Chapter 5

EU – Civil Society Relations:
The Impact of the EU on National Movements and National Identity

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The relationship between the EU and civil society has been accorded significant import in recent times. Civil society involvement at EU level has variously been expected, at least by the European Commission, the Economic and Social Committee (ESC) and partner NGOs, to bring Europe ‘closer to the people’, to address the democratic deficit and to deliver ‘good governance’. It was argued that there are a number of problems with the assumptions upon which the Commission’s approach was predicated: (i) the understanding of the relationship between civil society involvement at the EU level and the emergence of ‘participatory democracy’; (ii) the focus upon ‘organised’ or ‘tame’ civil society and (iii) the focus on involvement at the EU level rather than on the real impact of the EU on civil society bodies at national level or beneath and beyond existing national territorial boundaries. This chapter seeks to assess the implications of EU-civil society relations, for
national movements and national identity, and more generally in relation to
the process of European integration.¹

The involvement of civil-society at the EU level is not a new phenomenon
or method. However, this has been accompanied more recently by the rise
and institutionalisation of a new legitimating ‘fiction’ (cf Morgan 1989; Cram
2006) in the form of the now commonplace mantra propounded by officials,
interest groups, and academics, concerning the relationship between civil
society involvement at the EU level and the enhancement of ‘participatory
democracy’. As Smismans (2003: 484) has observed: ‘Both the Commission
and the ESC use the discourse on civil society and civil dialogue as an
element of legitimisation for their activities and institutional position […]
with the introduction of the concept of civil society both the Commission
and the ESC have reshaped the political debate on ‘EU democracy’. The
discourse introduces elements of ‘participatory democracy’, defined as the
possibility for those concerned by the decision to participate in the policy
process.

Many commentators have recognised the flawed nature of the understandings
of both, civil society and participatory democracy, upon which this fiction is
based (cf Armstrong 2002; Smismans 2003). However, as the ‘self-evident
truth’ that civil society involvement at the EU level equates with an increase
in participatory democracy is increasingly institutionalised, it has begun to
affect the practice and discourse of the actors involved, altering their
expectations about their role within the European Union. In this way, the
‘fiction’ may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As commentators and
practitioners become more and more focussed upon the operational failures
or inherent inability of civil society involvement to deliver enhanced

¹ For an extended version of the argument see Cram (forthcoming).
participatory democracy at the EU level, there is a risk of ‘forgetting to remember’ (Renan [1882] 1990; Cram 2001) that whether the EU’s direct democratic credentials need to be improved or not and whether this can or ought to be achieved through the direct participation of civil society actors at the EU level, is not a matter of universal agreement (see Majone 2005, 2006; Moravcsik 2004, 2005). Nevertheless, as more actors feel entitled to demand a greater input into the policy processes of the EU, what is required of the EU institutions before tacit or overt consent is conceded to the functioning of the system, is likely to become ever more complex. These expectations on the behalf of diverse actors have important implications for the way in which the Union, its role and function is ‘imagined’ (cf Andersen 1991) by civil society at large, as well as for the organised interests usually targeted by the EU institutions.

The various ‘imaginings’ of the European Union contribute, in turn, to its capacity to influence the various collective identities of the European people(s). Being part of the European Union has not only allowed a range of diverse identities to flourish, but by altering the relative costs and benefits of particular courses of action may even have encouraged the evolution of some national movements in the particular direction that they have developed. As different understandings of nation come to the fore within member states, or as national interests begin to challenge existing state boundaries, traditional nation-state-centric approaches are faced with a number of challenges.

It has been argued for countries as divergent as Germany, Spain, and the UK that the EU has had a ‘transformative effect’ on national identities, and thereby a facilitating effect on the emergence of a European identity. Risse (2005) argues that given the powerful symbolic motivations of Germans to subjugate national aspirations and to pool efforts at a European level, it is not
surprising to see Germanness and Europeanness as shared or mutually reinforcing identities. Since German re-unification, however, some observers have noticed a more distinctive German position in relation to the European Union. To this extent, a German-European identity may be both, contingent on the costs and benefits of membership, and contextual in relation to domestic and international opportunities and constraints.

In relation to Spain and Europe it has been argued that far from representing a conflict of identities, the turn to Europe has become synonymous with a “modern Spanish identity”: Spain as member of the European Community became associated ‘(…) with the values of modernity, democracy, tolerance and dialogue, this became a key component of the national self-image that helped to heal the polarized oppositions of the past between the ”two Spains” that clashed in the Civil War’ (Jauregui and Ruiz-Jimenez 2005:85). Other authors, however, put more emphasis on the upgrading of regional identities in the course of European integration.

The UK’s low levels of identification with Europe have often been interpreted as being the result of a particularly strong nationalism (Risse 2003: 497). However, more nuanced studies of the interplay between national, sub-national and supranational identities note great variety: ‘Those identifying themselves as English, the dominant nationality, in the UK are less supportive of the EU than those identifying with the minority identities. This suggests that the English resist the threat the EU poses to their identity, whereas the Scottish, Welsh and Irish perhaps see the EU as a positive force for the expression of theirs’ (Carey 2002: 406).

This draws attention to the relationship between “stateless nations” such as Scotland, Wales, and Catalonia, and the European Union in identity formation. The EU ‘provides opportunities for multiple identities to develop
and receive expression. In some cases, it may ease the transition to independence, when accommodation within the state proves impossible.’ (Keating 2001: 40) European integration was mostly seen as ‘safeguard for small nations’ and put to instrumental use by regional nationalists. But the understanding of the optimal relationship between Europe and nationalist parties and movements has ebbed and flowed.

Both the Welsh and the Scottish cases demonstrate the contextual nature of the ‘imaginings’ of Europe and the EU, as shifts in domestic and international opportunity structures emerged, national movements adapted their attitude to the European Union accordingly. It is now largely accepted that any calls for ‘independence’ will be made within the context of membership of the European Union.

The relationship between Catalonia and the EU is similarly long and complex (see Llobera 2005). Laitin has argued, for example, that Europe has served a number of purposes in Catalanist ideology. First, a commitment to Europe prevents accusations of the provincialism of the Catalans. Second, recognition of the authority of the EU, as a body which is not a state allows the articulation of demands for a growth in Catalan governmental authority despite the lack of its formal designation as a state. Finally, Europe, conceived of as a multi-national body which transcends defunct ‘nation-state’ boundaries, fits well with the Catalan conception of ‘one region many identities’. (Laitin 2001: 100-103)

With respect to the stateless nations it could be argued that the presence of Europe has now become taken for granted or banal within public discourse. This is well evidenced by media analysis (for Catalonia see Laitin 2001: 100). Undoubtedly, the everyday reference to Europe as ‘home news’ is an
important indicator of the extent to which the EU has shifted from ‘background’ to ‘homeland’ space (Billig 1995: 43).

The incantation of a wider European identity and of a shared European history and culture is also part of re-defining national identities in the case of extra-territorial nations. Accession to the European Union is seen by Hungarians and other extra-territorial nations in the Balkans as allowing the reinvention of national identity in a non-threatening form. Linked to the symbolic value of ‘Europe’ it helped to contain political myths of the national past and to subdue ambitions of political reunification.

Thus, the EU rather than encouraging convergence around a single homogeneous European identity, can be seen to be facilitating the flourishing of an identity which does not conform to traditional national-state models.

This diversity, instead of challenging the process of community building in the EU, can provide a vital source of dynamism for the integration process. The role of the EU as facilitator for diverse understandings of collective identities encourages the inhabitation of the EU (Billig 1995:42) at an everyday level and the reinforcement of a sense of banal Europeanism (Cram 2001) which is a crucial aspect of the European integration process.
References


Cram, Laura (forthcoming), Identity and Integration Theory: Diversity as a Source of Integration, in: Nations and Nationalism.


