



EUTrail on-line

JUNE 2010

Who Are We – The Europeans? (On the Barcelona experience)

Lars Krogh, Roskilde University, Copenhagen.
Forum of young researchers in intercultural dynamics Cidob

The integration of the countries of Europe has so far been an enormous success, at least if seen through the eyes of politicians and economists. The securing of peace and the longing for prosperity are both goals that have been achieved. However, the so-called 'union' of Europe remains to be between governments, and government officials. But what about the rest of us? - *us* the people of Europe? Where is the union between us? When has one ever seen someone waving a European flag? And does a Spanish person actually feel closer to a Hungarian just because they now both are members of the same institution? Most unlikely, and the reason for this, is that the people of Europe simply does not feel like one people - at least not yet.

EXPERIMENTING WITH EUROPE

This situation is the point of departure for a new initiative launched by a working group of European intellectuals, journalists and artists. The common feeling is that it is about time that people start relating across borders in order to create a Europe that does not only stand together in a formal and political sense. To create a Europe that has a backbone of genuine 'human to human' solidarity. It should be pointed out that this is not a project *for* the EU, neither is it a project *only* about how to unite Europeans. The idea is to imagine

Europe as a sort of laboratory to gain experience on what are the challenges and biggest obstacles in helping to bring culturally diverse people together. The project is named "The European Trail" (EU Trail) which indicates that it is an ongoing process that supposedly and hopefully will leave "a trail" in its path. The first meeting took place on June 17th-18th in Barcelona, Spain, where the participants discussed the possibilities and challenges for the endeavour.

THE NATIONAL IRON CAGE

One can wonder what are the reasons that we have not already created stronger bonds between us since, although we are different, we are not *that* different. The countries of Europe share many fundamental principles for how we have built up our societies, such as democratic, economic and legal values that most of us adhere to. *"The core problem of the EU and of European integration is that we cannot get out of the iron cage of the nation-state paradigm or nation-state bureaucracy. But the very idea of creating European citizenship without any reference of the nation-state, that means geographic location, is still a possibility"*, said Ferenc Miszlivetz as an initial comment at the seminar. The problem is, in other words, that the way we distinguish between people today is through

our membership to a nation-state. For instance, when we travel and meet other people travelling, the first question is normally “where are you from?”, as if, when we know one's country of origin we can better pinpoint *who* someone *is*. This is deeply rooted in us, and most of us never even think of other ways of differentiation. Certainly for many of us our national citizenship is one we endorse and embrace since it is, to a large extent, what makes us feel who we are, where we come from and where we belong. Few of us would want to be left without an active membership to a nation-state. The people behind The EU Trail are well aware of this and consequently they do not seek to rob people of their national identities. On the other hand, they introduce another way in which to consider 'who we are' and consequentially other ways of recognizing who 'others' are. The old slogan of “it is not *what* you are that makes you *who* you are - it is what you *do!*” would work as a description of what the people behind The EU Trail have in mind. Eric Corijn, sociologist from Brussels and part of The EU Trail, described it by the following words: *“We should consider citizenship not just as a characteristic but also as a relation in that a citizen only has a potential citizenship in as much as he/she invests in a type of relationship, coalition etc. so as a stakeholder and not as an individual”*. So what does this imply, one might ask? It means that citizenship can be conceived instead as something which is not static. Something that change through time and by the things you put an effort into, a citizenship of sorts that is not prescribed based on territory but one that has to be achieved. Although it can be hard to imagine how this would work in practical terms the idea is to stimulate thought of the things we rarely question and largely take for granted in life. By consequence, instead of using the familiar prescriptions of '2nd, 3rd or 4th generation immigrant' one could achieve his recognition by actively participating in various projects or coalitions in society, which then could grant one a citizenship of sorts as a reward for participation. By avoiding the nation-state as the sole applier of identification you could also avoid issues of having to distinguish between 'ethnic Danes' and 'new Danes' for instance,

simply because the nation-state identity is based on tradition whereas many other kinds of identities are based on what you yourself, make of it.

BUILDING A COMMON DESTINY

Then how could this work out in practice? We cannot all know about all of the doings and achievements of the people we meet. Here fore another important line was introduced at the seminar which consisted of the necessity to move from the 'having a common history' to 'building a common destiny'. *“I live in the city of Brussels where the majority of the population is foreign so if we have to decide and produce a common history we fail, the only thing is a common destiny, we need to tell each other that it is a common destiny and so it is a project much more. A project doesn't have an identity. A project is mixed. It is a combination of differences”* (Eric Corijn). This appears to be an interesting idea that drastically changes the way we think of the term 'integration' in general. Now, integration implies in general terms, attracting foreigners to fit into a way of how the ethnic population in a community, wishes to organize society. This is no mutual process in the sense that it is only one part that seeks adaptation, since it is presupposed that one part has to adapt into the other's ways. But if you, as Eric above, live in a place that is highly multicultural, a better solution could be to accept that everyone are there, together, and from this realization to build up something together. The integration process will then transform into being a project, a common project, which is open to everyone's participation. This has furthermore the advantage or the possible advantage, that when you work together on something, you get to relate to one another, and you do this in a way where you don't think about it because you work together in creating something shared. *“As processes when they are collaborative become more important in fact than the final outcomes, and this practice of collaboration mould on the other hand the emergence of communities/ networks of interest.”* (Cristina Farinha)

This can be visualized by thinking of the people inside an elevator. The elevator

experience' is usually one that does not involve much communication or fun in general – at least if you do not know the other people. But if the elevator stops unexpectedly you suddenly feel the situation differently, and you start talking with the other people to solve the problem. This is the phenomenon that The EU Trail wishes to see enlarged as a mechanism that could work on a larger scale in society.

FINDING SOLUTIONS!

If only society actually was an elevator and if only relating could be facilitated if it stopped working, things would undoubtedly be a lot easier. But society is complex, and the factors that determine when, where, how and why bonding occur, or not, are vast. For this reason, The EU Trail tries in this initial phase to limit the scope to be on the city, and more specifically, the big and multicultural cities of Europe.

“What is happening is that there are cities growing together, often across nation-state borders, which are producing not only wealth, but are producing new cultures, are producing the most interesting ways of acting socially. New kinds of agreements, also tensions of course, this is not heaven of course. But at least some form of a search – looking on for alternatives - is going on there. Regardless of, sometimes against, or sometimes disregarding the old structural agreements, which was attached to citizenships as of being members of a nation-state” (Rik Pinxten). This is not an attempt to exclude people from outside the city, it is merely a matter of realizing that it is in the city where there is an urgency for things to change, and at the same time, it is where change happens faster because things move more quickly. This is where the people are, where they live closest together, and where new ways of organization are sought most enthusiastically.

Another similar proposal that would work more on terms of 'having the idea of togetherness' was termed 'the grand narratives'. Being more abstract in form, and thus less demanding for practical participation such narratives, could possibly provide the missing 'something' that could work at bringing Europeans closer together. The famous British sociologist John Urry, also

present at the seminar, had such one concrete proposal: *“I think if we were trying to imagine a kind of a role for Europe, it would be to be the absolute and unambiguous centre of developing a low carbon economy and society. There are all sorts of initiatives that it already does, but simply to set its back to this high carbon system and say 'what we are going to do is to be the world's centre of innovation with regard to low carbon systems'”.*

The EU Trail will have other seminars, first in November this year in Ghent, Belgium, and next year at spring in Kőzseg, Hungary. This will culminate in a public event where the findings and proposals of the three seminars will be presented, both to the public and to policy-makers, in Brussels. Subsequently the plan is that the EU Trail will follow and become an integral part of the EU presidency and thus to gain a life of its own, in time.

Lars Krogh: Masters degree in Philosophy and Cultural Studies in Roskilde University in Denmark. Primary interests of research revolve around areas where philosophy can help identifying and explain issues related to cultural theory as in mutual understanding (hermeneutics), racism and discrimination (societal morals and ethics) and the uprising of nationalism (political philosophy).