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Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe

**Report on the July 2009 European
round table and the future of the
Voices for the *res publica* project**

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The second and last European Round Table of the 'Voices for the *res publica*' project was held on 10-12 July 2009 in Chesham, UK.

The meeting had a double agenda:

1. Bringing up-to-date our understanding of developments within each country, while assessing their role in any future European common action. Our discussions centred on the impact of the economic crisis on the key themes that had underpinned our project.
2. Given the issues raised, planning concretely for follow-ups to the project after the end of the Ford Foundation grant on 30 September 2009.

Report on the Second European Round Table (10-12 July 2009)

Participants were asked to reflect on the situation in their respective countries since their own national round table took place and in light of the international economic crisis.

The Economic Crisis

Interestingly enough, most participants felt that the international economic crisis had not significantly transformed their respective national settings in terms of the key *res publica* issues, for very different reasons. Sweden, the Netherlands, and even Poland appeared to be unaffected or only slightly touched by the crisis, perhaps because they had overhauled their state and banking sectors earlier than others. Germany had been in such a state of economic doldrums already that the crisis did not fall out of a clear sky and so did not change the context significantly. France had a far more regulated context than many other countries and was less affected by the collapse of the bubble. As for the UK, the economic crisis was but one part of a far larger crisis of trust involving all organs of the state, the media, and the political class, so that it contributed to the general gloom without having provoked it.

But all participants agreed that the crisis would inaugurate an age of shrunken state services requiring more local level initiatives to compensate for the weakening of the old welfare state nets. This could cause social and political havoc in France, a country where such state-run services were inherently tied up with the national identity. In other countries, many felt that, rather than being a problem, such a shrinking of state services could be seen as a blessing in disguise that may bring about improved national integration and increased local action.

Identity Issues

Participants agreed that the economic crisis had not adversely affected the sense of national identity felt by immigrants. Indeed, many felt that the whole issue of 'identity' was falling off the radar screen, either because other (economic or political) worries had replaced it, or simply because of 'battle fatigue', which some interpreted as the result of a victory within public opinion. As a sign of this, no one seemed to turn the issue of the wearing of a *niqab* or a *burqa* into a major national debate, not even in France, where initial calls for legal sanctions were in reality soft-pedalled...perhaps because there were more pressing problems at hand or simply because the numbers involved were tiny.

'Identity' issues were now replaced by issues linked to social welfare, the labour market and social services and these cut across any identity lines, paradoxically integrating immigrants in the same national problems. There was a new accent on the problem of 'trust' and 'participation' in national settings where there was much apathy and an increasingly mediocre political class. Ecology was also taking over as a universal cause that transcended 'identities.'

Local level actions were taking precedence over national debates, particularly in the UK, where lack of trust (in politics, in the media, in the established powers, and even in NGOs) was becoming a major source of worry, as in the Netherlands. It was important not to let such national fears be monopo-

lized by the extreme right. And this new emphasis on the local level further guaranteed the integration of minorities through their votes but also through their running for office.

Germany stood out as the only country where issues of national identity, which had been taboo for so long, were finally resurfacing to play a major cultural and political role in the creation of a common historical narrative. The country was still trying to come to grips with an inclusive identity based on historical responsibility. However, this new inclusive identity, which must look to the future, should be mindful to avoid potentially dangerous populist overtones.

The Future of Immigrant Minorities

The group was split over this issue. Some felt that, despite everything, countries still remained overwhelmingly 'White and Christian'. This meant, in the case of some Frenchmen of Muslim background, that they preferred to emigrate to 'new lands' such as Canada or even to the Emirates where they had greater job opportunities. But this did not mean that they would not come back, and in any case, they might reflect in a more extreme manner the case of many other Frenchmen who also felt stuck in the country's still ossified job structures. No similar mention of an 'exodus of talented immigrants' was made for immigrants from the other countries.

Most felt that immigrants, whether coloured and/or Muslim, were in the process of being integrated. It was simply a matter of time. Most agreed that the best way to ensure this was at the local level and through negotiation, rather than heavy legal action. Local belonging was fine for some but one had to be careful that it did not end up as 'ghetto belonging', with little interaction between neighbourhoods. Nor did 'virtual belonging' via the new technologies necessarily add up to real belonging. But this problem transcended immigrant minorities to encompass society as a whole.

Some stressed the importance of the generational divide, feeling that younger generations were interacting very differently. Others pointed to a recent

Gallup Poll which showed that the trust of immigrants in their respective national institutions was much higher than anticipated. But others argued that it might be deference rather than trust. In that case, younger, less deferential, generations could prove to be more combative than their parents, but this could be seen as a healthy sign that would lead to greater participation and future inclusiveness.

Multiple loyalties, European belonging, citizenship, dual citizenship

The group agreed that local, State and European identities were destined to play a growing role for all populations, not just immigrants. The question arose whether dual citizenships could facilitate national integration by not forcing the children of immigrants to have to choose between different identities, not unlike having to choose between a father and a mother. This was a major issue in Germany, which did not allow dual citizenship, unlike France, which allowed it (despite its official anti-multicultural stances). Not all the immigrant 'voices' agreed on this issue. Many felt that the process of achieving fully fledged citizenship and equality in the country where one lived was a more important goal than retaining ties, which were bound to weaken, with one's country of origin.

Others felt that the solution to any multiple loyalties was to be found inside 'Europe', the place which would allow for these hyphenated identities to emerge. Not all shared this optimism, but clearly the issue of not being able to be defined just by citizenship of one's country of immigration remained a very real problem.

Cultural Issues

One can sum up under this wide heading the different remarks participants made concerning the long-term aspects of the *res publica*. These included such issues as:

national commemorations and how to redefine them to give them relevance in changed contexts; the ongoing relevance in each country's development of key historical moments, which then led to a consolidated national identity;

the fate of old (religious, ethnic, political) minorities and their survival or disappearance;
giving new meanings to the historical origins of local cohesion;
language, literature and the arts as vehicles for the inclusion of different identities and, conversely, similar fates.

All of these aspects are perceived as central to the strengthening of *trust in the res publica*.

The most important tentative conclusion of the second European round table was that the 'identity debates' may have come to an end. This was due in great part to the fact that identities were gaining increasing respect, but above all to the fact that the major problems our societies will have to face in the future are common to all, and do not benefit from being divided by considerations of identity. This is particularly true with respect to issues linked to the economic crisis, unemployment, social justice, the law and environmental questions.

Paradoxically, the 'identity era' may have been one predicated on ongoing prosperity and a certain type of 'narcissistic' luxury. We have now entered an era in which common problems in a shrinking economic context are carrying the day. The *res publica*, rather than harkening back to a distant and mythical harmonious past, points to a future yet to be defined.