

CITIZENS' ORGANIZATIONS AS ACTORS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF A EUROPEAN IDENTITY*

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Paradoxes

The issue of the building of a European identity seems to be challenged, among others, by two paradoxical matters of fact.

The first is that, while a strong role of citizens in building a common identity is something obvious, in the European debate public institutions are usually supposed to be the main relevant actors. The citizens' role is underestimated if not ignored at all. This matter gives raise to a paradox: a common identity, and in the final analysis the European *demos* itself, would be built without the involvement of citizens in the whole process.

This paradox is shown by the case of the Constitutional Treaty of the EU and its rejection by French and Dutch referenda in 2005. Some elements of that process are of special interest:

- Before the beginning of the Convention's activity, European authorities refused the proposal of submitting the Convention's results to a general European referendum, as it was suggested by several NGOs on the occasion of the Nice Intergovernmental Conference (December 2000). The aim of the proposal was to put the Convention in the condition of beginning to work being aware that the text of the Constitution would have been judged by the whole European citizenry.
- During the Convention's activity, generally speaking no serious information nor consultation were carried out by the Convention. Some crowded and inconclusive meetings were convened and a page of the EU internet site, where every individual or NGO could send a message but without receiving any answer, was opened. It can be added that the only dialogue of the Convention with civil society organizations was arranged by the Economic and Social Committee, but it involved mainly Brussels-based institutions and organizations, often very far from reality.
- As for its content, the Constitutional Treaty reflects this lack of attention, including some vague norms related to the democratic life of the Union and the dialogue with civil society, far less ambitious than some daily activities of the Union's institutions themselves. No surprise that, because of the "vicious circle of distrust" (who does not trust is easily distrusted), the Treaty was rejected by citizens, although with several different motivations.

The second paradoxical factor is that, in case of European community, there is an inversion of the relationship between citizenship and identity. While in general identity is presumed to exist as a condition for the establishment of a citizenship, in the case of European Union citizenship was instituted (in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992) before the development of such an identity. This further paradox somehow reflects the general phenomenon of European institutions as non-standard entities.

This concerning situation should be better addressed taking into consideration the activity of citizens' organizations, operating both at national and Community levels in connection with European policies (for example, consumer, health, environment, social inclusion, etc.). This text is aimed at highlighting the actual and possible role of citizens' organizations in the building of a European identity.

For the sake of clarity, I mean for *civic organization* (or active citizenship, or civic activism, or citizens' organization) every organization—whatever its scope, size, juridical status, motivation,

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membership—which is self-created and self-managed by citizens. A civic organization is set up mainly on a voluntary basis. It is active in the area of public policies and aims at protecting citizens' rights and/or taking care for common goods. It does not seek profit and acts in the general interest. This concept is narrower than the one of *civil society*, since it involves only those organizations engaged in public interest activities; and, differently from the one of *third sector*, it encompasses both advocacy and service organizations. I do not use expressions as “NGO” or “NPO” because of their residual and negative (“non-something”) character.¹

In my approach, moreover, *public policies* are the proper arena of citizens' organizations, where they act both in the definition, implementation and evaluation phases. The field of public policy is different and partially autonomous from the one of politics, and participation in policy making has presently a weak link with political participation through parties and elections.²

The “Lab” of European Citizenship

The starting point of this text is nothing but European citizenship. It is important to focus our attention on citizenship, because of its close relation with the issue of identity, on one side, and the role of citizens' organizations, on the other side.

About European citizenship, two anomalies are to be highlighted. They in fact allow us to speak of a non-standard citizenship, which can therefore be considered as a laboratory of innovation.³

The *first anomaly* is that, comparing European citizenship with the traditional paradigm of citizenship, it emerges that it does not refer either to a national community or to a State and it is not grounded either to a common language or a common positive historical heritage (if anything it is negative). Moreover, European citizenship manifests itself in a series of rights and, even if only in principle, duties that do not derive from traditional governmental authority. The sense of belonging connected with European citizenship itself concerns something that is more similar to a civil society than to a nation (it is the case of the Erasmus program, which involved more than one million students since now).

In few words, the first anomaly is that European citizenship, though existing as an institutional reality, cannot be included in the traditional paradigm of citizenship.

The *second anomaly* is that European citizenship embodies a paradigm of civic activism in the realm of public policies that goes beyond the traditional boundaries of the concept of citizenship, which translates sovereignty in voting. This paradigm can be seen in EU everyday activity beside in official documents (such as the recent decision of the Council to start a program on “European active citizenship”⁴): for example in consumer policy, where specific “political” rights (representation, information, education) and powers (to start up consulting procedures, carry out alternative dispute resolutions, take legal actions in the representation of single consumers, negotiate agreements with stakeholders and contribute to defining and verifying quality standards) are practiced.⁵

It can be said that when the European Union calls citizens to exercise powers and responsibilities on a daily basis to implement rights or care for common goods, it deals with citizenship in a non-standard framework.

Thanks to these considerations, it can be concluded that the resulting pattern of European citizenship is a non-standard one because it is at the same time both an imperfect form of traditional citizenship and a hidden, or not fully recognized, form of new citizenship.

These two peculiar features make, in my opinion, European citizenship as the point where the issue of building European identity and the role of citizens' organizations, operating both at EU and at national level, significantly interact.

Citizens' Organizations and European Identity

The anchorage to citizenship enables us to overcome simplistic visions of the role of citizens' organizations in building European identity. According to these visions, citizens' organizations play an intermediation role between common citizens and the EU institutions and therefore are able to put the first closer to the latter; or they represent the whole civil society in front of public institutions; or even they can act as "agit-prop" of the European Union among people.

In front of these visions and of the rhetoric of civil society which is connected to, a more complex and conceptually tidy approach is required. It can indeed enable us to identify the role of citizens' organizations in supporting the building of a European identity, as well as the problems they must face to this end.

Such approach can be built, in my opinion, around the following points:

- In the European situation, the building of a common identity is strictly linked to the development of citizenship of the Union. Though in more usual situations this could not be the case, in the one of Europe such a correlation seems very important.
- Taking into account the non-standard nature of European citizenship, it can be maintained that the general meaning of citizens' organizations' activity is to enrich and enforce the "civic activism side" of such a citizenship which they are at the center of. "Enrich" means that they contribute to increase and make more serious the content of European citizenship. "Enforce", on the other side, means that they practice European citizenship as civic activism and therefore implement it.
- Acting for the building of European citizenship they contribute to the definition and sharing of a common European identity. Because of the relation between citizenship and collective identity, citizens' organizations' activity and interaction with public institutions can be therefore considered as part of the process of construction of a new European identity.

That having been said on the general relationship between European citizenship, citizens' organizations operating in policy making and the ongoing European identity, let us try to identify more precisely the ways citizens' organizations can and do support the shaping of a European identity. It will be done with reference to some of the results of the research activity linked to Active Citizenship Network, the European policy program of the Italian movement Cittadinanzattiva.⁶ In particular, the results of two main recent surveys will be used: the first has tried to identify the European governments' and institutions' policy style in interacting with citizens' organizations⁷, and the second has focused on the hot issue of the criteria of representativeness of citizens' organizations involved in policy making.⁸

On the basis of the results of these researches seven points related to the role of citizens' organizations can be identified.

1. Citizens' organizations work to give a concrete meaning to the rights related to European citizenship. In some cases, these rights are explicitly and directly established as content of the citizenship of the Union, such as the right to complain to the European Ombudsman or the one to send petitions to the Parliament. In other cases, these rights are stated in official EU documents, though of lower rank, and regard policy fields such as consumption, the environment, education, social inclusion, etc. They can be considered as contents of European citizenship as well. As for the duties, nothing can be said at the moment, since the definition of European citizenship does not specify any of them.

2. Citizens' organizations are increasingly able to take the floor with position papers and proposals, on matters related to the life and activity of the European Union. It is very important to notice that they are not only Brussels-based organizations, but also national-based ones. For example, in the 2005 on-line consultation on the future program on active European citizenship carried out by the EC DG Education and Culture, the national-based NGOs' answers were almost twice those of "European" NGOs.⁹ Besides the impact of this activity (see below), in this way they are contributing to the building of a European public sphere, that is, a space of debate on public issues autonomous by governments.¹⁰ There is a general

consensus that a public sphere is the hard core of civil society, which in turn is related to a common identity.

3. On certain matters, civic organizations are able to involve common citizens in EU-related topics. This role (differently from what is stated in the “standard view”) does not regard any possible issue, but only those which are directly linked to citizens’ organizations’ reputation and skills. In this case only, indeed, citizens’ organizations act as “proximity informers”, that is, actors enabled to inform people because they are trusted by them, this meaning that the same information delivered by a non-trusted actor would be simply rejected. The case of proximity information program in view of the introduction of the single currency, involving citizens’ organizations in training informers and coming in direct contact with hundreds of thousands common citizens (“Easy Euro” program) is a successful example of this role. It is of crucial importance in the light of the paradox of a process of construction of the European identity carried out by institutions alone, which I reported above.

4. Citizens’ organizations promote and live experiences of common work able to take into account differences of culture, language and habits, treating them not as obstacles or anomalies but as the normal condition of European citizens interacting and cooperating each other. This attitude to give value to diversity is practiced not only in the experiences of partnership in EU-funded projects, but also in the exchange of people between organizations, as it happens in the case of the European Voluntary Service¹¹. The existing linguistic barriers do not obstruct interaction and cooperation. The ability to live unity despite diversity can be considered one of the founding elements of a European identity.

5. Citizens’ organizations give a practical interpretation of citizenship as something that lives into a market, thus giving to the status of consumer the value of “citizenship in practice”. Not only the discourse but also the activity of citizens’ organizations give to the status of consumer the value of a concrete expression of citizenship. The wording “consumer-citizen”—in spite of the criticism that it is an oxymoron—means that in a common market, though evolving in a political entity such Europe is, to be citizen means to be aware consumer, able to exercise rights, powers and responsibilities. A common identity raising in an environment which is fundamentally a market cannot avoid to give value to the status of consumer as a shared condition.

6. Civic organizations’ existence and activity both at national and Community levels has given value as relevant actors not only to employers and workers (nor only to voters), but also to common citizens daily facing problems such as disability, pollution, unfair clauses of contracts, and so on. Without such a presence of citizens’ organizations, Europe would have been still represented as a corporatist public space, denying visibility and voice to non-workers and non-producers.

7. Citizens’ organizations act to reengineer the relationship between the citizenry and public institutions in terms of “horizontal subsidiarity”.¹² This principle, explicitly established in the Italian Constitution since 2001 (in the article 118.4), but practiced almost in all Europe, means that all citizens, both as individuals and organized bodies, are recognized as legitimate actors of public life. It means, in other words, that they act beyond the classical “division of labor” implied by the principle of freedom of association (the public affairs to the State, the private interest to the citizenry). This role of citizens as actors of the public interest—whatever the form, length and scope of action—is practiced on a permanent and structured basis by citizens’ organizations and could become one of the relevant contents of a European common identity.

Obstacles and Threatening Elements

Obviously the roles of citizens’ organizations in contributing to shape a European identity listed above meet several problems. They must be taken into account, especially at the end of avoiding an excess of optimism, an overestimation of civic activism or a new rhetoric of “civil society”. These problems seriously affect active citizenship organizations and threaten their possibility to play a constructive role.

How can we identify these problems? On one side they are not directly linked to the building of a European identity, but are general weakness elements to be taken into account. But on the other side, since a strong civic activism can be considered as an enabling condition for the emergence of a European identity, these factors themselves do have a direct negative impact on the subject we are dealing with.

On this regard, we can distinguish between an external and an internal side of the problem: the first side is related to attitudes and behaviors of citizens' organizations' interlocutors; and the second is caused by cultural and operational patterns of citizens' organizations themselves.

On the *external side*, we can stress three main problems. They must be considered seriously, because the building of a European identity is nothing but the result of a common effort, involving cooperation between citizens' organizations and public institutions.

The first problem is that, despite solemn declarations about the crucial role of citizens' organizations in the building of Europe, public institutions seem to have an ambiguous attitude towards them. On this regard, one could speak of a sort of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" syndrome. The following data-coming from ACN researches and concerning national laws and regulations-can be reported:

- The most involved institutions in charge of the recognition of citizens' organizations are the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice. This does suggest that the traditional State's "fear of organized citizens" still exists.

- About 40% of all the forms of control regard financial and administrative matters. This confirms that institutions tend to suspect citizens' organizations of mismanagement or frauds. Financial misbehaviors and threat to public security are indeed the two main causes of loss of legitimacy by citizens' organizations.

- In general, the administrative institutions are almost four times more involved in the relationship with civic organizations than the political institutions are. This matter could imply that civic activism tends to be recognized only as a technical supporter of public administration, rather than a political interlocutor of it.

The second problem is that in the implementation of the relationship, a number of pathologies do emerge. Among them, the following regarding national situations and identified by a sample of key persons can be mentioned:

- Lack of public funds for civic organizations: 51,4%:

- Lack of recognition of organizations as important actors of policy making (in respect to trade unions and business): 40,9%.

- Difficult access to policy makers; difficult identification of interlocutors because of lack of transparency and frequent changes in the staff: 37,1%.

- Distrust and reluctance, lack of consideration, respect and equal partnership towards civic organizations, at national and local levels: 33,3%.

- Insufficient and incomplete regulation: 23,8%.

- Attempt of the government to "organize" civic activism, to control it through ministries' permissions, police or infiltration of executive bodies, to influence it through legislation, administrative rules and funding: 20%.

- Poor communication and coordination links: 20%.

- Fear of organizations, considered as trouble makers and capable of influencing elections: 19%.

- Lack of transparency; lack of information on laws, programs and provisions: 18,1%.

- Consultations take place when decisions have been already taken; organizations' opinions are not taken into account and joint decisions are not implemented; the governments do not listen to the answers to their own questions: 18,1%.

The situation at the EU level is not as different as it could be expected. According to key persons operating at European level, the main hindrance factors are the following:

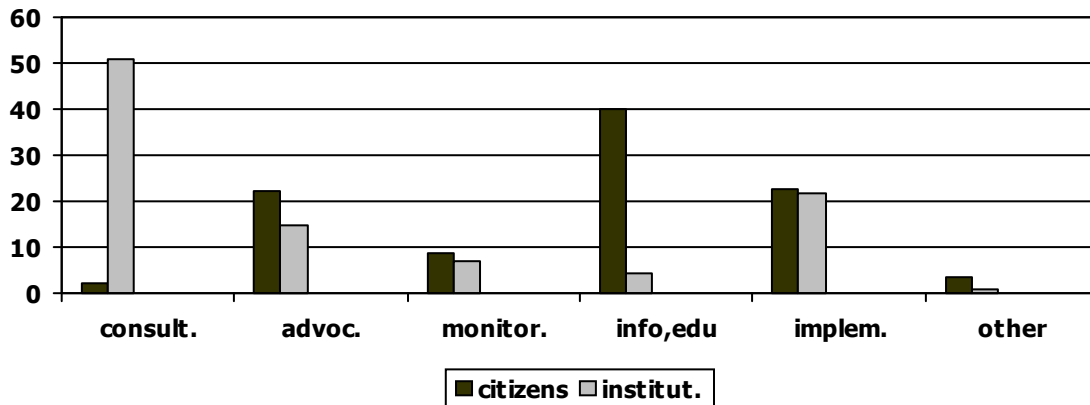
- Lack of full involvement of citizens' organizations in the definition of policies and operational programs.

- Limitations and obstacles in the access and management of EU funds.

- Weakness of the consultation process, in terms of organizational matters of the consultation, of lack of serious engagement of institutions, of real possibility to effectively participate for citizens' organizations, of lack of feedback to citizens' proposals and remarks.
 - Limited possibilities in the participation for small and not Brussels-based organizations.
 - Limitations in the access to institutions, officials and documents.
 - Negative attitude of institutions towards citizens' organizations (non-friendly attitude, misperception of citizens' organizations as links with civil society, protection of institutions against claims and criticisms of citizens' organizations).

The third problem is what could be identified as a divergence of agendas. It can be verified comparing actual citizens' actions and institutions' views with regard to five activities of citizens' organizations: consultation and dialogue between stakeholders; advocacy and representation; monitoring and assessment; information, education and advice; implementation activities and delivery of services.

Graph – Divergent agendas: what citizens' organizations really do and what institutions think they would do.



Source: Active Citizenship Network, 2004

The result (represented in the graph above) is a clear divergent agenda between citizens' actions and institutions' views at least on two points:

- Consultation is at the top for institutions and at the bottom for citizens.
- Information and education is at the top for citizens and at the bottom for institutions.

On the *internal side*, moreover, two kinds of obstacles can be identified, regarding cognitive and operational weaknesses, respectively.

As for cognitive weaknesses, it can be mentioned the double complex, of political inferiority and of moral superiority.¹³ The first means that citizens' organizations tend to feel and behave as subordinate to political and administrative powers, i.e. as actors of a lower rank, in any case dependent on the State and public powers. The second means that, because they are prevalently voluntary and do work on border issues, they are often tempted to refuse accountability requirements, as well as assessments and evaluations.

As for operational weaknesses, poor communication ability, organizational and managerial weakness, deficit in fund raising abilities and often a lack of institutional dimension can be mentioned as highly relevant factors.

For the sake of truth, it must be added that public administrations' behaviors and attitudes are often directed to make things more difficult for citizens' organizations rather than to facilitate their job and their positive evolution.

Conclusive remarks

In conclusion, we could remark that a more precise and pertinent identification of the citizens' organizations' nature and role seems to be a necessary condition for making a "good use" of them as enabling actors of a new European identity. Civic activism indeed risks to be either under- or over-estimated, as the attitude and behavior of public institutions at European and national levels show.

This uncertainty is reflected, for example, by the typical attitude of the European Union, to consider civic organizations in turn either mere suppliers of services or "representatives" of the whole "civil society". It demonstrates a deficit of awareness of the very specific nature of civic organizations. The issue of representativeness itself is of special meaning on this regard, since citizens' organizations' stakeholders tend to pretend that they fulfill the same requirements of political parties and trade unions ("How many are you?") and seem unable to assess the relevance (not the representativeness) of those organizations according to different needs and situations.¹⁴

If their limits and values are properly identified, it is possible to effectively involve citizens' organizations in the building of a new European identity, entrusting them to influence public culture and institutions' behavior as well as to contribute in defining a content of European citizenship closer to the everyday life of people.

¹ Giovanni Moro, *Manuale di cittadinanza attiva* (Roma, Carocci, 1998), 52-55.

² Id., *Azione civica. Conoscere e gestire le organizzazioni di cittadinanza attiva* (Roma, Carocci 2005), 51-56.

³ Id., "The 'Lab' of European Citizenship. Democratic deficit, governance approach and non-standard citizenship". Paper presented at the IIS Conference. Krakow: 2001.

⁴ Council of the European Union. *Council Decision establishing a Community action programme to promote active European citizenship (civic participation)*. Brussels: 16294/03, 19 January 2004.

⁵ European Commission. *Plan of Action on Consumer Policy Matters, 1999-2001*. Brussels: 1999. Romano Prodi, "Quality of Life – A Priority for Europe". Speech at the Third Annual Assembly of Consumer Associations of the European Union. Brussels: 23 November 2000.

⁶ Cf. www.activecitizenship.net.

⁷ Active Citizenship Network (ACN), *Public Institutions Interacting with Citizens' Organizations. A Survey on Public Policies Regarding Civic Activism in Europe* (Roma, Cittadinanzattiva, 2004).

⁸ Id., "Participation in Policy Making: Criteria for the Involvement of Civic NGOs". Research report. Roma: 2005.

⁹ European Commission. On-line consultation on the future program for Active European Citizenship 2007-2013. Presentation and analysis of the results. Brussels: DG Education and culture, 2005.

¹⁰ Victor Pérez-Díaz, "The Public Sphere and a European Civil Society", in *Real Civil Societies. Dilemmas of institutionalization*, edited by Jeffrey Alexander, 211-238. London: Sage Publications, 1998.

¹¹ See EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Youth Program*, http://europa.eu.int/comm/youth/program/index_en.html, 2005.

¹² Active Citizenship Network (ACN), (2003) "Rethinking the Principle of Subsidiarity" (final report, Cittadinanzattiva, 2003).

¹³ Moro, *Manuale di cittadinanza attiva*, 65.

¹⁴ Cf. Active Citizenship Network (ACN), "Participation in Policy Making".

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