



Growing European Civil Society: A Case of Social Engineering

by Helmut K. Anheier

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For some sixty years now, various mechanisms were to bring Europeans together – from town twinning to student exchange programs. The basic idea of such social engineering was that increased cross-border encounters among European citizens would create familiarity, a sense of community, and ultimately facilitate common economic as well as political action. While these mechanisms functioned well, they also had a middle class bias throughout and recently have some shown signs of losing their appeal. Disillusionment among some population groups, in particular the less educated and the unskilled, the rise of Euroskepticism and anti-European political parties, and the fiscal crises happening in many EU member states have exerted great pressure on the European Project and have created the need for strengthening social bonds across borders. What mechanisms or policy instruments could re-energize the European social space and make it accessible to a variety of population groups?

As with the economy, the social space envisaged for the new Europe was to make divisive, violence-prone and unmanageable conflicts among nations less likely, in particular the frequent wars which had laid waste to much of the continent twice in little more than one generation. Somewhat simplified, Europe's integration as a social space was to bring about more Europeanized national civil societies in terms of connections, identities and value orientations. The idea was to make Europeans more connected across borders, to encourage citizens to identify themselves more as Europeans rather than solely as whatever their national background might be, and to instil common values in generations to come.

Such changes do not come about by themselves. Like the political and economic reconstruction of Europe, they require institutions and an organizational infrastructure. Since the 1950s, based on an implicit "theory of change", and without an overarching vision in place to guide it, Europe relied on a number of mechanisms to help its populations overcome the mistrust and divisions of the past, and to move closer to the aforementioned shared social space. Prominent among them are municipal and regional twinning programs, student exchange programmes, or programmes by foundations and similar institutions to foster mutual awareness and understanding among Europeans.

What these mechanisms have in common is a reliance on the power of networks among people and organizations, and the promise that engineered contacts generate greater familiarity, mutual awareness and understanding, and, ultimately, construct the social space needed for Europe to develop as a connected, integrated system of civil society with high levels of social, economic and cultural capital across borders. What they also have in common is a tendency to involve the better educated and the upper-middle classes, especially professionals.

The basic idea was that increased opportunities for Europeans to meet, get to know and appreciate one another would facilitate more frequent and diverse contacts, including economic ones. Travel, exchange, and mutual learning served as the three pillars. This reasoning, well known among sociologists, is based on the conviction that such bonds will over time stimulate and sustain the bridging of social capital between non-contiguous communities.

Yet the various mechanisms for creating and consolidating Europe's social space seem less relevant today than in the 1950-70s because they are either less attractive to upcoming generations, are taken for granted, limited with regards to the kind of population groups they factually address, or tend to "preach to the converted". The programmes failed, and continue to fail, to reach the less educated, blue-collar workers and the lower-middle class as well as the "new precariat", i.e. the growing group of "near-poor" and marginalized who in many ways represent the perceived and the real losers of European integration. Put simply: Europe's social space has become more stratified, even exclusionary.

Professionals are at ease with living and negotiating the new Europe, and lower social strata seem more likely ill-at-ease with it, even to the extent that they will turn to anti-European political parties.

Indeed, the Europeanization of Europe's social space seems to have stalled and appears to have levelled off since the mid-1990s, effectively lagging behind political and economic integration. In other words, Europe's social space is underdeveloped relative to the expanding economic and political spaces. Therefore, Europe needs new institutional mechanisms if its social space is to keep up with the demands placed on its population and required by economic integration and politics. Such mechanisms have to attract those parts of the European population that established mechanisms left behind. Especially, new forms of cross-border "bond generators" are needed to overcome the biases and limitations of existing programmes.

Among the various options are:

- encouraging twinning among marginal local communities rather than among cities or towns as a whole;
- providing incentives for students from less well off backgrounds to participate in exchange programmes at school or university;
- introducing and expanding occupation-based exchanges, in particular cross-country vocational training as well as continuing education and executive training;
- offering internships in European corporations to school leavers;

- enhancing cross-border civic engagement programmes;
- encouraging multiple citizenships across member states;
- investing in "third language" education at primary and secondary school levels;
- exploring how new media and user-generated platforms can become more inclusionary in terms of social class and background.



Prof. Helmut K. Anheier, *Hertie School*

Dean and Professor of Sociology. He also holds a chair of Sociology at Heidelberg University and serves as Academic Director of the Center for Social Investment. From 2001 to 2009 he was Professor of Public Policy and Social Welfare at UCLA's School of Public Affairs and Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics. Professor Anheier founded and directed the Centre for Civil Society at the LSE and the Center for Civil Society at UCLA. Before embarking on an academic career, he served as social affairs officer to the United Nations. He is currently researching the nexus between globalisation, civil society, and culture and is interested in policy analysis and methodological questions.

