

REINVENTING EUROPE THROUGH LOCAL INITIATIVE

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On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the AEIDL, Marjorie Jouen held a speech on 19 February 2014 in Brussels on “Reinventing Europe through local initiative: what are the issues for society and democracy?”. This Tribune is based on her address.

“Those of us who are concerned with unlocking human potentials need to recognise the importance of allowing citizens to constitute their own local jurisdictions or associations using the knowledge and experience they have built up when addressing their collective issues. We have much to do to enable citizens all over the world to participate actively in local public economies.”

I have chosen to begin my address by quoting from a speech delivered by 2009 Nobel Economy Prizewinner Elinor Ostrom at a conference in Helsinki in 2004 on the formal and informal economy, to illustrate the extent to which the economic issues so brilliantly expounded by Chris Brooks are intrinsically bound to the democratic and societal issues which I shall now endeavour to explain.

The European construction process is the heir to a long history that is enmeshed with the modern era, the era of the emancipation of the individual from the local tribe and community. The individual was thus allowed to pursue his personal development by shaking off the constraints of geography, in other words by shaking off the mud clinging to his boots.

The social sciences - primarily sociology, political science and economics - were built on the strength of this vision. The 20th century, and more specifically the second half of the century, was heavily dominated by the state / market / individual trio.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, I was prompted to study the pre-founder texts and to take a closer look at the famous photograph of the Treaty’s signing. There were two major groups missing back in 1957: women, and local communities. Altiero Spinelli, in the declaration appealing for European

unity which he drafted while in prison on the island of Ventotene under the Fascist dictatorship, was scathing about local communities and dismissed provinces a hangover from the past.

A famous quip in the 1960s often sought to explain the difference between provincialism and localism by arguing that the former envies and belatedly aches what is going on in the capital, while the latter simply has no idea what is going on in the capital! Thus it is hardly surprising that little room was found for local development in the political landscape at the start of the European construction process.

The European Economic Community, as it was then known, is emblematically the work of the founding fathers and of inspired technocrats. It long prospered far from the people, who were only considered in their capacity as workers, travellers or merchants. Citizens only really entered the European sphere with the direct election of the European Parliament by universal suffrage in 1979.

A change occurred in the 1980s with the breakdown of the welfare state, the collapse of the communist state and the gradual crumbling of a social model based on jobs in industry. The European construction process was going to have to get closer to the people of Europe and to their daily concerns.

This was when the European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL) was first set up. Thus the AEIDL’s twenty-five year life-span coincides with a period in which, turning the tide of a long movement based on the rejection of territorial embedness, Europe finally rediscovered local initiative. Today, in our turn, as we face the weariness and the growing Euro-scepticism that we can all perceive,

the time has come to reinvent Europe through local initiative.

1. Europe has reinvented local initiative

I have not used the word “invent” because local initiative has always existed. The EU’s role has consisted in placing it centre stage again, in branding it and unlocking its potential for development by emphasising its new features in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

At the grass-roots level, the period following the oil shocks and the crisis in traditional industry spawned a movement bristling with initiatives which allowed numerous suffering industrial regions and declining rural areas to discover a new path to development. These local initiatives had new aims compared to their traditional image, involving jobs in the private sector or in the social economy, the creation of initiatives pegged to agricultural diversification, tourism, cottage nurseries, culture, individual services and so forth; new financial circuits with the mobilisation of local savings and ethical investments; the improvement of living standards in terms of the environment, transport, housing, energy, green areas, education, leisure and so on.

On the other side of the fence, the EU needed to justify the legitimacy of its single market project with those who were in danger of losing out by it. In keeping with the cohesion policy that was devised as a policy to accompany the single market, support for local development came to compensate for the massive subsidies reserved primarily for infrastructures.

A European Commission report published in 1994 is enlightening in this connection, explaining why the EU supports local development. It bases this support on the following three elements:

- “Making decision-makers aware of the importance of soft investment and non-material factors in regional development, and thus tilt the balance away from heavy infrastructure in European intervention;
- Emancipating local people by giving them the means to shape their own future, and helping them to play a full part in European integration;
- Accelerating learning about sustainable development at the lowest level of government, by

encouraging imitation in other similar places and at higher levels of government (provincial, regional, national).”

One might almost say that, in some ways, Europegate crashed the member states in the effort to stimulate local innovation with its programmes, with which you are all familiar: first of all the pilot schemes, followed by LEADER, NOW, INTEGRA, URBAN, EQUAL, FARNET and many more. Exchanges of experience and networks made it possible to theorise this “community-led local development” (as it is known today), the famous LEADER method being used as a model. Certain key factors were identified:

- the location, often a living space, an area, a valley, an employment zone or a neighbourhood, but rarely an administrative district;
- multiple partners from the public, private and voluntary spheres;
- and lastly, the methods of collaborating around a unifying project.

But gradually “the genie was out of his bottle” and the mechanism seized up. First of all, the primary reason driving local initiatives exceeded the purview of structural funds. Today, new reasons are prompting citizens to get organised in their communities. People are talking about resilience, about environmental and energy transition, about problems and issues that fall fairly consistently outside the social and economic spheres associated with the cohesion policy. By the same token, the empowerment of people at the grass-roots level has whetted their appetite and their demands in the area of citizenship; and their expectations are far from being met by the European institutions’ current organisation and modus operandi.

Also, financial support for local development became more constrictive. On the pretext of improving their efficiency, local initiatives were forced to meet a set of criteria that were a far cry from the rationale behind their original emergence and development. They had to show that they could outlast the duration of European support, that they would shed their unique nature in order to develop towards “normality”, that they would achieve a critical mass to make them viable and so on and so forth. In a nutshell, they were caught in the trap of what some people call performance-related management.

Another reason why their success aroused mistrust was because it was in danger of disrupting the pyramidal ordering of the public power structure. Far from sparking enthusiasm, a proposal to set aside 5% of all funding from the European territorial funds (ERDF, ESF, EAFRD and EMFF)¹ 2014-2020 for the kind of local development that would have made it possible to reach out to 250 million people with projects having a direct impact on their lives was stonewalled by the member states, ending up as a non-binding measure of very limited scope. So a splendid opportunity to rebuild Europe's image in the eyes of its citizens was wasted.

But does this mean that we should give up? Most certainly not. Europe desperately needs local development.

2. Europe has to be reinvented through local initiative

We are not only facing a new economic cycle, as Chris Brooks pointed out, but also a new political cycle with many distinguishing features: the uncertain nature of the debate between participation and representation; multi-level governance; the limbo in which social, civil and civic dialogue is wallowing; the political parties' inability to seize on and interact with people's changing conduct and aspirations; the volatile nature of civil society and so forth.

The democratic challenge besetting the European construction process seems huge if we believe the picture of it painted by the media. In the media's view, the typical European man in the street is mistrustful of his neighbour, fragile, passive, besotted with his creature comforts, swears only by precaution and prudence, and wants all of his rights but none of his duties. In actual fact, that typical man in the street does not exist.

On the contrary, a large number of European citizens take part in local initiatives of one kind or another. And local development embodies values and practices for the future, a future that is being built from the bottom up.

To realise this, one has but to read the inventory put together by the AEIDL for this conference. What may emerge from the theoretical standpoint of political science, things such as matters of attrition or challenges, are resolved by local initiatives pragmatically and on a daily basis. Let me give you some examples: the dilemma between ownership and use (with the increasing popularity of sharing systems); the role of

information technologies in the spheres of solidarity and conviviality; the multiple-belonging adopted by people; the growing fluidity between professional and private life; the exhaustion and overheating of the consumer society; the end of the organisation of society around work (leisure-related mobility throughout life, and so forth); adapting to climate change; the dilemma between diversity and standardisation (diversity recognised as a factor for efficiency and sustainability); growing fluidity between work and leisure time; competition pitted against cooperation and so on.

Thus local initiative has everything it needs to reinvent Europe.

But we should not be so naive as to think that all we need to do is launch a major new initiative or a new manifesto for the reconstruction site to swing into action.

This, because rather than coming up against a stone wall of opposition as it might have done in a distant, authoritarian past, a vast movement in favour of local development would be in danger of getting bogged down in the quagmire of rational decision-making with its mass of performance-related indicators and benchmarks. And we also need to cope with a constraint called terminology. If people promoting local initiatives wish to be heard, they have to use a terminology devised on the basis of an economic and financial rationale, thus to distort a reality which is in fact multi-faceted, quality-based, diverse and creative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that reinventing Europe is a long-term task for which the time is now absolutely right. Fiscal planning for 2014 to 2020 is complete and it is built around the Europe 2020 Strategy, so we need to look beyond that with the determination to work on a new strategy for individual development – a word which is often paired with emancipation to describe the purpose of local initiatives.

At the beginning of my speech I mentioned the modern era, the era that spawned the individualistic *homo oeconomicus*. Well, today we have entered another era, an era which some people call post-modern but which I would like to call the Anthropocenic era in view of the planet-wide environmental issues at stake. Men and women who take part in local development, and whom

we might call the cooperative *homo localicus*, perfectly reflect this era.

Committing to a strategy designed to ensure that the cooperative *homo localicus* prevails over the individualistic *homo æconomicus*, thus contributing to Odysseus' victory over the Cyclops Polyphemus, is a fantastic goal for the next twenty-five years!

To help us move in that direction, I would like to share with you a quote from Luc Boltanski's *Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation*: "It is by keeping itself deliberately in a state of permanent imbalance that society - in other words, the man in the street - will avoid the domination that would otherwise gain a grip on everything".

1. ERDF: European Regional Development Fund
ESF: European Social Fund
EAFRD: European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EMFF: European Maritime and Fisheries Fund

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