

“The Europe beneath Europe”

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This year is a European Year, in the sense that direct elections will take place for the European Parliament in the end of May. They will be the 8th European Elections since the very first one organized in 1979. At that time, it was considered as a major step forward in the direction of a more democratic Europe. 35 years after the first European elections, where are we to-day in terms of European citizenship?

In 1979, the turnout was 62%. It regularly decreased to reach the low level of 42% in the last elections in 2009. Five years later, the only question for the 2014 elections (apart from the results) is: will we managed to stabilize the level of 2009? It is difficult to be more ambitious, if we consider that, in the last “Eurobarometer” survey of the European Commission, only 29% of the people considered that their voice counts in the EU. Only 23% of the Greeks and 29% of the Italians said that they approved the democratic functioning of the EU (and only 35% of the French, according to a recent survey in France).

Is it better in the new countries, the countries that have just joined the EU and should logically be more enthusiastic? The answer is clearly “no”: the turnout in the last European Elections was 37% in Bulgaria and 27% in Romania (two countries which joined in 2007). In April last year, it was only 21% in Croatia, for the very first European elections in this country.

Meanwhile, nevertheless, the “objective” conditions for the participation of the citizens have significantly improved in the EU since 1979. First, the powers of the European Parliament have been significantly reinforced. Since the middle of the 1980’s, the symbols of Europe have been multiplied: flag, anthem, passport, and more recently euro with coins and notes that are used in the daily life. Normally, it should make you feel more “European”. Besides, European citizens can vote at local and European elections in any other EU country where they are living. The Lisbon Treaty has also introduced a consultative right of initiative for a group of 1 million EU citizens from at least 7 Member states. And so on, and so forth.... But with relatively limited results, as the recent surveys clearly show, as well as the constant declining of the participation in the European elections.

In my view, the big lesson to be learned here is that *policies* of citizenship, all designed from above (from Brussels), are not capable by themselves to create a European *polity*. The addition of policies does not make a polity (a political

community in the Greek sense of the term “politeia”). This top-down process can surely create the institutional framework, the shape, but not the *content* of a European citizenship. This can be done only bottom-up, not from Brussels, by a myriad of civic initiatives which will create – or re-create – basic communities.

Civic initiatives correspond to a form of empowerment... At the end of the day, this is a question of ownership, of ownership of Europe. And from this point of view, civic initiatives change completely the perspective. The challenge here is the nature of the European integration.

But there is a difference between civic *initiatives* and the creation of civic *communities*. Civic initiatives cannot create civic communities *if they remain isolated*. Such communities will be created only *by the relations* that will develop between each other. And it is also an alternative way to envisage the basic idea of “solidarities of facts” which was at the origins of the European integration (but at this time applied to coal and steel, not to citizens). In other words, *networks and networking processes are an absolute necessity*. Now, the new information and communication technologies multiply the possibilities of horizontal networks organizing the society without the necessity of a centre and a vertical power.

So, all that has been briefly described before, all the experiences that have been presented yesterday and will be presented to-day after this introduction, all create the conditions, in Europe and in other parts of the world, of a “*Silent revolution*” that I have named “*The Europe beneath Europe*”. Your experiences testify that this is possible, but only on the condition that they will not develop in isolation, that you exchange between yourselves, develop more and more interactions in more and more dense and solid networks. Otherwise, you may certainly achieve limited positive results, but you will fail to change really things.

The meaning of this “Europe beneath Europe Revolution” is to put the European citizen *at the very centre* of the process of uniting Europe – not anymore the Member states, not the Brussels institutions, not the politicians, not the economic and financial interests. The term Revolution is adequate here, since the etymology of the word is to change the centre, the focus of things, like in the Copernician revolution when the sun became the new centre, and not the earth anymore.

As we stated before, even well-intentioned, even very devoted to the rights of the citizens, the Brussels institutions are *structurally* incapable of generating the *required level of energy* to realize it. It is your task. It is a fact that the energy can only come from the bottom, from the people themselves, not from the institutions. And the sufficient level of energy to initiate significant change can only be reached by connecting civic initiatives, by networking.

One characteristic of this evolution is that it is largely *unnoticed*. Of course, the use of new technologies is largely celebrated in the media. But their potential for recreating an active society has to be further explored from the perspective of a redefinition of

what is called to-day “governance”. From this perspective, it is striking to notice that we gradually build a society of *recommendations*: people are looking for advices, what do you think of this? What do you think of that? And people make up their mind on the basis of exchange of views. Meanwhile (in parallel), the prestige of the representative democracy is declining: people are less and less ready to give elected representatives the power to decide in the name of the society. They deeply feel, more and more, that the society is represented directly by themselves, by their opinions.

Of course, this evolution is not exempt from true dangers. It can lead to populism, or to the “brand new world” described by Aldous Huxley, or to the well-known “Big Brother” of George Orwell. The recent NSA scandal is here a useful warning. Technology is neutral in itself – not bad, not good. But the use of technology is never neutral. When political, economic, financial or moral powers make use of technology for their own purposes, “1984” is never far away. On the opposite side of the spectrum, when individuals use technologies egoistically for the satisfaction of their own ego, it leads to anarchy, the war of all against all as Thomas Hobbes used to say, and it will pave the way for the emergence of a new Power.

In fact, let us confess that it is all too often a temptation to oppose official Europe, the one represented by the Brussels institutions, to this “Europe beneath Europe”, represented by all civic initiatives, like yours, starting from the bottom, starting from the local communities to build a European community. Even if the contrast between the two “Europe”, the official one and the civic one, is very telling, I think that it is a civic virtue to resist this temptation to oppose them. In my opinion, it is a civic virtue to resist the temptation to pretend to be the “true” Europe in opposition to the “fake” Europe from Brussels. In other words, it seems more appropriate to try to bridge the gap between the two “Europe”, the institutional and the civic one. It implies that efforts should be made on both sides.

On one hand, it is important to get more and more aware in Brussels that Europe is not only a question of norms and economic interests. Of course it counts. But prescribing new norms and integrating social and economic structures is not enough. It means that the Brussels institutions should encourage the bottom-up civic Europe that they are unable to replace. We can see here a possible illustration of the principle of subsidiarity: the initiatives are local, and should remain local. The EU institutions intervene to give them the opportunity to reach a cross-border dimension, a European dimension, and only for that purpose: as an encouragement, as a catalyst, not as a prescriber.

On the other hand, from the other side of the spectrum, it is important to assess more precisely the endogenous limits of civic initiatives and their subsequent need for institutional forms of cooperation. One critical point of the civic initiatives is generally their lack of sustainability after a certain number of years, when the initial enthusiasm has declined and when the financial difficulties are on the contrary growing. It is

therefore crucial for them to establish long lasting “win-win” partnerships with political institutions, like local or regional authorities, and with economic actors, like local enterprises. It is also essential to prove that civic initiatives can save and create jobs, sustainable jobs, that they can concretely contribute to alleviate this endemic problem in a lot of regions throughout Europe.

By and large, this necessity for partnership includes the relations with the European Union. It means that civic initiatives have to organize themselves also in a more traditional way, in associations like this one, to improve their communication and their capacity for advocacy in Brussels. The risk of course could be a growing gap between the local initiatives on the ground and the top-association in Brussels. We find here again the dichotomy between action and institutionalization. I saw many networks which one day had to institutionalize to acquire visibility, to attract funds, etc..., and I can confess that bridging the two logics is not easy in the long run! But it is necessary. I think that, the more you preserve the bottom-up dynamics, the networking character, the less institutionalization you bring, the more flexibility, energy, enthusiasm, inventiveness you keep, the better it is!

In conclusion, I would say that we will not combat the crisis in Europe only by austerity plans. Etymologically, crisis means “mutation”, “change”. In this line of thought, what we need is to renovate democracy in Europe. But it would be a great mistake to wait for Brussels institutions, political elites at European or national level to do it, simply because it is beyond their capacity. We have to base this change on civic initiatives. In their turn, local civic initiatives are part of the landscape but not all of it. They are a necessary condition, but the European institutions have also their role to play, their added value as long as they do not replace bottom-up initiatives, but on the contrary, encourage them.

All the other solutions have shown their limits. In this new alliance lies the chance for a democratic Europe, a Europe really made by its citizens, and not only in the name of its citizens.