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Toward a European Civil Society?

1) Contemporary Europe might seem a particularly crass example of the uncivil dimensions of civil society: a European society which is not (or not yet) one, racked by resentments resulting from colonialism and its end, from state socialism and its end, and from the rise of new economic and political powers elsewhere in the world. Much of Europe is torn apart by national conflicts, while most of its more prosperous states have been shoehorned by small numbers of enthusiasts into a partial federation which is notionally presided over by an unloved political and administrative bureaucracy and which has set up a Fortress Europe against cheap food and poor people. This may indeed still look like a 'dark continent', in the penultimate month of 'Europe's twentieth century' (Mazower, 1998). On the other hand, of course, one cannot forget that the concept and the political theory of civil society are an invention of Europe and of European settler colonies, that they were substantially advanced between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, particularly in the 1980s by Eastern European dissidents, nor that Europe, despite everything, is currently in the forefront of postnational democratic integration (See eg Habermas, 1991, 1998).

In this paper I shall be looking at the brighter side of the European picture, and asking in particular how far one can discern the beginnings of a European civil society which is more than just the sum of civil societies in Europe. In a value choice which I shall not justify here, but am of course willing to defend in the discussion, I am assuming that something of this kind is desirable, that, to paraphrase Willy Brandt in a different context, what belongs together should grow together. And since Europe is anyway embarked on an integration process, for better or worse, it can at least be argued that this requires some sort of civil society dimension.

I am also making the theoretical assumption that, despite all the vicissitudes of the concept of civil society and of the reality of civil society politics (cf. Fine & Rai, 1997; Alexander, 1998), one can meaningfully talk about the existence of civil societies, however embattled, in most if not all of Europe. Whether there is also an emergent European civil society is a futher question, which I shall address indirectly, via some remarks about European identities on the one hand and European-level institutions and practices on the other. A discussion of European civil society, I think, necessarily hangs between these two poles. My approach is therefore something like that advanced by Habermas in 1974 in an early reflection on the possibilities of social identities not tied to territorial states and their membership. A collective identity, Habermas argues, can only be conceived in a reflexive form, in an awareness that one has opportunities to participate in processes of communication in which identity formation occurs as a continuous learning process. Such value and norm creating communications by no means always have the precison of discourses, and they are by no means always institutionalised and therefore to be expected at particular times and places. They often remain diffuse, appear under very different definitions and flow out of the 'base' into the pores of organisationally structured areas of life. They have a subpolitical character, i.e. they operate below the level of

political decision processes, but they indirectly influence the political system because they change the normative framework of political decisions. (Habermas, 1976, p. 116).

Habermas has of course turned more recently to address the issue of postnational and in particular European identities and formations in more detail; see Habermas, 1996; 1998; 1999). Gerard Delanty's work, most recently Delanty (1999), adopts a similar approach.

I think, then, that to talk of a European civil society presupposes some sort of affirmative answer to similar questions about the existence of some minimal version of a European identity, perhaps a cultural identity. As Reinhold Viehoff and Rien Segers put it, in the introduction to their edited collection on this theme, many of the conflicts accompanying the European integration process have a cultural content, wherever they may formally be located in institutional structures (Viehoff and Segers (1999), p. 28. At the same time, however, to frame the question of civil society in this way this raises the stakes since, as Klaus Eder points out in the same collection (p. 149), to start from the premise that there should be some sort of European identity and to look for ways of adequately representing it is 'to turn the logic of collective identity formation on its head'. Nevertheless, Eder insists, if it is to be more than an instrumental association of nation-states dresed up as a 'community', 'Europe needs culture in order to found a transnational order on a consensus' (pp.152-3).

2) What can be said, first, about the residual distinctiveness of Europe as a cultural region of the modern world? A familiar theme, invoked even in an advertising series by Shell some ten years ago and reiterated in a television interview in mid-September by President Prodi, is diversity, notably the diversity of languages. Compared to the largely anglophone societies of North America or the area sharing Chinese pictograms, or even large regions such as India or the former USSR with an established lingua franca, Europe looks rather a mess. It is at least true that in the European case a pattern of linguistic variation largely coexisting with the boundaries of developed modern states creates powerful entrenched structures and interests which in turn, act as obstacles to cultural and political integration. (It is obvious, at least to this particular English-speaker, that the official language of the European Union ought to be English, just as it is obvious that its principal institutions should all be centralised in Brussels, but no-one quite dares to say so.) This, then, if it is a distinctive feature of European culture, is one which is centrifugal rather than centripetal.

Europe's position as a major cultural producer is of course one of the effects of its previous world hegemony, partly preserved in that of its world languages: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and to some extent even Dutch. Again, this is both a source of division, as competition intensifies worldwide between the British Councils, Goethe-Institute, Alliances Françaises, Istituti Italiani and so on, but this diversity may also be a source of strength. European culture has also stood up well in many ways to the challenge of North American imports. This applies not just to cultural commodities such as films but also to material aspects of life such as the car-based civilisation; despite everything, most European cities remain less car-based and suburbanised than US ones. For a time these might have seemed like cultural lags. Now, however, it appears that in many ways parts of the US are returning to more 'European' modes of life, including railways and urban mass transit systems, delicatessen food

(even cheese) and niche markets for cult movies in some of the cities. And if there is, as Colin Crouch (1993) has suggested, a European model or set of models of industrial relations, this may well appeal to other regions of the world. Europe also appears 'modern' in relation to the US and many other regions of the world in the extent of its secularisation: whatever the difficulties of measurement in this domain, it is clear that religious belief in Europe has mostly ceased to have the kind of importance for social life as a whole which it has retained elsewhere, even in ostensibly secular states. Scandinavia and East Central Europe have gone furthest in this direction, though France, despite a historically strong Catholic tradition, has also had a strong secular emphasis in education and other matters of state policy (laïcité) and now displays a relatively high level of disbelief in God (Therborn, p.275).

The resilience of European culture can also of course be seen in a more negative light. How, one might reasonably ask, has a culture made up of constant processes of import and export, in a continent or sub-continent which ruled substantial colonial territories for more than half of the twentieth century, and then received substantial migratory flows from outside Europe in the middle decades of the century, been so relatively untouched by these processes? (Paul Gilroy, whose Black Atlantic was a pioneering exploration of a transnational and transcontinental subculture, has also rightly commented on the failure of the dominant culture in England to respond to and value cultural and ethnic difference in a way which is common in North America.) Multiculturalism is a crucially important ideal, but perhaps not yet much of a reality. Nor has the impact on Europe of the technologically more advanced regions elsewhere in the world been as substantial as one might expect. So far, for example, Japanese influences on European culture have not been particularly striking, despite important exceptions in management styles and some areas of design. More generally, the privatism of European ways of life has probably reduced the impact of other cultural influences.

It is not enough, however, to point to distinctivenesses or commonalities in cultural or social forms within Europe, nor even to the frequency and intensity of inter- or transnational interaction. What matters is a more reflexive shaping and incorporation of these common patterns into some sense of identity. A European identity might be seen as taking shape in opposition to, on the one hand, national or subnational identities of a traditional kind and, on the other, alternative supranational identities such as an Anglo-American atlanticist identity, a Francophone (or Hispano- or Lusitano-) or a Mediterranean one. A former supranational candidate, based on the Soviet bloc or 'socialist community of nations' and backed up by the knout of the Brezhnev doctrine, is clearly eliminated. But none of the others seems particularly salient either; the structural relations emerging from the European integration process have probably dealt the coup de grace to these anyway somewhat factitious identities. For the core states of the European Union, the euro will probably be a more powerful integrative force than any of these, though even a currency union is not necessarily much more of a Heimat than a customs union.

On the other hand, and despite the continued massive presence of national infrastructures of all kinds, one should not overlook the growing affinities between inhabitants of the main metropolitan centres in Europe or within some of the Euroregions. Border regions like Mosel-Rhine, for example, seem to have a real identity, marked in a slightly macabre fashion

some years ago when after a bad motorway pile-up casualties were divided between the nearest hospitals, which happened to be in three different countries. But my own regional grouping, East Sussex/Seine-Maritime, has more obstacles to overcome - not least the collapse of the direct ferry service.

Migration, or rather willingness to migrate, is an important index of Europeanness in the sense relevant here. Clearly Europe scores very low on this dimension compared to the US, where substantial flows from rustbelt to sunbelt and so on have been commonplace. Only in Belgium and Luxemburg does more than 2.5% of the workforce come from another EU member state (The Observer, 7.1.96). Intermarriage in Europe is correspondingly insubstantial - even across the line of the former Berlin Wall. And despite the rise of the transnational manager, the political classes of Europe remain strikingly national in their composition. The German candidate for French political office Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the Czech former MEP for Italy Jiri Pelikan, or the German-born MP for Birmingham Gisela Stuart remain isolated exceptions. Even in the supranational EU institutions, explicit national quotas exist for appointments, including senior positions such as European commissioner or judge in the European Court. Social movements are somewhat less bound by nation-state boundaries, though for many of course the local nature of their concerns militates against their Europeanisation. There is also no genuinely European newspaper, published in the major languages, and The European makes a poor showing compared to the Herald Tribune or Financial Times.

3) Before this attempt to look on the bright side of European integration ends up, as in the Monty Python film The Life of Brian, nailed up or entombed, let me take a step back: reculer pour mieux sauter. I take one of the most important elements in recent theorising about and for civil society to have been the realisation that it must be conceived not so much in opposition to as in conjunction with state and other systemic structures, whether or not the term is extended to include them (Peréz-Días, 1993; 1998), and it is to these that I now turn rather more explicitly. I am offering therefore one element of a reply to Charles Turner's critique (in Fine & Rai, 1997) of Gellner and Habermas for what he sees as their undue economism and constitutionalism respectively. There may be good reasons, pace Turner, for focussing not just on the associational dimension of civil society but on the contribution of other political and economic (and even military) structures to the integration process. This is not to justify the dangerous elitism of much European integration politics, with its shameless technocratism and its neglect or patronising of the benighted natives, but it does suggest an open-minded and broad-spectrum approach to Europe-level activities. A European identity may emerge from conflicts in agricultural negotiations as well as from more lofty exercises in pursuit of common values; as Bernhard Giesen has suggested, we should be thinking perhaps in terms of Simmel's model of the integrating effects of conflict rather than Durkheimian sociology of religion (Giesen (1999), in Viehoff and Segers (1999), p. 145). Eder, too, has stressed the importance of (the management of dissensus, as much as consensus. A European identity will also be something highly mediated in the sense of virtual, where the real agents are likely to remain predominantly drawn from a limited number of social circles; as Richard Münch (1999, p. 249) puts it, 'the elites of top managers, expeerts, political leaders and intellectuals...)'.

There is of course a further issue here, that of the division between a broadly geographical and cultural Grosseuropa, stretching from the Atlantic to at least the Urals and probably the Russian Pacific, and the Kleineuropa made up of the member states of the EU at any give point in time. I am implacably opposed to the sloppy equation of 'Europe' with the EU, and the concomitant neglect, for the moment at least, of the 'other Europe'. On the other hand it is clear that the integration process within the EU is the leading edge of European integration conceived more broadly, leaving the non-members as inevitably an outer circle or set of circles. More broadly, the EU has become, as Rainer Lepsius puts it,

'an object which possesses a normative content and immediately structures behaviour in the menber states. If the extension of a European identity presupposes a specific object relation, this has come into existence with the development of the European Union' (Lepsius, 1999, in Viehoff and Segers (1999), p. 202) .

We may wish, then, for a 'people's Europe' beyond the glass and print temples of the EU institutions, but this will have to develop in some sort of relation with them, rather as communists used to have to define themselves, whether positively or negatively, in relation to the Soviet Union. The slogan 'Yes to Europe, no to Maastricht' was still of course a contribution to the Maastricht debate. This puts the emphasis back again on the EU and its democratic deficit. As Delanty (1999, p. 283) puts it, 'The normative orientation for European identity must be the opening up of the democratic space opened up by European integration...European identity cannot rest on other criteria than democratic identifications and the ideal of a postnational citizenship.'

4) With the collapse of the 'people's democracies', and the eclipse of revolutionary socialism, the liberal democratic state, like capitalism, has no obvious practical alternative. If anything, and despite very important elements of disillusionment or political alienation (Budge, Newton et al, 1997; Ch.5), it has acquired stronger roots with the democratisation of everyday life: the growing acceptance, exemplified in spheres as diverse as media interviews with politicians and child-rearing practices, that all our decisions and ways of life are in principle open to questioning. They become in Habermas's sense 'post-conventional'. Modernity is, as the German historical sociologist Norbert Elias described it, essentially a 'society of individuals' (Elias, 1988), and, as Durkheim recognised, individualism has become something of a substitute for religious belief in modern societies. Parents' views on the desirability or otherwise of encouraging independence rather than obedience in their children are, as Therborn notes (p. 292), an interesting marker of differences across Europe. There are striking differences between the value placed on autonomy in the North and Central region (Austria, West Germany, Netherlands and the Nordic countries) and the emphasis on obedience in the South and West (UK, Ireland, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain.) Similarly, between some parts of Eastern Europe (Hungary, East Germany, and the former Soviet Baltic republics, but also Bulgaria in the south-east) and others (authoritarian Czechoslovakia, Poland Belorussia and Russia). In the domain of working practices and workplace cultures in Europe, which also displays considerable diversity, the contrast between corporatist Rhineland capitalism and the neoliberal British version (Albert, 1991; 1993) intersects with that between managerially top-heavy and authoritarian French (and other Latin) enterprises and those in Germany or

Scandinavia, where workers have tended to be more skilled, participation more institutionalised and managers less numerous (Therborn, p.79; cf. Lane, 1989). How far these differences will persist, against a background of globalisation of both economic structures and managerial cultures, is an open question. In both cases, however, it is interesting that the traditional stereotype which contrasts a libertarian or anarchic France with a rigid and authoritarian Germany is contradicted by the evidence.

Individualism may also, as Richard Münch (1999, pp. 230-1) has suggested, favour the development of a European identity. The more sovereign and reflexive we are in the construction of our individual identities, the easier it will be for us ti foreground a European one. In the political sphere, Habermas has popularised Dolf Sternberger's conception of 'constitutional patriotism' (Verfassungspatriotismus) based not on membership of a particular ethnic or national community or Volk but on a rational and defensible identification with a decent constitutional state which may of course be the one whose citizenship one holds as well as the one in which one lives. But as Habermas has also come to stress, if the liberal democratic nation-state has few internal enemies, it is increasingly seen as inappropriate to the contemporary reality of global processes and challenges as well as to the desire of many citizens for more local autonomy. In Daniel Bell's classic phrase, it is 'too small for the big problems of life, and too big for the small problems of life' (Bell, 1987, p. 14). In this postnational constellation, as Habermas has called it, the progress of European union, combined as it is with attempts to strengthen regional autonomy under the slogan of subsidiarity', becomes a crucial external determinant of the internal reconfiguration of many European states, notably the UK. Once again, Europe is pioneering a mode of governance, this time transnational rather than national, which gives some practical embodiment to the current extension of democratic thinking into conceptions of cosmopolitan democracy (Held, 1995). This development is as important, I believe, as the earlier extension of liberal democracy into social democracy; it coexists uneasily, however, with communitarian thinking both in social and political philosophy and in the practice of, for example, Clinton and Blair, and to some extent Jospin and Schröder.

The rise of the communitarian ideology coexists rather curiously with claims about the end of the social or its replacement by the postsocial (not of course that the protagonists are the same). In a broader prespective, however, the opposition, described by Tönnies (1887), between the large-scale anonymous and formal structures characteristic of modernity and the survival of localised or now sometimes de-localised communities of co-residents or co-thinkers remains a feature of contemporary Europe. Some thinkers have argued that the rationalisation processes characteristic of modernity have given place to a more disorganised and chaotic postmodern world of disorganised capitalism, franchised welfare services and utilities, unstructured belief, chaotic lives made up of juggling a variety of short-term part-time jobs, and so forth. This is I think a mistake, and not just in the sphere of work, where this thesis has been subjected to a certain amoiunt of back-pedalling recently. What we find instead, I think, in what some people have called a second modernity is an accentuation of many of the same processes under conditions where structures have become more complex and virtual, though no less efficacious. Class structures, I suggest, remain crucially important determinants of individuals' life-chances, even if they no longer find a direct embodiment in huge working-class

occupational communities or mass organisations. The effects of gender, too, have remained pervasive, even as fewer and fewer occupations are explicitly segregated. In this newly rationalised world, issues of individual identity return in new but still recognisable forms.

We are back, the with the issue of modernity, and the possibility of decoupling it analytically from the European context in which it initially developed. Asking what is distinctive about European modernity, the French sociologist Henri Mendras (1997, p. 53) offers a historical answer which emphasises the

long and slow conquest of Europe [by which he means Western Europe] by an ideological model. This model is made up of ideological innovations: the individualist idea of man; the distinction between three types of legitimacy: religious, political and economic; the notion of capital; la combination of science and technology, the power of the majority; the binding force of contract and of the relation of trust which it presupposes; the constitutional state and Roman property law. These are the fundamental elements of western European civilisation ...which are unique in the history of civilisation.

What is striking in this list, I think, is the way it includes, for good reason, formal-legal relations as well as other beliefs and practices which one might assign to the sphere of civil society.

Modernity is characterised, of course, by a weakening of traditional identities in the anonymity of cities and individual wage-labour. At the same time, we see a desire to categorise and classify, of which Foucault gave the classic examples in his studies of the emergence of the 'mad', 'sick' or 'homosexual' identity. More particularly, the European nation-states became concerned to count and measure their populations, and to impose a common national identity at the expense of regional ones (Eley and Suny, 1996). Boundary changes throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and migration flows within and into Europe have increasingly subverted the latter process, but many European states continue to try to preserve a traditional line. France, in particular, has resisted expressions of cultural difference in public institutions, in particular the wearing of Islamic headscarves in schools, and is currently opposing a European agreement reached in 1992 to support minority languages.

The important point, however, is that it is increasingly easy for individuals to define themselves in various ways, choosing between a repertoire of identities and foregrounding one or another according to context. (The frequent adoption in internet chat groups of a fictitious identity or the opposite gender is one of the most recent examples.) Here again we see the inseparable interplay of structural and cultural elements in defining identities. Sexual identity is fairly clear-cut, but its salience in social contexts is highly variable. A homosexual identity may be given a central place by its bearer and his or her associates, or it may be kept in the background by both. Some women may change their names to mark their distinctness from their fathers or parents. There seems however to be an emergent consensus in the incipiently multicultural societies of contemporary Europe that it is up to individuals to define their identities, choosing what weight they wish to attach to each, and that 'outing' and 'othering' are unacceptable. Members of ethnic and religious minorities, in particular, have resisted attempts, no doubt well-meaning, to increase their political representation through

the incorporation of traditional elites or 'community leaders'. What strikes me, and here I differ from Therborn (1995, p.242) is how relatively hard it has been for Europeans to move to a North American pattern where 'Italian-American', 'African-American' and so on are recognisable identities and where it is understood that the bit before the hyphen will have different degrees of salience for different individuals. There are of course significant fundamentalist counter-movements, calling forth in their turn responses such as that by Samuel Huntington (1993) which manage to be both hysterical and cynical. More seriously, the fundmentalisms of the 'others' are matched by a 'majority' fundamentalism which refuses ethnic and cultural difference and for which a black person, say, can never be 'really' British or French.

The extent to which a European identity has approached the traditional importance of national or regional identities (Scottish, Breton etc.) is again highly variable between and within states. As the latest Eurobarometer (51, Spring 1999, p. 8) puts it, trying to make the best of things, 'At the EU level, nearly 9 in 10 people feel attached to their country, their town or village and their region. More than half of EU citizens feels attached to Europe.' Not, however, in the Netherlands (49%), Greece (41%) or the UK (37%). More worryingly still, I think it can be argued that, under conditions of advanced modernity, even xenophobia has become reflexive. An awareness of the ways in which misunderstanding and prejudice may be understood forms part of the context underlying them - just as, in Anthony Giddens' words, "Anyone who contemplates marriage today...knows a great deal about 'what is going on' in the social arena of marriage and divorce" (Giddens, 1991, p.14). A newspaper report some years ago that UK students participating in international exchange programmes often returned home more, rather than less hostile to foreigners was neatly illustrated by a cartoon in which one (male) student says to another: "I hate foreigners because they've turned me into a xenophobe".

The most intense forms of xenophobia of course remain 'racial', and the term 'European' has of course been used too much in the past to denote a 'racial' identity for us to be entirely comfortable with it now. On the other hand, a focus on a necessarily multicultural Europe held together by cosmopolitan political, social and economic ties, may make members of minority ethnic groups feel more comfortable than a more traditional emphasis on notionally homogeneous, if in practice always diverse, 'national' entities (Giesen (1999), in Viehoff and Segers (1999), p. 144). 'British', for example, in formations such as 'Black British' or 'British Asian', has long been offered to ethnic minorities instead of the more marked 'English', Welsh or Scottish', though the growing unacceptability of the term 'British', as Tom Nairn's 'break-up of Britain' at last becomes a probability, is reflected in the decision, based on the results of pilot studies, not to use it in the Scottish version of the upcoming UK census.

5) We have learned from thinkers like Elias, Touraine and Giddens to avoid reifiying 'societies', defined by the boundaries of particular states, and it is no less important to avoid reifying 'Europe'. It is clearly an entity with fuzzy edges, and not just because some European states include overseas territories or because Turkey and Russia stretch into Asia. But it's also internally fuzzy: the contours of Europe's main traditional divisions are shifting in dramatic ways. It is not just that the old political East/West division has now been replaced by an economic one. The cultural North/South divide within Europe, marked for example by the line

between potatoes and pasta, remains important, but is changing in many ways, with the modernisation of (parts of the) southern European societies. It is now for example Italy, rather than the Protestant Northern countries, which (in the absence of adequate child-care provision) apparently puts work before having children. The North-South religious divide remains an important structural principle in Western Europe, as does, further East, that between Orthodox Christianity and Islam. The East-West line also remains crucial, as Germans on both sides (but especially the East) will confirm, and many central Europeans would also continue to stress the distinctiveness of their societies from 'Eastern' Europe as well as from Russia. There are also many similarities between Scandinavia and parts of East Central Europe, despite their diverse political histories for much of the twentieth century.

On the issue of compatibilities and incompatibilities of various structural and cultural forms, Max Weber borrowed from Goethe what remains perhaps the most useful concept for addressing these issues: the chemical concept of elective affinity (Wahlverwandtschaft). But if this provides a useful way of thinking about such relations, it does not give us much of an idea about just what fits with what. What is clear, however, is that human societies are much more ingenious in their cultural bricolage or pick-and-mix than we can predict (see, for example, Gilroy, 1993). The current attention to conceptions of hybridity is helpful here, though even this term risks implying a certain reification of the initial entities between which hybridising occurs. It seems fair to expect, however, that despite the Americanising pull of the mass media, reflecting and reinforcing the appeal of North America and to some extent Australia to many young Europeans, Europe will remain culturally distinct from other world regions, with local differences persisting against a background of common European and global systems. The washing powder, for example, may have instructions in many languages and contact addresses in half a dozen countries, but the fine detail of domestic work will continue to display interesting differences across the continent. The interrelations between post-conventional post-national identities, themselves competing with more atavistic traditional national identities, and a European identity, whose ambivalence in relation to this antithesis Gerard Delanty (1999) has rightly stressed, will form the broader social and cultural background to the ups and downs of the political and economic project of European integration in the early twenty-first century.

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