

„Europe is a process of learning“

Tobias Weise's essay won second in the IP essay contest

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Kennedy's often cited words asking the American people to invest in their country's future and well-being were uttered in troubled times: domestically, segregation and social inequalities disturbed the fragile social peace; internationally, a hot phase of the Cold War threatened to bring the world to the brink of a last, nuclear world war. Yet, the succeeding phrase of Kennedy's inaugural address illustrates in which directions America's new President might have thought to remedy the problems of his time: “My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.” Here, an idea of a global community – standing united in the fight on inequality and repression – is envisaged, that in Kennedy's time is still phrased in the intellectual framework of global citizenship, aiming at the emergence of a world state. Nevertheless, if disconnected from this idea, the prospect of a global civil community is one of the most interesting questions of our time.

How can such a global, transnational community be thought? First of all, a global community can be understood as something that is held together by a network of meaning. Networks of meaning structure individual life by prescribing norms and setting constraints on individual action. In a

global community, the overarching network growingly communicates values and ideas that are shared by all members of that community. Consequently, individuals' lives within this community, that are blind to traditional national networks, are acting more and more under the same constraints and opportunities, prescribed by the shared network. To some extent, this global community already exists. It is in times of denationalized contexts of interaction that individuals become aware of how much their life depends on the interactions that happen outside of their traditionally national spaces of action. As these processes of denationalization – or globalization, as some prefer to call them – start to affect individuals around the globe, chances rise that they become aware of their interdependence and of the global community they already form.

Of course, this development is best not read too naively. Critical voices evaluate this evolution with more pessimism. Where values and networks of meaning converge, the danger is that local, traditional values are threatened and that traditional ways of life are destroyed. Furthermore, the idea of a transnationally integrated community also raises fears about the situation of those that are excluded from that very community. Global injustice and loss of cultural diversity are among the largest menaces of an emerging global community. In contrast,

the hopes of the optimistic observers are that – following a liberal paradigm – growing exchange will lead to deeper integration and consequently to more prosperity, or may even guarantee stable peace within the interconnected community.

As a test case, the national communities of the European Union are often considered as the first example of an emerging, large-scale transnational, European civil community. Whether this is true or not, the European experience clearly illustrates that the birth of a transnational civil community can hardly be thought of without a parallel process of political integration. Here, the European example impressively illustrates how an area of peace and stability materialized after World War II, and especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall. What remains interesting, however, is how the political process and the process of European community building influenced each other. Can they be thought of separately? While political systems provide people with basic protective rights, they also require public support to guarantee these rights. This elementary interdependence constitutes a self-enforcing circle between public support and the performance of political systems. Without public support, political systems and their guaranteed rights are doomed to collapse.

This finding allows us to refocus on the second part of Kennedy's dictum clearly asking how the people's role has to be configured to guarantee a peaceful and stable development of the political system. In the European context of Eurocracy and a perceived democratic deficit, this question becomes a vital one. Therefore, what can

Europeans do to make the idea of a peaceful and stable Europe come true in the long run?

A stronger, transnational civil community is certainly a prerequisite for further development of European political institutions. Consequently, Europeans need to comprehend the already emerged structure of the European civil community and, furthermore, they need to enter into a distinct phase of learning to deepen the already existing interdependent networks of meaning. This learning has to be done in three essential areas: (i) democratic participation, (ii) transcultural communication capacities, and (iii) mobility.

Democratic participation is a basic condition for a peacefully organized social life. Democratic institutions should guarantee participation and inclusion of potentially all individuals.

But here the same dilemma arises: no institution can be built in a fashion that would protect it from being captured by malevolent individuals that abuse the institution's capabilities for their own purposes. Consequently, a European civil community should not bear the expenses of being apolitical. Therefore, the Europeans need to begin to care about European politics, not only because it is a normative obligation, but because they need to understand that their own involvement in the European political process is the only means to overcome its deficiencies and lack of transparency. There are many ways for European individuals to engage in European politics. Next to the traditi-

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onal track of party politics, personal involvement in non-state actors' activities has never before offered better chances to participate successfully than today. People will (and will have to) recognize that the European political system is where their preferences and opinions need to be heard, because there the issues of their daily life are discussed and transformed into rules and laws.

How could a community with a shared network of meaning evolve if people do not have the capacities to communicate across their traditional national borders? It cannot. Thus, capacity building in the area of transcultural communication needs to be a major concern of European citizens. Language learning is – of course – the

initial and necessary step. These linguistic capacities need to be combined with basic knowledge

of other nations' collective memories and their current political agendas. Here, the challenge is that individuals need to perceive the need to build these capabilities on their own. No state institution can force an individual to learn or to immerse themselves in other cultures and ways of life. Instead, the highly interdependent framework of action that people live in will, sooner or later, force them to be cognizant of their own responsibility. The resulting initiated phase of learning will have self-enhancing effects on the already existing transnational community because a growing number of people realize the interdependence-induced similarities of their values and constraints.

Finally, the increased mobility of people within Europe will – together with the above mentioned measures – cement the foundations of the European civil community. After the so far successfully introduced mobility of goods and services within the EU, it is people's mobility that has not yet risen to its intended quality. More than 15 years after Maastricht, even in border areas, the exchanges between the different European nationals are relatively low. Worker mobility, but also social mobility are still lacking attractiveness as the old national borders have not disappeared in people's perceptions. For the further deepening of a European community, this is especially counterproductive. Physical presence in other cultures helps in understanding the intersecting conceptions of life. As a further consequence, incentives to learn the others' culture rise and motivations for problematizing European dimensions in politics get higher. Of course, this does not imply that individuals to live their lives better outside their country of birth. It is rather the idea of short term mobility – like high school years, student exchanges and work periods outside one's home country that render the concept of people's mobility interesting. Why? Because short term mobility potentially offers a broader scope of Europe: more countries, more cultures, and less peril of being fixed on traditional, national perspectives.

To conclude, these three propositions could help to deepen the already existing European civil community. Therefore, the task of each European is to engage in a mode of active participation in this emerging community.

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Once European individuals are aware of the common values, ideas, and restraints they share, i.e. if they recognize the interconnected and overlapping nature of their life-structuring networks of meaning, the easier and faster the European civil community will grow. Successively, the more the civil community becomes aware of its own existence, the more it will pressure the existing political institutions to comply with norms of higher transparency and accountability. The self-enforcing circle of rights and responsibilities will continue to produce stable living condition, but of course not without a working and demanding civil community.

In a nutshell: Ask not what Europe can do for you, but participate politically and culturally in the European civil community to render the continuation and improvement of a democratic, prosperous, and peaceful Europe possible.



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