

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

NECE Workshop: The Impacts of National Identities for European Integration as a Focus of Citizenship Education

INPUT PAPER

Introductory Remarks to Session 1: Citizenship Education Between Ethnicity - Identity – Nationality: Scientific Findings and Country-specific Comparisons

„Debating Europe” – Identity and Citizenship in a European Democracy

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Abstract

De-politization, disinterest, fragmented identities are keywords of recent analysis of present developments. The gap between citizens and elites is not only, but primarily an issue for considerations on EU citizenship. From a postmodern perspective one could deduce that categories such as identity and citizenship are not relevant for 21st century societies (cf. Scott-Baumann 2003). I will argue in this paper that, also from a postmodern perspective, identity is a relevant issue and that the relation between citizens, civil society and governing elites has to be discussed. Furthermore I will refer to the European Commission's Plan D and the White Paper On a European Communication Policy and will thereby exemplify, how a different approach could point to a more promising direction.

Introduction

De-politization, disinterest, fragmented identities are keywords of recent analyses of present developments. The gap between citizens and elites is not only, but primarily an issue for considerations on EU citizenship. From a postmodern perspective one could deduce that categories such as identity and citizenship are not relevant for 21st century societies (cf. Scott-Baumann 2003). I will argue in this paper that from a postmodern perspective identity is also a relevant issue and the relation between citizens, civil society and governing elites has to be discussed. However, this does not imply that one can simply close the elite/citizens-gap by "getting closer to the citizens" as has been proposed several times by the European Commission. By referring to the European Commission's Plan D and the White Paper On a European Communication Policy I will criticize the simplified understanding of the problems

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

of European democracy represented in these publications and exemplify how a different approach could point towards a more promising direction. The intention of this paper is, thus, to delineate which facets of citizenship and identity should be placed centre stage and to show in which ways, different from the Commission's one, these issues could be addressed.

Initiatives

In October 2005 the Commission launched an initiative called Plan D, followed inter alia by a White Paper On a European Communication Policy subtitled "Debating Europe, involving people" in February 2006 – not least as a reaction to the negative referenda to the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands (May 2005). Plan D stands for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate and was meant to accelerate debates about the future of the European Union during the so called "period of reflection".

The problems addressed in the White Paper can be summarized by one keyword: the elite – citizens gap. The paper states that this gap is widely recognized and that one of its main causes can be found in an information deficit of the citizens. The intention of the paper is to propose ways to close this gap and to promote a "healthy democracy" – without further specifying the meaning of this goal.

This issue is mainly addressed by emphasizing the importance of the public sphere, civil society and information policy. As far as I know, the only EU-wide project based on these considerations is the forum on the Commission's homepage, where citizens are encouraged to discuss European issues of their concerns. This was also the main topic at the German presidency meeting in January 2007, called: "Communicating Europe together". The outcome of this project is at least questionable – the participation is rather limited.

The Problems

Problem 1: Consent instead of struggle

A crucial aspect of western democracies is that citizens and civil society constantly question those who govern. Claude Lefort saw the differentia specifica between democracies and other forms of government in the fact that the place of power in democracy remains empty; power cannot be possessed once and for all. Power is not located within society in the sense that it necessarily results from it, but is posed outside and can thus only be realized by representatives in a contingent and temporary manner.

In this sense the negative votes on the European constitutional treaty must be considered highly democratic and not an expression of too little democracy or primarily a sign for the elite – citizens gap. It is not a democratic necessity that citizens agree with governing elites. Much more important is that elites react on citizens' articulations voiced in referenda (i.e. the aspect of responsiveness). We also have to recognize all the surveys, which have been carried out to show that in no other European country the constitutional treaty was as much debated as in France. Starting from this angle the negative votes were more democratic than the decisions taken by parliaments and governments, since contentious debates had preceded them.

The "consent-aspect" also becomes evident, when the White Paper complains that so far elites have focused on telling people what the EU does, instead of listening to people's views. However, this is not what debate means. Debate is not only "telling" and "listening" but reacting, struggling and reaching the other's limits. Thus, the problem is not so much that citizens are detached from EU politicians and "eurocrats", but that elites tend to oppress and palliate fundamental critique.

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Problem2: Responsibility and Actors

As already mentioned in the outline for Plan D the main responsibility for enhancing debates is handed to the nation states (Wallström in the Press Release). The White Paper for instance states:

“It is the responsibility of government, at national, regional and local level, to consult and inform citizens about public policy – including European policies and their impact on people’s daily lives – and to put in place the forums to give this debate life.”

If we take on a more “realistic” point of view, this suggestion or demand seems rather utopian. Why should national governments be interested in promoting balanced arguments and quasi-objective information on EU policies, if they are so successful in using them in their blame-games? This request entirely ignores political strategies and struggle upon power positions.

Furthermore we should question, if there is one nation state in Europe where the government debates policy issues with “the people”. There are certain, institutionalized channels where concerns can be articulated. But there is no impetus to really realize the “democracy by the people” a priori to political recommendations. In this regard the actor is not the national or regional government, but civil society, NGOs, interest representations and the media.

Admittedly – and this is also emphasized by the Commission’s statement – the public sphere plays a crucial role for citizenship education. Nevertheless, actors within the public sphere are not restricted to territorial division. This means that the public sphere is not a materialized arena, restricted to the national, regional or local level. The public sphere is communication and production of systems of signification across territorial boundaries, across means of communication or specific actors. Everything which contributes to the formation of collective demands, interests and perspectives must be considered as a contribution to the public sphere. In this sense from the EU’s perspective it is more important to elaborate on public issues than on ways and actors of communication on national levels. If EU officials want EU citizens to debate, they have to articulate their point of view and concepts and have to accept radical different points of view and counter concepts.

Furthermore the public sphere cannot be considered as a monolithic entity. Rather we should consider talking about multiple publics or spheres of publics (Calhoun 1995). Different struggles, as for example “ethnic struggle”, “women’s struggle”, “class struggle” or “religious struggle” form their own political arena and thus public sphere.

“Such struggles issue from and occur within the gaps and contradictions between formally sanctioned norms, expectations and classifications of rights, obligations and entitlements, on the one hand, and the everyday disruptions to and negations of those expectations and classifications, on the other. These gaps and contradictions are the ethical and political of new public spaces.” (O’Brien and Panna 1996: 9)

In this sense the public sphere cannot be misused as a propagandistic organ for government initiatives. We have to accept that within the public sphere protest and counter-hegemonic projects are articulated – a fundamental function of a democratic public sphere. Considering that it seems as if the Commission had a very specific notion of public sphere – it is mainly envisioned as an information providing instrument. The postmodern one instead, “can provide no guarantees of either formal or substantive equality, nor does entry into this public sphere necessarily entail empowerment or emancipation” (O’Brien and Panna 1996: 13).

Problem 3: Language and system of signification

Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström, responsible for Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy described the Plan D as an initiative about “debate, dialogue and listening” (Press Release 13. October 2005). From this paraphrase we can deduce that the combination of democracy, dialogue and debate was not well chosen. Nobody knew why dialogue and debate was put side by side. It could have been understandable, if the authors intended to emphasize that not only an exchange of information is needed, but a confrontation – a dispute, which could lead to the discover of

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

the other's limits. However, it does not seem as if this was the intention, since in German "debate" was not translated as "dispute" but "discussion" – something very similar to dialogue. The confusion about the wording also became evident, when Jean-Claude Juncker the then-president of the European Council stumbled to find the right expression and only made it to the "democracy" and the "debate".

This seems like a pars-pro-toto for the whole communication policy of the European Union. In the White Paper, language barriers are identified as a main problem for the emergence of a European public. –However different empirical studies carried out at my institute show that different concepts of European integration or the European constitutional treaty are not a result of distinct mother tongues. For instance, also German and Austrian understandings of these concepts differ widely. If differing concepts emerge at all they can be identified with political camps, citizens and elites, levels of education, i.e. broadsheet and tabloid media, or in the dimension of inclusiveness of the respective public sphere. Thus, common patterns of interpretation and a similar framework of signification do not result from a common natural language, but from constant communication and exchange of points of references. In short: we could also live with adequate translations.

Conclusion

To sum up, we can find a rather modern approach to citizenship in the Commission's statements. The citizen is a rational, information interested individual; there are universal categories as nation, identity and citizenship; by quoting survey data as Eurobarometer they count on positive knowledge. But what if EU citizens had a much more postmodern character – then we would have to change the perspective or vocabulary. I would say there is nothing to lose. We have to consider that "subtle and pervasive divisions in cultural status and power permeate the definitions and voices that tell of modern experiences [...], often rendering existing, formal political channels of little use as vehicles for change and 'progress' for marginalized groups." (O'Brien and Penna 1996: 7)

Vis-à-vis a postmodern citizen we would have to consider that there is no equality per se, which does not mean that the concept of equality should be abandoned as a normative corrective. We would have to consider that there is not only the conscious, enlightened citizen, but there is also the irrational one – with desires and unfulfilled demands. Still, the decision of the latter citizen must be judged as equally important and legitimate as the one of the former. The modern concepts tend to forget the marginalized and exploited. We would also have to consider that struggle is needed, because unless there is no interest in others, there is no problematization and thus no practice of identification.

The White Paper tries to define common principles for a EU-democracy. For instance the "right to information and freedom of expression" is one of the cornerstones. But if we look closely, we notice that the interpretation of this phrase not only includes the right, but the obligation to gain information. The main problem in a EU democracy is not that information is impossible to gather, but that citizens are not interested in this information. And again my explanation is the missing common system of signification, due to the lack of a genuine European public sphere or spheres of publics, whose development is not only a task for nation states, but the European institutions themselves and is furthermore mainly to acquire by issue dependencies.

Joan Copjec describes the tension within the concept of citizenship:

"If all our citizens can be said to be Americans [and here we can also apply 'Europeans'], this is not because we share any positive characteristics, but rather because we have all been given the right to shed these characteristics, to present ourselves as disembodied before the law. I divest myself of my identity, therefore I am a citizen. This is the peculiar logic of democracy." (Copjec 1991: 30)

In this sense we have to recognize also the tension between citizenship and identity, which has to be kept, let alone between national and European citizenship criss-crossed by all kinds of identities and subject positions.

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

From a postmodern perspective we furthermore have to acknowledge that if there is one side there is always also another one. If there is identity we have to consider fragmentation and total loss. If there is the nation's citizen we have to consider the alien. Of course concrete articulations will always lie somewhere in between. Difference is an important category for democracy, but not in the sense of simple diversity, rather it refers to "the socially produced asymmetries between cultural spheres and their political location in hierarchies of domination and resistance" (O'Brien and Penna: 7). This type of diversity needs something which can be dislocated, i.e. a universal claim against its background differences are able to act. Still, on the other hand this means also that the expansion of citizenship in the sense of an abstract universal belonging to "social rights, devoid of particularistic or national foundations" as for example in Turner's concept (1993: 14) or Habermas' "constitutional patriotism" (1992) is not possible. With this critique on modern concepts we have to draw our attention to the everyday world – in the institute I work at for example we try meeting this challenge by the application of discourse analysis to different kinds of actors.

To conclude, it is not that the world has become more complicated, but we have developed a more complex system of knowledge and now we have to deal with it. This is the first thing to realize and for the second I would like to cite O'Brien and Penna (1996: 14) who state in reference to a slightly different quotation by Spivak: "to make the status of citizenship accessible, try doing it with the constituencies who demand it".

Cited Literature

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