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Social sciences and European society in the making

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The study of the European integration process offers a serious challenge for the social sciences. It is easy to understand why the disciplines of law, economics, and political science have made the most relevant contributions to the study of the Europeanization of our societies. From the treaty creating the European Coal and Steel Community in May 1951 to the establishment a few years later of Euratom, from the treaty of Rome to the European Economic Community (EEC), from the European Single Act to the Maastricht treaty and the Monetary Union, from the treaties of Amsterdam and Nice to the recent Convention that resulted in the proposal for a European Constitution, all of these historical events during the second half of the twentieth century mark a process of transferring sovereignty rights from nation-states to European institutions. The Council, the Commission, the Parliament, and the European Court of Justice are substantial innovations from the point of view of public law. They are not 'state institutions', nor are they intergovernmental agencies. In many domains, the influence of European regulations on national legislation is impressive. The amount of literature in all languages on the legal aspects of European integration is astonishing.

The scientific developments in the field of economics are important. The creation of a common market; the free circulation of financial capital, goods and services, and the labour force; and the establishment of a common currency have impacted on the economy on both the international and the national levels, leading to significant revisions in economic thought. Here, again, the literature on the economic aspects of European integration has increased to the extent that no single researcher can master it adequately.

Similar observations can be made for the field of political science. It is true that the main political processes are still taking place at the level of the nation-state.

The struggle for power in democratic societies, the decisions about who will govern and who will take the role of the opposition, the definition of cleavages between and within political parties, and many other issues are all phenomena taking place on the terrain of national politics. However, as we shall see later on, since the nation-states are unable to deal efficiently with an increasing number of problems (economic, social, environmental, including migration, terrorism, criminality), more and more decisions are negotiated at the European level, through formal and informal actions of the European institutions, or through agreements between member-state governments. The locus of power is shifting; interest groups are organizing at the European level. Since many important decisions escape the level of the political process (i.e. at the national level), the degree of legitimacy of national institutions is clearly declining, while European institutions still lack democratic legitimacy. In fact, the European Parliament is elected by the people of the member states, but currently does not play a relevant political role and is far from providing democratic legitimacy for the EU. These are just a few examples of the questions political science deals with in regard to European integration.

If the disciplines of law, economics, and political science lead the analysis of the process of European society-building, sociology, social psychology and anthropology lag behind. Sociology, in particular, occupies a marginal position in the study of European integration. With some exceptions, sociologists have shown limited interest in the analysis of the social forces that promoted the process of Europeanization, or in its dynamics and implications for future generations of Europeans. There are some remarkable exceptions: the works of Goran Therborn in Sweden, Colin Crouch and Gerard Delanty in Britain, Henri Mendras in France, Salvador Giner in Spain, Max Haller in Austria, Maurizio Bach, Ulrich Beck, Hartmut Kaelbe and Jürgen Habermas in Germany, Gianfranco Bettin in Italy and a few others are all relevant contributions.[1–11] I will not discuss them here in detail. Overall, however, the discipline of sociology is rather absent in attempts to answer the question: is there a European society in the making?

The reasons for this absence are not difficult to identify. The object 'Society', at the centre of the attention of classical sociologists, has been fragmented into a variety of distinct dimensions, giving birth to a number of 'specialized sociologies', which neglect the 'global' dimension of social processes. At the same time, the study of social interactions has been dissolved from the macro to the micro level of analysis. Is it worthwhile to return to the classical questions of the future societal impact of processes of global social change, such as the process of Europeanization and globalization? These processes pose a challenge to the discipline. I cannot hope, in this paper, to fill this gap, but to suggest some research directions that can help to overcome this serious shortcoming in sociological research. Perhaps it is possible to avoid crossing some crucial

historical phenomena, which will impact on the future of our societies, without taking notice of their relevance.

The first direction is that of comparative social research. The amount of this research has sharply increased during the last two decades, due in part to resources provided by the European Union. Comparative research helps to assess similarities and differences among the units of analysis under consideration. Where these units are national societies (and their sub-national components), it is possible to determine, first, whether the differences among countries are larger or smaller than those within countries. Second, we can ask in which groups of countries the similarities prevail over the differences. Obviously, if differences among countries prove to be less pronounced than those within them, this would support the hypothesis of the existence of elements of a European society. Furthermore, over time, comparisons will show whether these differences are weakening and similarities are strengthening in the medium- and long-run. And again, if the comparison can be extended to non-European societies at comparable development levels (such as Japan, China, or the United States), it will be possible to assess to what extent differences within Europe are stronger or weaker than the differences between Europe and these extra-European societies.

In the late 1980s, a German social historian, Hartmut Kaelbe,[12] largely on the basis of official statistics, attempted a long-term comparison of some of the main countries within Europe, as well as comparing these countries with the United States, Canada, Japan, and the former Soviet Union. Kaelbe's comparisons were based on a series of indicators of occupational structure, levels of education, forms of urbanization, welfare provisions and institutions, family structures, and workplace conflict. He found that, for the majority of indicators, the differences among European countries decreased considerably during the last century – especially during the decades after World War II. While he found similar convergences occurred within the extra-European countries he studied, some European specificities persist. Kaelbe suggests in particular that differences among European countries (e.g. concerning occupational or urban structure) were no greater than the differences among individual states of the United States or among the former republics of the USSR.

There are, of course, areas where national traditions persist and differences among European countries are still very pronounced. Political systems, for example, are still quite different, although all countries have adopted democratic regimes; there is no convergence toward a unique model. The range of differences is, however, relatively limited. In the post-war period, quite a few countries (Spain, Portugal, and Greece, and later the Eastern European countries) experienced the transition from totalitarian or authoritarian regimes to democracy, and have all joined the European Union. The original group of six countries (France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries) attracted the adhesion of socially and

economically advanced countries (Britain and the Scandinavian countries, with the exception of Norway), but also of Mediterranean and Eastern European countries.

It is impossible to deny that a convergence process is taking place, which allows us to speak, with caution, of a European society in the making. This type of society, however, tolerates a high level of pluralism and heterogeneity. The convergence must be interpreted as a reduction of heterogeneity more than as a tendency toward a unique societal model. At this point, we must ask whether this process is common to all advanced countries (convergence as 'Americanization'), or is specific to Europe. I will return to this question later.

In any case, only comparative research will be able to answer this kind of question. In years to come, we will likely see a further qualitative and quantitative development of comparative research.

As I said, the comparative approach is suited to assessing similarities and differences on a series of properties between units of analysis (in our case, national societies). Comparative research is best suited to questions answered at the macro level. However, we need also a different kind of research strategy to get at the core of our problem: is there a European society in the making?

I will now turn in a second direction, and ask two further questions: does European society take shape as a series of interlocking networks of relationships and interactions; and is the European dimension the horizon within which leading elites, in the private and in the public sectors, design their strategies and policies?

I think that questions of this kind can best be approached at the micro level, through the study of relationships among social actors. From this perspective, we can define the European society in the making (in the sense of the Simmelian concept of *Vergesellschaftung*) as the set of relations crossing national boundaries and creating a large variety of networks and aggregates, more or less tight, more or less stable. These nets of relations become tighter and tighter with the increase in the opportunities offered by geographical mobility and the growth in communicative skills among those of different linguistic communities. Nobody would deny that geographic mobility (for professional, cultural, or leisure reasons) has increased over the last few decades. It is true that this mobility goes beyond European borders, but I think that the frequency of displacements within Europe has increased faster and to a larger degree than toward extra-European areas.

The linguistic question is obviously a crucial one. The plurality of European languages is a characteristic that cannot and should not be eliminated. Europe will never become a community of people speaking the same language; the European identity will not stand on the basis of the same idiom, even in the likely and desirable case that English is adopted as the communicative (vehicular) language. The opportunity to enter into relational networks at the European level will depend largely upon the acquisition of communicative skills in languages other than the

mother tongue. Even inhabitants of the British Isles, who enjoy an obvious advantage in accessing international networks, are now more eager to learn a foreign language than in the past. The linguistic policy of the EU and the member states has therefore a crucial role in creating conditions for the establishment of relational networks across linguistic barriers.

I will now put forward some hypotheses about which social groups are most involved in relational networks of a European dimension. Where the linkages are more tightly knit, we can find significant units of a European society in formation. In general, those who have had the opportunity to spend prolonged periods outside of their country of origin and in another European country (with the exception of official members of a nation-state's diplomatic services) are obviously more likely to be involved in European networks and to have developed a cosmopolitan rather than a local orientation. Functionaries and officials of the European institutions (primarily those working in Brussels, Luxembourg, Strasbourg and Frankfurt, but also in the various European agencies all over the continent) occupy a privileged position in this context. This is not a very large group (no more than a few tens of thousands); but they not only interact every day in social circles of different nationalities, but have a vested interest in the development of European institutions.

An informal circle of groups rotates around this central core. It is composed of the representatives of interest groups that are affected by decisions taken at the community level and, therefore, try to influence those decisions. Lobbying activity around European institutions is, as everybody knows, very intensive. Brussels hosts an enormous number of permanent offices of various public and private organizations, with personnel constantly commuting back and forth to their central offices. One has only to spend a few hours on a working day at Brussels airport to notice this continuous movement.

A further group is located in, or close to, the nodes of the European relational networks. It is composed of managers of enterprises or banks operating in international markets, with branches and offices in several countries. Besides multinational enterprises, many professional firms (lawyers, real estate agents, consulting and auditing firms) are affiliated in permanent forms of co-operation and exchange, for the simple reason that many of their clients require professional services that transcend the boundaries of any single country. The emergence of these relational networks is a phenomenon connected with processes beyond the European dimension. We can, however, speak of Europeanization as part of a larger process of internationalization, globalization, or mondialization. We can propose the hypothesis (which I think can be empirically confirmed) that these networks are most tightly linked at the European level and that, in other words, a thickening of highly frequent and intense relations is taking place at the that level.

Almost all of these examples refer more or less directly to economic activities. However, Europeanization and internationalization processes are not limited to the economic sphere. Almost all scientific communities have felt the need to establish an intermediate associational structure between the national and the world level. I belong to the Italian, the International, and also the European Sociological Association. I am sure there should be an office in Brussels that would keep track of all professional, scientific and cultural associations having a European dimension. This kind of census of organizations would be an excellent point of departure for the study of the European civil society in the making.

This international (European and world) dimension is perhaps even more pronounced at the highest levels of the arts, music, and show business. The fame of a poor artist does not normally transcend the local or national level; but artists are not considered successful if their names do not become well-known at the international level, their agents do not operate in extended networks, and their performances are not demanded by publics in different countries. When people say that artists are the best ambassadors of their countries, this means, paradoxically, that they have been able to get out of the national dimension to enter a star system where their talent is recognized independently of their nationality. This is true today because of the global dimension of mass communication, but was also true in the past when the best artists operated at the service of kings and courts all over Europe.

I have yet to mention the initiatives that I think are contributing most to the formation of a European civil society: the exchange of students between schools and universities. There are, to my knowledge, very few inquiries into the effects of these exchanges. During the last 20 years, several tens of thousands of students have been able to get out of their 'provincial' environments and experience life in a different setting. I am sure that these experiences have highly favoured the establishment of friendship relations and greatly contributed to reducing prejudices that prevent co-operation among people of different national origins. The effects of these actions are even more significant if we consider that a large part of the ruling classes in future decades will be recruited among the young people who now take part in these exchanges.

A secondary, but far from negligible, effect of the diffusion of these exchanges is an increased tendency to move to other countries for reasons of study or work. We have solid data supporting this statement. Migration studies should pay more attention to the movement of highly educated and highly skilled persons. These individuals are more likely to engage in mixed marriages, to raise their children in a cosmopolitan environment, and therefore to become elements around which the aggregation of European civil society takes place.

To close these considerations on the 'molecular construction' of European society, I would suggest that experts of network analysis should focus on the

density of networks crossing national borders. This variable can tell us with more precision if, where, and how a European society is in the making. I think it would be possible to construct an index to measure the frequency and intensity of cross-border linkages, and to test the hypothesis that those who are most closely knit in these networks are also those who show more favourable attitudes and more commitment to furthering the process of unification.

What I have said so far tries to answer the question: which strategies should the social sciences adopt in order to assess whether there is a European society in the making? The answer is: more comparative research and more network analysis underlining cross-national linkages.

To close, let me suggest a consideration of a different kind. One could reasonably argue that a process of societal formation at the European level will take place only if Europe can develop an image of the future and a promise (or a mission) whose validity goes beyond Europe itself to address a universal dimension. The lack of such a 'vision' is, I suppose, to a large extent responsible for the weak development of a sense of common belonging. The process of European unification has involved, since its inception, large sectors of economic, cultural, and political elites in an increasing number of countries (from the original six, to the present 25). Citizens, however, have been kept largely in a marginal position. In some countries there have been referenda for or against joining the Union, and every five years since 1979, the voters are called to elect the members of the European Parliament. Electoral participation is declining in Europe, even in the case of national elections, but is at its lowest for the European Parliament.

If you ask a sample of European citizens (as the Eurobarometer does) to which territorial unit they feel they owe their first and second allegiances (the local community, the region, the nation, Europe or the world), only a minority of interviewees choose Europe (a choice which increases in frequency with level of education).

Even if consistent pieces of sovereignty passed, de facto or by law, from the nation states to the EU (in the 12 states of the Euro-area, even the right to mint currency), the arena where political competition takes place, where cleavages are formed, where passions and interests are mobilized, still remains essentially confined to the national level.

The European idea appeals more to reason than to the emotions; it is – so to speak – a 'cold ideal'. I think that this characteristic has a positive side, since it reduces the risk of the development of a sort of aggressive European nationalism in the future. Europe cannot become a nation in the sense that this term has historically assumed since the nineteenth century. The very idea of a united Europe was born out of the will to overcome the nation as the agency requiring from its members absolute dedication and sacrifice. The fact that in the collective imagination (or imagery) Europe is frequently associated with business and

economic interests has contributed to forgetting its true origins, the two World Wars and the reaction to the attempt to unify the continent under the hegemony of a single imperial superpower. In particular, the first attempt to create a sort of supranational authority (the European Coal and Steel Community) was built upon the desire to put an end to almost a century of bloody wars between France and Germany and to transform two former enemies into partners in a common enterprise. The most significant effect of the construction of the European Union is not, or not only, the creation of favourable conditions for economic development and prosperity, but the elimination of the possibility of new wars in the heart of the continent and the laying of the groundwork for the integration of peoples historically separated by barriers of hostility.

Exactly for these reasons, European identity does not run the risk of becoming exclusive (exclusive of other collective identities), as the national identities have been in the phases of acute nationalism and as they still are in regions like the Balkans, where the idea of supernational and multinational integration has not yet entered into consideration.

In fact, the specificity of European identity is this: one can assume a European identity without erasing or weakening one's national identity. European identity adds to other sources of collective identities without negating them. This principle, so simple as to appear trivial, is in reality quite revolutionary. It says that to create unity, one does not need to downplay diversity, as did nation-states that stifled local cultures and erased long-established traditions in order to impose a unique national culture. The fusion of people of very different racial, ethnic, and religious origins into a melting pot in the formation of the United States provides the classical example: to become fully 'American', immigrants had to forget – at most in the span of two generations – the language, culture, traditions, and lifestyles of their parents. To become 'European', none of this is needed: the assumption of a European identity does not imply giving up one's own national or local identity. Unity is not achieved at the cost of diversity, but, on the contrary, is achieved on the basis of diversity.

The fundamental problems of a world where the process of globalization creates growing interdependencies will increasingly grow out of the need to interact with the other, in order to cooperate, without denying his/her diversity. If this is true, Europe can still claim to be an example for the rest of the world. If Europe can demonstrate that former enemies can successfully cooperate in a common endeavour, that the other can become a partner without denying his diversity, that institutions can guarantee unity without imposing uniformity, then we can claim that Europe carries a promise that is valid not only for Europeans. The fact that this value dimension of the process of unification has been left in the shadows is in my opinion responsible for the incapacity of the European idea to mobilize support from the people and, particularly, from younger generations.

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