We, the People’ vs. ‘We, the Peoples’—
the Debate over the Nature of the Union
in the USA and Canada and its Lessons for
European Integration

Dennis-Jonathan Mann


Abstract

Dennis-Jonathan Mann’s thesis contributes to a growing body of literature that uses the framework of comparative federalism to “make sense” of the European Union. On an empirical level, the thesis contrasts the EU discourse with an in-depth analysis of two (historic) cases of nature of the Union debates: that of the (early) United States and Canada. Empirically, a core insight of the study is that the puzzle regarding the nature of the EU is largely misunderstood as being an exceptional or sui generis case. Rather, a (temporary) “state of limbo” is found to be the rule and not the exception in the systems studied. In terms of its theoretical contribution, Dennis-Jonathan Mann’s thesis seeks to overcome the positivistic (and often teleological) approaches prevailing in the field of comparative federalism by drawing upon insights from constructivist epistemology. Thereby, a positivistic reliance on “hard facts”, strict typologies and formal institutions can be shifted towards a perspective that allows for an analysis of the debates and discourses about the systems’ alleged “facts” and structures. Hereby, Dennis-Jonathan Mann not only shows remarkable analogies between the three nature of the Union debates, the findings also raise questions over some of the core assumptions found in the European integration literature. Above all, the findings suggest that essentially contested federal systems can be sustained in spite of rivaling concepts regarding their nature and telos, thereby refuting widely held beliefs that the European Union must either “clarify its nature” or fail. Contrary to the latter view, the findings of this thesis actually suggest that—rather than endangering them—a contested nature and constitutional ambiguity is what holds these Unions together and what enables them to “go on”.
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