

## Chapter 11

# THE CRISIS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION OPPORTUNITY OR GRAVEYARD FOR A EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY?

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As noted in the introduction to this book (Meeuwisse and Scaramuzzino), the degree to which the project of European integration has come so far that it is irreversible or, conversely, is tottering on the brink of collapse, is still an open question. In this chapter I will return to three of the questions raised directly or indirectly in the introductory chapter (see also chapters 1, 2, and 3). First: Is the current crisis of the European Union (EU) an opportunity for a deeper Europeanization of civil society? Or is the dominant response of European civil society rather tied to the forces that appear to be tearing the EU apart? Second: At a more theoretical level, how are we to think about the very notion of a European civil society in the absence of either a European state or a European nation or demos? As the introduction stresses, civil society can be understood as a public sphere where citizens meet to form a common nation, demos, and culture through discussions and debates. It can also be thought of as an institutional arrangement through which agents of the state connect in many ways—political, economic, legal—with citizens and representatives of organized civil society and its many interest organizations and social movements. On those terms, to what extent can we speak of a European civil society? And what kind of civil society is it in that case? Finally: What can the case of Sweden teach us in regard to the European state/civil society dynamic given that it is a society that is characterized both by a vibrant civil society and a strong welfare state, both of which

are historically grounded in a social contract that ties together citizen and nation-state in a web of relations that have as much to do with identity and values—a public sphere—as with bureaucracy, institutions, and practices? Given Sweden’s status as a quintessential nation-state, does the EU and the supposed Europeanization of Swedish civil society represent a threat or an opportunity? Does it even matter to the extent that it is meaningful to speak of Europeanization at a deeper level?

### **The Crisis of 2016 and the Failure of European Civil Society**

The year 2016 has the potential of qualifying as one of those years that historians later will use as a marker for a moment of radical change, even discontinuity. Just as 1776, 1789, 1848, 1914, 1933, 1945, 1989, and 2001 have come to signify important shifts through revolutions, wars, the founding of the United Nations, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the terrorist attack on New York and Washington, DC, 2016 has emerged as the year endowed with a similar historical gravitas. Whereas 1989 marked “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) and the conclusive victory of the democratic market societies over their socialist or communist contenders, 2016 became the year when nationalism defeated globalism, signaling “the end of the Western world as we know it” (Applebaum 2016). Instead of continuing with the victorious global economic system based on free trade and relatively open borders, founded in the post–World War II accords stretching from the Bretton Woods agreements and the Marshall Plan to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, we now face the return of protectionism and a stress on national sovereignty on all levels: social, cultural, economic, and political.

This turn away from globalist and postnational visions became brutally obvious during 2016 on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States Donald Trump was elected as the new president on promises to build walls and impose protectionist economic policies under the banner of America First. In Europe, pro-European and globalist elites have been overwhelmed by political currents favoring a return of nation-statism. This found dramatic expression in the vote for Brexit in the UK during the summer of 2016, but these sentiments turned out to be widespread throughout the EU. Thus the elections in 2017 and 2018 gave ample proof of similar popular sentiment throughout the EU as voters in the Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy proved disastrous to the mainstream center-right and center-left parties.

The crisis of the EU is also a failure of European civil society. At heart is the long-standing, much debated, and heavily researched democratic deficit

that has separated the EU elites from the various peoples of the union. This deficit has been analyzed in institutional terms, and many attempts have been made to democratize the EU by introducing a balance between those institutions, such as the European Commission (EC), which express the top-down and confederal character of the union as a compact between independent nation-states on the one hand and those that embody the vision of an ever-closer union of the peoples of Europe on the other. Not least the establishment of the European Parliament (EP) is one such attempt; another is the European citizens' initiatives (ECI), which allows for an element of direct or at least participatory democracy, even though it is sometimes criticized for chiefly being a matter of discursive window dressing "without adding much in substance" (see Garcia 2015, 175; see also Greenwood 2015; Hedling, and Meeuwisse 2015).

But beyond or perhaps beneath the questions of constitutional and institutional arrangements lurks a far more difficult problem, namely the creation of a truly European demos, or nation. This conundrum touches on a challenge particular or at least particularly salient to the EU project: How does one embrace and promote diversity and difference and simultaneously ensure integration and union? Just as there is a certain ambivalence with respect to the institutional framework, leaning on the one hand toward confederalism and widening and on the other toward an ever-deeper unionization, there is a similar tension that applies to the politics of EU identity construction.

There have been many attempts to create or at least promote a common European identity. Recognizing that the creation of modern nation-states in Europe and elsewhere could serve as a model, a plethora of national symbols have been created that try to balance unity and diversity, from the EU flag and the adoption of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from his ninth symphony as the anthem of Europe, to an EU motto ("United in Diversity") and a "Europe Day" held on May 9 to celebrate peace and unity in Europe. Along with these there are European prizes and European Capitals of Culture and many other attempts at promoting awareness and pride in the EU. The creation of the common currency, the euro, must be understood in the same light. As many economists now argue, the euro is in fundamental ways incomplete as a common currency; its primary value has instead been symbolic, suggesting cultural unity as much as economic integration. Similarly, the issuing of passports in the name of both the EU and the member states denotes this duality of identity. One of the most significant attempts at Europeanization on the model of the nation-state is probably the various investments in research and higher education, such as the Erasmus program and the massive funding of research through the European Research Council, which have brought together students and scholars from across the EU.

While these attempts at forging a common European identity along the model of the nation-states might have had some success, they have been limited if repeated Eurobarometer surveys are to be trusted. The reason becomes clear if we look more closely at how the projects of creating nation-states proceeded historically. As many scholars of nationalism have argued, a widespread sense of national belonging and community was relatively weak until the American and French revolutions ushered in the age of the nation-state. The elites often had a primary allegiance that was European and cosmopolitan, conversing as much in Latin and later in French and German as they did in the vernacular. The masses, on the other hand, retained local or regional identities and languages or dialects. In his influential book, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, the historian Eugene Weber (1976) studied how France was transformed from a geographical concept into an “imagined community,” to cite another seminal expert on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991). Weber observed that fewer than half of French subjects actually spoke French around 1850, yet by 1914 they felt sufficiently French to enthusiastically march to war in spite of a strong working-class movement across Europe that supposedly adhered to the International and its Marxist view of both state and nation as destined for the dustbin of history. How was this possible?

Weber provides a number of explanations involving both the state and civil society. In particular he stresses three developments: public schools, military conscription, and the creation of national media structures, which in turn linked to the standardization of a national language. Weber’s findings are in line with those of a number of other historians who have studied similar developments in other European countries, involving what a major historian of German nationalism, George Mosse, calls the “nationalization of the masses” (Mosse 1974). The state uses its power to standardize and nationalize—a process that also entails integration and democratization. Thus, public schooling and conscription were key elements for both liberal nationalists and the working-class movement. In Sweden, for example, one slogan of the budding Social Democratic party was “One vote, one gun,” suggesting the tight linkage between universal suffrage as a right and the duty to defend one’s country. And the public school also built on the duality of rights and duties; it was both a compulsory duty and a universal right.

The third element, the creation of a common public sphere, a national media, a national language, and a national culture went hand in hand with the efforts to integrate at school and in the army. The connection between language and schooling is obvious; this was the way that children at an early age learned the national idiom. However, it was also a medium through which to assimilate the national narrative: stories, histories, literature, and culture that were presented as the common heritage. Furthermore, it

entailed not only a simple, homogenous top-down process. Thanks to the rise of both national and local media, written in the national language, as well as a contentious civil society with a plethora of associations, it involved a more complex process of interaction between the state and civil society. On the one hand, a common language and shared conversation resulted; on the other hand, the emergence of a contentious public sphere and a myriad of often critical and oppositional associations created the foundation for a vibrant democratic political culture within the confines of the nation-state.

Thus, over time this was a development that had both an integrative side and a side that allowed for opposition and contestation. Together they resulted in the emergence of what we can call national democracy. With the introduction of universal suffrage on the one hand and a modern system of taxation on the other, this led to the elaboration of the kind of social contracts that we today live with in most Western democracies, even if they differ in important ways from country to country. In some ways, the social contracts are quite straightforward—at the one end citizens who vote, work, pay taxes and exert political influence through elections and their civil society organizations (CSOs), and at the other end the state that provides social rights such as education, health care, and pensions that are financed by taxes, a system administered by the state, sometimes in collaboration with CSOs. At the same time the politics of solidarity that we associate with the welfare state and the notion of social citizenship also depend on a sense of belonging and community.

In this way the modern nation-states were forged through a process whereby the state shaped civil society and civil society in turn exerted influence on state action. The result is a social contract that depends on both social trust among citizens and their confidence in common institutions, both public (state) and private (civil society). Without such trust, the legitimacy of the state is in doubt and civil society easily becomes a vehicle for division and polarization rather than the connective tissue between the state and its citizens. Indeed, there is a thin line between trust and distrust, as the crises of the 1840s and 1930s have shown, and this represents a potential fragility of the social contract that is possibly relevant to the current political crisis as we yet again witness the rise of populist nationalism rooted in distrust between the elites and the masses. Populist leaders from Napoleon III to Hitler, and Mussolini to le Pen and Trump, have repeatedly been able to generate popular support in civil society to challenge established political, cultural, and economic elites.

In this context it should be noted that while the state is the chief expression of the universal and national idea, many CSOs have historically been equally committed to the overall project of nationalization, often connected to political agendas emphasizing democratization. In the Swedish—and

Nordic—case, this has been the case not least for the social movements (*folkrörelserna*) that were engaged in not just interest politics but also in a broader educational mission. Thus adult education (*folkbildning*), including boarding schools for peasants and workers, the so-called folk high schools (*folkhögskolor*), often combined training in technical skills with classes aimed at enhancing knowledge of Swedish culture and history and providing training in civics (*medborgarkunskap*). However, the role of civil society is complex and cannot be reduced to being democratic or good in any simple sense. Thus the movements that today are supporting Brexit, Trump, le Pen, and other politicians are as much a part of civil society as those that support the EU, open borders, human rights, and postnational utopias.

### **European Civil Society: Is It Possible without a European State?**

With this analysis of how the prenational territorial states of Europe nationalized their populations in the context of democratization, let us consider the EU again. As stated in the introductory chapter to this book, the proofs of successful European integration often include a common financial policy and currency, free movement of goods and people, and a common system of border control. However, on closer inspection the euro crisis in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 has revealed that the euro is a case of an emperor without clothes, that the EU is lacking a truly integrated financial order. And the refugee crisis of 2015 in turn exposed the fragility of the border controls and the absence of a common policy with regard to migrants and refugees.

Beyond that, if we follow the logic described in the previous section regarding how stable nation-states were established in Europe (and beyond), the EU lacks other crucial aspects of both nation and state. If perhaps the most important components of a durable social contract involve a common language and common media, compulsory public schools and a conscription army, and a system of taxes that allow for social rights, these are also lacking in the EU. Add to this the lack of a fully realized common currency, the lack of a common army, and shaky control of the common borders, and we begin to get an idea of why the distance between citizens and the EU might be large indeed. And without the hard institutions of the state that in turn shape and structure civil society and mold that sense of community and belonging that is central to both demos and nation, it becomes difficult to imagine either how the democratic deficit can be shrunk or a stronger sense of European identity and culture can be achieved.

Of course, against this it can be argued that the EU is precisely *not* meant to be a state, but something else—a union of member states, the origin of

which was more about establishing a common market and avoiding war among the European nation-states than about creating a social contract with deeper ambitions involving notions of citizenship, community, and belonging. Yet this is a line of argument that begs the questions currently dogging the EU, having embraced the idea of European citizenship and the social dimension, namely the democratic deficit and the lack of popular legitimacy among large portions of the European citizenry. The question that we need to ask is if it is possible to create a genuine public sphere and an institutionalized civil society in the absence of a state or a state-like structure.

If we consider theories of civil society, it becomes clear that the question of the relation between the state and civil society looms large. At the same time it is possible to identify several competing theoretical traditions that are all relevant for discussing the question of whether we can speak of a European civil society and, if so, in what way we can conceive of such an European civil society. One useful point of departure is the political theorist Jean Cohen's essay "Civil Society and Globalization: Rethinking the Categories" (Cohen 2007) in which she analyzes the postnational turn with respect to the concept of civil society. Noting that the discourse of civil society had gone global and become one of the "most widely utilized concepts by politicians, academics, and political activists around the world," Cohen also warns against the pitfalls of the "domestic analogy," which simply transposes "an unchanged analysis of parameters of a nationally oriented civil society to the global level." This would, Cohen argues, be a "serious mistake" (Cohen 2007, 37, 40, 48).

Instead, Cohen stresses, "The emergence of civil society goes hand in hand with the development of the modern territorial sovereign state" (Cohen 2007, 40). In particular, she argues, "it was the coupling of law and the state," constitutionalism, and representative government that made for the modern state's stable structure and enabled both the development of the market economy and a vibrant civil society in the context of national democracy (Cohen 2007, 40). Crucial to this order was a sense of a social contract that ultimately was built on trust, expressed concretely through a "gift exchange," as Marcel Mauss (1954) might have put it, among citizens in civil society via the shared institutions of the state according to the logic of duties (taxes) paid and (social) rights earned.

This understanding of the state/civil society nexus presupposed, as Cohen puts it, the sovereign state as a crucial "referent and target, tacitly assuming that civil society and the state are 'coterminous'" (Cohen 2007, 46–47). Crucially, this understanding was based on the idea of members in a bounded community who both acted as *citizens*, cowriting the law as members of the sovereign nation/people and obeying the rule of that law as *subjects*. The citizen's civic activity was thus directed at influencing political

decisions made by the state, as well as at holding the state and its agents responsible and accountable by ensuring a degree of transparency and subjecting politicians to scrutiny through elections. But it went beyond mere dry constitutional arrangements and depended on a sense of national community. As Cohen writes, “Citizens construed as authors and addressees of the law, subject to the same jurisdiction and rules, are presumed to share a certain community of fate” (Cohen 2007, 46). And this sense of shared fate and identity also served as the basis for both welfare state solidarity and a politics of social justice. There is, Cohen continues, a “we” that insists that “our” representatives “make laws, policies and regulations that provide the social basis for meaningful citizenship, for social justice and social solidarity” (Cohen 2007, 46).

In practice, this has meant that although civil society at large, unlike the nation-state, is not formally defined by membership or national borders, it has nonetheless been focused historically on addressing the state through associations organized locally, regionally, and nationally, and only more peripherally supranationally. The same has been true for civil society understood as the public sphere—with public discourse and debate aiming at influencing collective public opinion and thus the formation of political will ultimately translated into legislation and policy in the context of the democratic, sovereign state. From this vantage point the notion of a global civil society is a dubious one for the simple reason that there is no global state, no global constitution to which such a global civil society would correspond and speak to. At best one can point to a variety of attempts at building a legal regime with global or at least regional reach through institutions such as, in the European context, the ECJ and, at the global level, the International Criminal Court, as well as the various human rights conventions connected to the UN.

While this incomplete and piecemeal juridification of international society is important, it still falls far short of becoming a global constitution. There is no equivalent of national political society and no counterpart to the accountable representative institutions of the nation-states, no effective transnational enforcement mechanisms that allow for making decisions that are both binding and subject to continual scrutiny through day-to-day politics, regular elections, and a critical public sphere. Furthermore, as I will return to in the discussion of the EU, the tendency to lean on law in the absence of democratic political institutions carries with it its own dangers by making such supranational legal action vulnerable to charges of bypassing popular opinion and of being post- or antidemocratic.

The theory of civil society that Cohen subscribes to is rooted in the classic theory of Hegel for whom the notion of a civil society that is separate and decoupled from the state would have been largely unimaginable. However, Cohen departs from Hegel in that she embraces a conception, typical of



most contemporary scholars thinking about civil society that separates out the market, i.e. for-profit economic actors, from civil society, which is cast as a nonprofit sector. For Hegel, by contrast, civil society was the social realm where individuals and groups sought to satisfy needs, fulfill desires, and protect interests. It included both what we today think of as the market and the associational life that in contemporary parlance has become synonymous with the more-narrow understanding of what constitutes civil society, with a focus on nonprofit organizations and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Inspired by Adam Smith, Hegel envisioned civil society, including the market, as a legitimate, necessary, and ultimately positive force, enabling the pursuit of gain, pleasure, self-expression, and self-interest and leading at the aggregate, societal level to an increased wealth of the nation. At the same time, however, he also argued that the internal contradictions of civil society produced by this relentless pursuit of particular interests—atomistic individualism, inequality, poverty, and social disorder—could never be resolved by civil society itself. Only the state, Hegel argued, could promote and safeguard the general or universal interest of society as a whole, achieving a higher purpose of rationality that he described as the “unity and interpenetration of universality and individuality” (Hegel 1991, 276; Trägårdh 2010).

In other words, for Hegel civil society was not intrinsically good or civil, and he certainly did not view the state as inherently bad. Rather, he conceived of civil society and the state in more dynamic, relational, and evolutionary terms. From the individual’s point of view, he suggested a movement from the inward-looking privacy of the family, through the forging of an intermediary social identity transcending private self-interest in the corporations and associations of civil society, to the universalist rationality embodied by the state. From a societal perspective, he stressed the institutions mediating and resolving conflict within civil society and connecting civil society to the state, rather than a reification of civil society in terms of opposing, overcoming, or transcending the state.

However, in the contemporary world, the Hegelian idea of civil society has largely lost out to a very different notion of civil society, one that informs most ideas of global civil society and, for that matter, most national conversations that invoke the concept of civil society. In this reading, the central organizing trope is what another political theorist, Margaret Somers, calls the “meta narrative of Anglo-American citizenship theory” in which the state is always seen as hovering “on the brink of being a source of tyranny” (Somers 1995, 259). In this alternative conception of civil society, civil society is seen as prior to and autonomous from the state rather than being the product of certain historical developments of the modern state that created the conditions that allowed the development of civil society.

This theory of civil society has left a heavy mark on current narratives on civil society, especially global civil society but also at the national level and in the context of the EU. Indeed, the modern use of the term originated in Eastern Europe during the years leading up to the collapse of communist rule. Because the state was viewed as oppressive and corrupt, the oppositional movements like Solidarity in Poland were invested with great hope and moral weight. As a consequence, ordinary politics associated with political parties, politicians, and the institutions of the state was viewed with suspicion and a sense of utter disillusionment. This disgust with ordinary politics led to a certain overinvestment in the promise of civil society. In the words of Havel, it became a dream of an antipolitical politics built on the supposed humanity of the people as opposed to the professional propaganda of career politicians. He envisioned a politics from below, that he termed a “politics of people, not of the apparatus, [a] politics growing from the heart not from a thesis” (Havel 1988, 398). This sense of utopian euphoria also attended the 2011 uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East that derived their energy from the same enduring fantasy with its links to the French Revolution, and beyond that to heroic, if mostly futile, revolts on the part of long-suffering slaves and serfs around the world.

Here we see a common theme that unites thinkers on the left and on the right. On the left there was Marx, who imagined an international civil society as the end point of a dialectical process, including bourgeois revolution and proletarian dictatorship, when the state would wither away and deliver man into anarchic, universal freedom. On the right there was an equally utopian antistatist sentiment among radical liberals. Thus libertarian thinkers like Hayek dreamt about a spontaneous order where the state has shrunk into insignificance, setting society and man free.

While such extreme antistatistism belongs to the fringes of the political spectrum, what is more common is the decoupling of state and civil society that is typical in the world of global or international civil society. Thus we have witnessed the growth of so-called NGOs that have become important actors with respect to the post-1989 project of spreading free-market democracy across the globe. As Jens Stilhoff Sørensen (2010) has argued, the ascendancy of civil society as a fashionable concept in the development and aid sector was intimately linked to the paradigmatic shift from a state-centered approach to the development of a neoliberal focus on the market. With the loss of faith in state-to-state aid and the rise of a broader neoliberal trend dating back to the Thatcher–Reagan era, the Washington consensus brought with it a new focus on civil society NGOs as both the vehicle and target for aid—a semi-utopian faith in the market and civil society was joined to a deep skepticism of the Keynesian state-centered approach.

Another variant of this poststatist conception of civil society is the notion of civil society that is central to John Keane's idea of monitory democracy, which imagines a new stage in the development of democracy that he calls "post-representative" democracy (Keane 2007). He imagines an "epochal transformation [when] the world of actually existing democracy experiences an historic sea-change, one that is taking us away from the assembly-based and representative democracy of past times towards a form of democracy with entirely different contours and dynamics" (22).

However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, this faith in the magic of civil society has been declining, not least in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the rise of the war on terror. To some extent the state is making a comeback, though this is a return that is largely restricted to the security-related functions of the state and does not include Nordic-style ambitions to promote state-guaranteed social security. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly clear that to speak of a global civil society, as Keane does, in the absence of a global state is problematic at best. Insofar as civil society is in fact constituted by and inseparable from the modern state—even if it occasionally spawns and fosters a critique of that state—it is clear that the Hegelian emphasis on the relations between the state and civil society, and the ties that bind them together, is as relevant as ever. Civil society seems plainly incapable of replacing the state. Instead of pitting one against the other—a rhetorical and tactical ploy of Eastern European dissidents and of American neoliberals alike—might it perhaps be more fruitful to focus on the ways in which the interplay of state and civil society results in a productive mode of governance?

From a civil society point of view, the EU occupies a kind of middle ground between the institutional solidity of the nation-state and the fluidity of the global (dis)order. On the one hand, there are the various mechanisms through which the EU constitutes a very concrete opportunity structure—as discussed in several of the chapters of this book—whereby money and other resources are channeled to local CSOs through EU organs such as the European Social Fund (ESF) or via the European Research Council to scholars throughout Europe (see, e.g., chapters 3 and 4 by Scaramuzzino and Wennerhag; and chapter 6 by Di Placido and Scaramuzzino in this book). On the other hand, some of these initiatives can be seen as an EU equivalent of global foreign aid policies, whereby richer countries in the northwest of the EU distribute aid to the poorer ones in the east and south, sometimes via NGOs that operate similarly to the many projects carried out by Western NGOs in Africa or Asia. As projects that are poorly rooted in the local political economy, they are prone to produce resentment as much as gratitude, as is the case for most forms of charity.

A third type of civil society activity in Europe is the one that Mary Kaldor and Sabine Selchow has called the "The 'Bubbling Up' of Subterranean

Politics in Europe” (2013), a regional equivalent of the Occupy movement with its antiestablishment, antistatist, and anarchic proclivities. Many of these movements belong to the broader phenomenon of movements that challenge the primacy of the nation-states, speaking in the language of human rights and no borders. But while they can be thought of as postnational, that does not make them European. Rather, the ire is as much directed at the EU as Fortress Europe as it is against the individual nation-states. The concern of such movements is in a sense more focused on the negative consequences of borders while being informed by a cosmopolitan utopianism, than it is focused on feeding a vision of the EU as a step toward a global order.

However, there is another way in which the EU provides an opportunity structure that is truly postnational in the way that Jean Cohen also discusses, namely that the EU, while failing in the mission to create a European demos or nation, has succeeded in establishing a supranational legal order. As *New York Times* journalist Roger Cohen noted in an article from 2000, the EU has in one regard represented a fundamental challenge to national sovereignty. However, he argued, this emerging European identity is based not on the adoption of a common culture in the sense of a common language, literature, or history, nor in the republican and statist sense as organized around mass political parties, the ritual of voting, conscription, or an oath of allegiance. Rather, Cohen claimed, this “new sense of European citizenship [was founded on the] pre-eminence of European law over national legislation” (Cohen 2000).

This aspect of Europeanization is in some ways also a matter of Americanization in that it involves the type of juridification of politics that has for a long time been a hallmark of US political culture (Trägårdh and Delli Carpini 2004). While the ECJ initially was focused on rather mundane and technical issues related to trade and fishing quotas, it has over time evolved into a place where Europeans go to uphold their rights, rights that at times are claimed against national states on the basis of a developing EU charter of individual rights and antidiscrimination laws. In this way the EU has changed the political playing field in a novel way in Europe, providing CSOs representing minorities such as the disabled, which have been discriminated against at the national level, with a new opportunity to fight back (Lawson and Gooding 2005). This particular aspect of the Europeanization of civil society has not been in focus in this book but would be worthy of further consideration (see also Meeuwisse and Vilhelmsson, chapter 10).

At the same time, European integration and the challenges to national sovereignty do not just stimulate the growth of a European civil society that sees the EU primarily as an opportunity structure, be it in economic terms as a source of money or in a juridical sense as an avenue to pursue justice in a court of law. Equally important, it is now evident, are those CSOs that

are formed and empowered to resist European integration and to reassert national sovereignty. Again, this takes many forms, from the politics of right-wing and left-wing populism that is directed against migration and open borders or against the harsh austerity programs rooted in neoliberal economic policies, to a reaction against the many ways in which the EU as a community of law enables the ECJ to overrule decisions made in the national parliaments. During the Brexit campaign, the “Leave” proponents appealed to many of these arguments, stressing control of territory, borders, and the national legal space. From a Swedish point of view, Refugees Welcome and the anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats, represent the poles of such tendencies toward the Europeanization of civil society. But such a statement must be tempered by the fact that even if Refugees Welcome and other CSOs fighting for migrants’ rights might be critical of the nation-states for their closed borders and harsh treatment of refugees, this does not mean that they necessarily see the EU as a more progressive force (Barker 2015; Sager, Holgersson, and Öberg 2016). Likewise, while the Sweden Democrats might enter into tactical alliances with like-minded parties elsewhere in Europe, their ultimate goal is to strengthen, not weaken, national sovereignty.

### **Sweden and the EU: Welfare State Nationalism and the Specter of Europe**

Empirically speaking, Sweden and the other Nordic countries have perhaps come the closest to constituting a democratic, neo-Hegelian political order (Trägårdh 2010; Trägårdh and Witoszek 2013). Characterized by a democratic corporatist system whose hallmark is precisely the routinized institutions that connect state and civil society in a peculiar form of governance, these societies exhibit both a large, vital civil society providing political input and social voice from a particularized society and an equally strong state given the task to represent and safeguard national community and universal social welfare.

In this way Sweden is also set apart from most of the rest of the EU. As noted in the introduction to this book, there exists a mismatch between the Swedish social contract, including the composition and function of civil society, and that of the EU at large. I will return to this question but let us first note that skepticism toward the EU is not specific to Sweden. Indeed, many Europeans view the EU and the move toward an ever-closer union with mixed feelings. While security concerns and the peace argument continue to play an important role, it is evident that with the fading memory of World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the process of economic

and political integration has increasingly come to be complicated by concerns over national identity. To some extent the emergence of neonationalism is an expression of the increasing split between the elites, who tend to be persuaded by integrationist arguments and seduced by the promise of increased economic growth, and the masses, who are both less European in their outlook and more prone to feel threatened by unemployment thought to be linked to globalization (see also Hedling and Meeuwisse, chapter 5). Thus the political climate has pushed to the fore the latent conflict between the EU project and the survival of the nation (Trägårdh 2002).

It is in this perspective that a deeper understanding of how historically rooted conceptions of national identity inform the politics of Europe becomes crucial. In fact, the extent to which Europeans feel such bouts of anxiety has varied quite dramatically from country to country, ranging from the relative Euro-enthusiasm in the heartland countries like France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux, via legendary British insularity and intransigence within the union, to Swiss and Norwegian refusals to even join the EU. From this perspective, Sweden is a reluctant latecomer to Europe, joining the EU only in 1995 and then with only a slim majority of the population voting “yes” after a heated and divisive debate. In fact, a considerable part of the population continues to view the EU with mixed feelings and are as likely to express apprehension over the *specter* of Europe as to express confidence in the *promise* of Europe. In the end, what convinced that slight minority of Swedes to vote yes to join the EU were economic arguments made against the backdrop of one of the most profound economic crises in Sweden since the Depression. Symptomatically, even then Sweden was one of the few members to vote against the adoption of the euro as a common currency (Trägårdh 2002).

How do we explain this EU-skeptical attitude on the part of the Swedes who otherwise would seem to be well poised to take advantage of the benefits afforded by membership, not least given their long-standing commitment to free trade and their dependence on large, export-oriented companies?

To understand this, one must grasp the ways in which European integration in the form of adapting to the EU poses a deep threat to the way in which many Swedes have come to understand the proper relationship between state, society, nation, and people. That is, Swedish national identity has come to be tightly linked to the welfare state, understood not simply as a set of institutions but as the realization of the People’s Home (*Folkhemmet*), the central organizing slogan of the Social Democrats who dominated Swedish politics from 1933 until 1990 and who still remain the largest party in the Swedish Parliament.

The extraordinary and lasting potency of this concept derives from the seamless way in which the two concepts of the people—those of demos and

ethnos—have been fused into one coherent whole. That is, it is not simply that in Sweden the democratic-Jacobin notion of the people has won out over the ethnic-cultural reading associated with, most infamously, the German experience. Rather, the Swedish concepts of people, popular/populist/democratic, and people's home (*folk*, *folklighet*, and *folkhem*) are all part and parcel of a national narrative that has cast the Swedes as intrinsically democratic and freedom-loving, as having democracy in the blood. Thus, since to be a Swedish nationalist meant perforce that one embraced democratic values, it was possible in the 1930s for the Social Democrats to successfully harness the power of national feeling, to become national socialists, and to fight off the challenge from domestic wanna-be Nazis (Trägårdh 1990; Trägårdh 2002).

Furthermore, and just as importantly, the Swedish Model, as it came to be known, was characterized by an extreme form of statism, built on a social contract between a strong and good state on the one hand and the emancipated and autonomous individual on the other. Through the institutions of the state, the individual, so it was thought, was liberated from those institutions of civil society that harbored patriarchal and hierarchical values and practices—the traditional family, the conservative churches, and the upper-class charity organizations. The inequalities and dependencies associated with these institutions were to be replaced by an egalitarian social order.

In this scheme, the state and the people were conceived of as intrinsically linked; the people's home was a state that served as the homely domain of national community, the context in which the ideal of solidarity could be joined to that of equality. At the same time, this Swedish ideology, with its dual emphasis on social equality and individual autonomy, was understood to be distinctly modern and highly efficient; the welfare of the welfare state implied not just solidarity and equality but also prosperity and progress.

This does not mean that civil society was only a force of reaction in this particular imaginary. Rather, Swedish civil society was conceived to have two components that were locked in battle. Positioned against the reactionary civil society associated with charity and philanthropy were the social movements that represented the working class. Their political agenda was to replace the need for philanthropy with taxes and the necessity of charity with social rights.

From this point of view, the left-wing supporters of the nation-statist Swedish welfare state could only imagine Europe to the south of Denmark as a backward bastion of neofeudalism, patriarchy, hierarchy, disorder, corruption, and inequality. During the heated debates in the early 1990s over whether Sweden should join the EU, continental notions like subsidiarity and civil society were perceived as insidious, neoliberal, or papist ideas,

fundamentally antithetical to the founding principles of the welfare state. Sweden was continually cast in the trope of democracy, equality, and solidarity, while Europe was pictured, especially by the Social Democrats and the Left at large, in terms of the so-called four K's: *konserveratism*, *kapitalism*, *katolicism*, and *kolonialism*. That is, Europe was cast as the conceptual opposite of Sweden. It was the realm of untamed capitalism, it suffered from the legacy of colonialism, its social policies were informed by backward notions rooted in Catholic social thought, and it was politically dominated not by Social Democratic parties but by conservatives of different shades (Ekström, Myrdal, and Pålsson 1962; Trägårdh 2002).

Conversely, the political parties to the right have tended to see in Europe a possibility to accomplish through the back door what they have consistently failed to achieve at the national level—the dismantling of the oppressive welfare state and the revitalization of what they see as an atrophied civil society. Liberals came to see the EU as a project promoting the freedom of the market from state regulation and the freedom of the individual from the narrow confines of Swedish egalitarianism. Social conservatives and Christian Democrats, on the other hand, imagined the restoration of the natural social structures of civil society that they believed had been undermined by the unholy alliance between big government and big business.

Beneath the political rhetoric of the debate over EU membership there were, however, very real differences between Sweden and most of the EU with respect to the relationship between the state and civil society and the composition and role played by CSOs in Sweden. Comparatively, Swedish civil society was both larger and different, and the ties between the state and civil society were also far more developed and intricate. On the one hand, the dominant organizational form was the democratic membership association—not charities, philanthropies, nonprofit organizations, or faith-based organizations, as was the case in many other parts of the EU. On the other hand, the links between civil society and the state were intimate and numerous, not least through the system of governmental commissions that allowed for continual input from civil society into the political process leading to laws and policies (Trägårdh 2007a). Furthermore, Swedish CSOs have tended historically to primarily have a political or voice function rather than being a provider of welfare services (schools, health care, elderly care). The moral and political logic that characterizes Swedish civil society is thus similar to the one that infuses the social contract as a whole, stressing individual autonomy and social equality and being antithetical to unequal power relations, be it charity, patriarchal family relations, or hierarchical and undemocratic forms of organization (Trägårdh 2010). This has translated into the primacy of the alliance between citizen and state, what I have termed statist individualism, and a civil society that is more invested in the



input side of the social contract and the political process (voice) than in the provision of welfare as nonprofit organizations (service).

In this perspective it is crucial to note how different the Swedish state-civil society nexus looks in comparison to that of the United States and many other European countries south of Denmark. The antistatism so prevalent in the United States but also the stress on charities and nonprofit organizations in continental Europe is often linked to a romantic and rather unrealistic conception of what civil society in fact can do to combat poverty, inequality, and social injustice. While charities can alleviate some suffering, they can do little to address systemically the underlying structures of inequality and injustice. Indeed it might be argued that charity and private philanthropy tend to further entrench and even legitimize such injustice. By contrast, tax-financed social investments typical of the Swedish welfare state has a universal reach, aiming in principle if not always in fact to reach all citizens while taking the form of rights, rather than alms.

## Conclusions

While the (over)heated rhetoric that dominated the debates from the 1960s until the early 1990s has since given way to a far more balanced and much less emotional discourse on Europe and the EU, fundamental continuities prevail. In many ways, Sweden has been much like Great Britain in that the decision to join the EU was driven far more by the cold logic of economic necessity than by any passionate dreams of a united Europe. And, like England, Sweden imagined itself to be more global than European, more committed to free trade than to Fortress Europe. Swedish internationalism grew after World War II, but it was fueled more by enthusiasm for the UN and by solidarity with the developing world than by the narrower project of the EU. As the historian Mikael af Malmberg summarized the debate over European integration between 1945 and 1959: “Norden, the world, and nothing in between” (Malmberg 1994, 32), an attitude that would remain salient well into the debates over EU membership in the 1990s.

From a civil society perspective, this continued Swedish focus on the nation-state has translated into a rather instrumental attitude toward the EU. There has been recognition on the part of local governments and local CSOs that the EU, through for example the ESF, has come to constitute an opportunity structure to be exploited. To do so effectively, there has also been a willingness to adopt continental concepts such as social economy in order to discursively match the requirements for EU funding (see Di Placido and Scaramuzzino, chapter 6; and Levander, chapter 7). However, beyond this almost mechanical level there are few signs of deeper Europeanization,

something that several of the chapters of this book tend to confirm (see Scaramuzzino and Wennerhag, chapter 4). As suggested above, one area in which a Europeanization of civil society might be occurring is the relation to the ECJ insofar as Swedish CSOs and individual citizens use courts to pursue individual rights and fight discrimination, using the European courts to trump Swedish law. This is a topic that warrants further study.

The relationship between Sweden and the EU began as a kind of shotgun wedding when Sweden was in a deep economic crisis and in need of a gallant knight in economic armor. Since then the relationship has developed into a cool but durable marriage of convenience, short on passion but long on mutual economic benefits. Like Germany, Sweden has been a winner in the era of globalization and in this scheme the EU has been an important piece in the puzzle. But in terms of the politics of solidarity and the interplay between state and civil society, Sweden as a whole and its civil society in particular remains profoundly national. There might no longer be the same intense anti-European rhetoric as before, but nor is there much of a sense of an ever-closer union with the rest of the EU. This is as true for Swedish civil society as it is for Sweden more generally.

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