnational partisan forces exposing the mismatch between a representation of the European community as a united whole and the reality of its sociological divisions. This kind of opposition is similar to the principled opposition to the extent that it sheds a critical light on some key tenets of European integration, but it also distances itself from a Eurosceptic view by demanding to be included into this process rather than asking for an exit.

What could this pan-European *dissensus* be about? How could it usher a European people? Some transnational practices of partisanship have been instrumental in founding the European Union (White 2020) and raising tentative claims of speaking

in the name of a European people (Ballangé, 2022). As a matter of fact, the very existence of the European integration process results from a loose but powerful coordination of several Christian-democratic political formations that joined their partisan forces to lay the European foundations in the 1950s (Kaiser 2007).

However, as White points out (2014: 385–388), transnational partisanship is usually not embedded into a stable partisan competition, as is the case at the national level. Because it is not part of a thickly structured political regime, because opposition is absent, and because exerting power and influence on the international scene generally requires controlling several institutions at once, transnational partisanship is often an asymmetrical and episodic phenomenon. Transnational partisans tend to coordinate around certain salient issues and face little to no opposition when they promote their public policies or political projects on the international scene. Once they have achieved their political goal, they disassemble. One could, however, expect this pattern not to be repeated within the European Union. First, because the Union possesses a robust and sophisticated set of political institutions that now arguably amount to a genuine political regime (Magnette 2017) and provides thus political conflict with a stable arena, though the latter is designed to produce a consensus rather than to allow the expression of dissent. Second, because the structure of the political conflicts within the Union—itself a function of the structure of its social divisions—could stabilize itself and establish a continuity, with some local variations, between the domestic and the European political stages.

This continuity is partly rooted in the history of the European integration. The first steps in the process of political integration were taken via the construction of a common market due to an avowed fear of the possible abuses of popular sovereignty in the democratic regime (Müller 2011). And since it is easier to reach a political consensus by removing existing economic regulations than by creating some new ones, this integration via the market has had an asymmetric effect. It leaned heavily on the abolition of obstacles to free European trade but failed to draft economic regulations to protect the economic actors most exposed to and fragilized by this new continent-wide competition (Scharpf 1998). Ever since, the single market has deepened economic inequalities *across* but also *within* each Member State, fuelling a pan-European social discontent (Fligstein 2008). Since political conflicts track social divisions, in Rancière's viewpoint, one could expect the uncounted of the European market's economic integration to speak up in the name of a European people, in spite of their lack of entitlement or qualities, and to denounce their economic relegation. Crucially, this staging of the political community's sociological division need not result in an exit claim, or in a longing for an outdated and mythical national people. The transnational political formation DiEM25, with its anti-austerity, anti-establishment but pro-European platform constitutes such an attempt at politicizing this division and expressing a pan-European dissensus (De Cleen et al. 2020), though this political experiment failed so far to garner any popular or electoral support. If a European people was to emerge around a pan-European dissensus, it is much more likely to result from a coalition of like-minded national political parties politicizing a cross-border social division. This is an unlikely prospect at this stage but one that should not be entirely ruled out. Peoplehood needs not to remain strictly national or result in a homogenizing integration at a supranational level, it could also

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spring from a European claim to political equality, driven by transnational partisanship practices staging a Europe-wide dissensus.

Conclusion

In this article, I made the case that a dissensus-based approach of peoplehood, drawn from Rancière's insights, is better suited to understanding our current political predicaments than the consensus-based account of peoplehood found in Hobbes' and Rousseau's works. This dissensus-based account of peoplehood is superior in at least two respects. First, it is better articulated to the democratic regime. For, it does not brush aside the discrepancy between the claim to speak in every citizen's name and the fact that the *demos* is always divided, both politically and socially. Rancière's stroke of genius is to present this mismatch as sparking a dissensus which, paradoxically, has unifying features. A democratic people is brought into existence by the admission that its internal conflicts, institutionalized through partisanship practices, cannot be allowed to tear the community's fabric but will never be fully overcome. Second, this idea that antagonistic partisanship practices can distil a sense of peoplehood is more helpful than a consensus-based approach of peoplehood to discuss the possibility of a European people. As far as the European Union is concerned, it allows us to cast the issue in a new light. Instead of endlessly discussing the relative merits of two communities imagined as forming a unified whole (the distinct European Nation State on one hand and the continent-spanning European civilization on the other), it looks at the institutional conditions required to allow the expression of a EU-wide dissensus, from which an European people could emerge. While the current institutional design of the EU is rather geared towards building consensus (to deliver political outputs), some Europe-wide social divisions make their way into the European institutions' debates through transnational partisan practices—suggesting that the perspective of a European people is less far-fetched or illusory than it may appear.

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