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CULTURAL CONVERGENCE IN EUROPE?

Introduction

Nowadays it is popular to stress cultural diversity in relation to European integration. One theme is to look at the diversity of the Western European cultures as a barrier to further integration, particularly within politics: the peoples of Europe are too different in languages, traditions, ways of life, and in their historical experiences, to be able to function within one political community. Another theme is to stress cultural diversity as a value in itself to be protected and secured by guaranteeing a large amount of autonomy for the state level. EU policy-making shall not by will or by accident infringe upon the living variation of the member state practices. The now so fashionable subsidiarity principle can be regarded as a bulwark against cultural convergence. Cultural diversity, it is said, is also valuable in relation both to economic innovation and to social dynamism and vitality.

So, at least within political discourse, cultural diversity in relation to European integration is a prominent theme. The opposite theme of cultural convergence as an effect of interdependence and integration is not very widely discussed, at least not in the present European situation. (Convergence as a result of industrial mass production or of mass-media influence are, on the other hand, present in the discussions of today). This has something to do with the current political situation in Western Europe: both political and, particularly, cultural integration seem to be a threat but also avoidable by substantial segments of the Western European populations.

In this paper I would, all the same, like to focus on the subject of cultural convergence within Western Europe as a possible result of the on-going integration processes. I will approach my discussion by presenting an argument, that might be relevant for the understanding and analysis of the macro-trends of our age, though it is about another historical period, the raise of nationalism. Ernest Gellner, in his book on "Nations and Nationalism", puts forward the thesis that the emergence of national cultures and eventually nation states can be seen as an answer to the needs of the industrial society with its emphasis on

continuous growth and continuous new production methods. The nation constitutes a common culture that replaces the local cultures of the earlier agrarian society. Local cultural diversity acts as barriers to the mobility and flexibility needed for industrial production and must, therefore, be replaced.

1. A sketch of the Gellner argument on nationalism

Industrial society, dominated by the ideas of continuous growth and innovation, needs a high level of labour force mobility.

> "High productivity [...] requires a complex and refined division of labour. Perpetually growing productivity requires that this division be not merely complex, but also, perpetually, and often rapidly changing"[1].

It is necessary for people to change their occupations and jobs several times during their active time in production. The industrial production system is futhermore based upon high levels of technological and conceptual skills. Rationality in the sense of systematic ordering and calculations – in the disaggregation of problem areas into more "easy-to-handle" subparts and the choice of means based upon ends-means efficiency criteria – becomes the dominant cognitive paradigm. The manipulation of materials and products is more and more substituted by the manipulation of meaning. The complexity and interdependence of the economic processes makes exact and clear communication a functional prerequisite.

> "Most jobs, if not actually involving work 'with people', involve the control of buttons or switches or leavers which need to be **understood,** and are explicable, once again, in some standard idiom intelligible to all comers. For the first time in human history, explicit and reasonably precise communication becomes generally, pervasively used and important"[2].

The needs of the industrial society could be summarized in two groups. Firstly, the need for flexibility and mobility makes it imperative that people are not defined by specific group or status memberships that are related to their occupations or occupational expectancies. Mobility is instead furthered by socio-political principles like individualism and egalitarianism. It is important for the economic dynamics that everybody **in theory** can advance in society.

> "The immediate consequence of this new kind of mobility is a certain kind of egalitarianism. Modern society is not mobile because it is egalitarian: it is egalitarian because it is mobile"[3].

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[1] **E. Gellner** 1983, p. 24.
[2] Ibidem, p. 33.
[3] Ibidem, p. 24-25.

Secondly, in order to realize the potential of the industrial system the population must have a high level of education. Widespread literacy and training in conceptual manipulation is demanded for technological and communicational skills. Education must be un-specialized and given by institutions not directly related either to the family/local community or to the workplace. Specific job training constitutes only a minor part of the whole educational effort, which is much more geared to intellectuall and occupational flexibility than to specific task training.

> "Industrial society may by most criteria be the most highly specialized society ever; but its educational system is unquestionably the least specialized, the most universally standardized, that has ever existed. The same kind of training or education is given to all or most children and adolescents up to an astonishingly late age"[4].

> "For the large majority of the population the distinctive skills involved in working life are superimposed on the basic training, either on the job or as part of a much less prolonged supplementary training"[5].

Now, these functional demands create according to Gellner a strong development in the direction of cultural homogenization. The earlier cultural pluralism of the preceding agrarian societies, where specific local cultures could be sustained by small and rather isolated agrarian communities, create obstacles to the mobility and communicational skills of the population. Thus, the society needs a common language and culture, through which to realize

> "the level of literacy and technical competence, in a standardized medium, a common conceptual currency, which is required of members of this society if they are to be properly employable and enjoy full and effective moral citizenship"[6].

> "Culture is no longer merely the adornment, confirmation and legitimation of a social order which was also sustained by harsher and coercive constraints; culture is now the necessary shared medium, the life-blood or perhaps rather the minimal shared atmosphere, within which alone the members of the society can breathe and survive and produce. But some organism must ensure that this literate and unified culture is indeed being effectively produced, that the educational product is not shoddy and substandard [...] The imperative of exo-socialization is the main clue to why state and culture must now be linked, whereas in the past their connection was thin, fortuitous, varied, loose and often minimal. Now it is unavoidable. That is what nationalism is about [...]"[7].

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[4] Ibidem, p. 27.
[5] Ibidem, p. 28.
[6] Ibidem, p. 34.
[7] Ibidem, p. 38.

> "Nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication"[8].

2. Cultural convergence in Europe of to-day?

Transferring the functionalist argument by Gellner for the spread of nationalism, one might see a parallel development in the present period. The starting point is the internationalization of the economy. In the context of Europe economic integration, as expressed by the internal market concept, calls for mobility not only of goods across the borders but also of services, labour, and capital. The point to be stressed here is the demands for interaction of all kinds of economic agents across the nation state borders. The labour force is to be mobile across the EU territory, firms are not only going to compete with each other but also to cooperate in research and development and so on. The implication seems to be that the internal market in order to be successful must be accompanied by a cultural convergence, at least in the sense that there is a need for clear communication and understanding between the economic agents. Linguistic skills but also the establishment of common concepts and a common cognitive framework would seem a functionalistic imperative, and thus a damand for common educational standards both in educational content and in qualification criteria. If your culture defines your area of employability, then the case for cultural convergence must be strong in the context of a European labour market.

I would like to argue that there is within the European Union a trend of cultural convergence with the aim of creating common language skills and educational qualifications. Such a statement seems to run directly against the current ideas in the field of education and culture as these are expressed in the Maastricht treaty. The relevant treaty articles express an explicit prohibition against European level harmonization within the field of education and culture. Article 126 of the EC-treaty stipulates that

> "The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States, and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, *while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity*".

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[8] Ibidem, p. 58.

Article 126.4 excludes *any harmonization of the laws and regulation of the Member States.* But this only bans the use of certain legal means to enforce cultural convergence. There are other political measures that might be used.

If we accept the triad of labour force qualifications including transnational mobility → demands for clear communication and understanding → demands for high and "equal" qualifications, then it is quite possible to interpret rather largescale national and EU policy programmes as expressions of a European cultural convergence policy.

I would like to mention three different types of programmes within the educational policy area:

1) **Language training programmes,** like the EU Lingua programme. It is quite evident that the lack of language skills is seen as a barrier to European integration, both economic, social and political. The arguments mostly emphasize the necessity for languages in order to cope in an international economy. As a result both national governments and the EU institutions have launched educational programmes aiming at raising the language skill level among broad segments of the populations, particularly of course among the young. As an example one could mention the French government programme to introduce vigorously foreign language teaching already in the lower levels of the French school system with particular focus on the other EU languages.

2) **The emphasis on the European dimension** in many study programme contexts. The EU has for a number of years supported the development and implementation of teaching activities that have a clear focus upon Europe, even if the term "Europe" often has been vaguely defined or left undefined. One could mention support to higher education in the form of the Jean Monnet Programme, with the explicit goal of furthering teaching about Europe and particulary the European Union. But one could also mention the much broader student and staff exchange programme Erasmus, in which intercultural training is realized through interuniveristy contacts and study periods abroad. It is quite interesting that one of the elements cherished by the European Commission if not so much by universities, is the development of joint or common curricula. National governments also accept and financially support the goal of international higher education cooperation and exchange. Reasons are often given in terms of the necessity to confront international competition in the field of teaching and research in order to raise output quality. Thus, again a focus upon demands of economic efficiency in new and international circumstances.

3) **Harmonization of professional qualifications.** Efforts to standardize academic degrees or to implement procedures of "reciprocal recognition" of national degrees, have been mounting in the last decade within the European

Union. This is hardly astonishing. The common labour market of the internal market programme will be a sham without qualifications being recognized by employers and authorities in all member countries. Otherwise the labour force mobility will be seriously hampered. National educational authorities seem to participate in or encourage developments towards reciprocal recognition of degrees, even though standardization in this area (as in other areas) meet with opposition based upon the differences between national academic traditions. To repeat, if your culture defines your employability, there will be a strong pressure to change the culture in order to reap the gains from an international economy.

Thus, there seems to be policies implemented both by the European and the national level of the political system, which in their effects could be seen as leading to culture convergence through the establishment of communicational and cognitive skills necessary for labour mobility and flexibility[9]. The parallel to the Gellner thesis of the link between the industrial society and its need for a common culture in the form of nationalism is in some respects striking. Of course, there are also differences. Two questions seem particularly pertinent in ralation to the issue of culture convergence as an effect of European economic integration.

1) If there is a culture convergence process, as indicated above, how are we going to characterize the resulting culture?

One particular aspect, which is extremely relevant, is of course whether there will only be a partial convergence, both in relation to the type of people that will be affected, and in relation to the elements of culture being affected. Will it be an elite subculture (or perhaps superculture) leaving the rest of the society rather unaffected for a long period of time? Will it only encompass certain professional aspects of a persons's life leaving other cultural patterns intact?

2) What will be the impact on the political systems of this culture convergence? What are the implications for the nation state and the national political elites?

A reduction of cultural divergence as perceived by the populations tends to diminish the "grip" of the nation as the self-evident indentification centre, *everything else being equal.* At least one reason to reject political integration would seem to be of less importance, namely the mental distance between "us"

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[9] I do not intend to imply some sort of conscious policy or "conspiracy" to realize a homogenization of the cultures of Europe. Neither, but reversely, does Gellner imply that nationalists created the nation myth and the nation state as a means to furthering economic competitive advantage. As I understand his argument, the explanation formula is of a much more functionalist than of an intentional or rational choice kind.

and "them"[10]. This does not mean than traditional loyalty and identification with the nation would disappear, but it would be less usable for political elites wanting to retain nation state sovereignty and to restrict all forms of political integration above intergovernmental cooperation. To put it bluntly: cultural convergence might imply a reduction of the power base of national political elites. The same line of reasoning may apply to cultural elites too, which might be of interest to the present discussion as cultural elites may generate countermovements[11] to the cultural convergence trend.

Let us for the sake of the argument assume that national political elites from purely self-interested reasons are sceptical or hesitant about political integration. Political integration of a supra-national kind changes the power bases of the political elites and might also reduce the number of political positions they can hold. The clearest example is of course political unification, where only one set of top positions – one government will replace x governments from x unifying states[12]. But even in other, not so radical, integration processes political elites must compete for attention and influence: political integration can be seen as linking earlier independent political systems to each other, thus creating new networks of communication and influence, networks which also include non-elite segments of the populations. Thus, we would assume that political elites would have an interest in reducing the impact of international political communication by trying to a certain extent to **isolate the population** from direct political communication and interaction with the larger supranational political system[13]. I am not trying to imply that democratic national elites try to use coercive methods, such as censorship or other types of restrictions, in order to isolate the national population. I only want to suggest that to the extent that political integration leads to a lower level of control (of communication, agenda setting, etc.), for national political elites, these might establish counter-strategies trying to regain a higher level of control. One such strategy could be to emphasize the special character and value of the national culture, to insist that there are certain policy areas, particularly culture, which are out of bonds for supra-national intervention. Thus, it would seem rational for political elites to play on the

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[10] For a more detailed argument regarding the importance of cultural differences for the decision to accept or reject political integration, see my article: Why is Cultural Diversity a Political Problem? in **S. Zetterholm** (ed.) National Cultures and European Integration, Berg, Oxford (under public.).

[11] These are called **obstacles to entropy** in the language of Ernest Gellner. Cf., p. 64 in **E. Gellner** 1983.

[12] A parallel argument can be found in **E. Gellner** 1983, p. 135.

[13] One could mention different kinds of political strategies, which could be interpreted as attempts to keep control by national elites of communication and political interaction: the proposal for indirect elections to the European parliament; the concept of **directive** making the national parliament an active participant in the law-making process and as an effect often concealing the EU origin of the law, etc.

instrument of nationalism in order to control as much as possible of their own political power base. But nationalist rhetoric is in this situation a much more defensive strategy than the early nationalism in the period of the establishment of the industrial society. The goal is not to create a new political unit, seen to be appropriate for the situation and the problems ahead. **Defensive nationalism** tries to preserve a long-existing political unit from being changed while at the same time many problems (economic, ecological or political) are accepted as being international in character. Furthermore, in times of international cooperation and integration it is much more difficult to define your own national identity by contrasting it to "the others". National stereotypes are no longer used or usable as contrasts or enemy-images[14]. The result may be a more non-aggressive and relativistic emphasis on cultural diversity as a value and thus, by implication, on your own culture as worth your pride and interest.

As already mentioned, it must be stressed that most national political elites regard international economic interdependence as unavoidable. As a result, economic integration and the concomitant necessity of internationalization of education (at least as regards labour force qualifications aiming at international mobility and flexibility) are accepted as policy goals. Governments and other political elites must be said to use an adaptive strategy in the economic field.

As a result of these conflicting goals we get a well-known double strategy of most Western European governments and political elites. On the one hand, acceptance of economic integration, particularly as long as it does not involve any spill-over into establishment of independent policy-making institutions. On the other, a strategy of preserving as much as possible the nation state from transnational influences, that might change the political power structure, i.e. to keep the nation state and the national culture intact.

One might doubt that this strategy will be successful if economic integration and its concomitant policies of education and training lead to culture convergence. Thus, the first question to be focused upon in this connection is the extent to which the economic, competitive demands push strongly in the direction of transnational education and thus (in the long run) to cultural convergence.

> "Should one expect that eventually, with the consummation of effective industrialization, inter-cultural and inter-linguistic differences will degenerate into merely phonetic ones, when only superficial tokens of communication are variable, while the semantic content and the social context of utterances and actions become universal, non-regional?"[15]

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[14] Cf. U. Hedetoft, Det nationale Fremmedbillede som Kulturelt Tegn, in Agree-Gentikow-Hedetoft, 1991. There are of course limits to the change of national stereotypes, but the European political discourse prohibits any more blatant negative stereotypes of the other the member states.

[15] E. Gellner 1983, p. 117.

I have tried to focus on some indicators for a trend towards transnational education in Western Europe. I would also formulate the hypothesis that these kinds of efforts – national as well as European – within the field of education will eventually create (a certain amount of) what here has been called cultural convergence. In some elite contexts cultural barriers are already absent:

> "Two equally sophisticated well-trained members of the upper professional layers of developed industrial countries feel little strain and need to adjust when visiting each other's lands, irrespective of how competent they are at Speaking each other's language, in the literal sense"[16].

But professional elites is one thing and broader population segments another. It is quite interesting, though, to note that the educational and exchange programmes of the European Union have, taken all together, a very broad target group, still, of course, with the emphasis on higher education. If we take the functionalist argument of Gellner seriously, we should perhaps rather look at the demands implicit in the internationalization of the economy for broader population segments "going international" in training and work. The stress in the present political and economic debate on human resources and life-long education seem to indicate that large parts of the labour force are the target for education, probably also for transnational education.

Our second question concerned the political implications of a cultural convergence trend. Even if we accept the existence of such a trend, it does not automatically follow that we (even in a rather long run) are heading for a radical political restructuring of EU-Europe. I have very briefly indicated above that there will be a political struggle and that there are counter strategies for national political elites. One could add that the kind of functional logic, which we have used here, perhaps predisposes us to underestimate the strength, the countervailing powers, of the nation state. This was a conclusion made by Ernst Haas in his evaluation of the political neo-functionalist integration theory[17]. One should not underestimate the vitality of the nation state structure[18].

Still, the thrust of my argument goes in the other direction. I have tried to raise the question whether we underestimate the macro, long-term trend towards cultural convergence in Western Europe by focusing on a too short time perspective and by following the cultural diversity theme, given to us by political discourse.

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[16] **E. Gellner** 1983, p. 117-118.

[17] **E. B. Haas** 1976.

[18] **N. Elias,** a sociologist of macro-historical change, follows in his book "The Society of Individuals" a functionalist logic and argues that "survival units through history become larger and larger in order to cope with growing interdependence and the ensuing cross-border problems. There is all the same nothing automatic about moving up to supra-national survival units. The real identity-loss felt by the populations when nation state sovereignty is threatened, may, according to Elias, impede the establishment of supra-national political units.

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