

Prospects for a European Society: Insights from the study of Euro-couples

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The sociological literature on European integration has shown great interest in two related topics: the social changes that it entails and the extent to which these changes increase support for the European Union and contribute to its consolidation as a political project. Fifteen years after the publication of Adrian Favell's seminal book *Eurostars and Eurocities*, we already have solid answers to these questions, very much in line with which one would have predicted when examining the literature on the emergence of nation-states. Regarding the first question my research has focused on the extent to which new social groups that we could describe as European are emerging. Drawing on the main sociological traditions, from Marx to Bourdieu, I loosely define European social groups as groups of Europeans sharing similar economic interests, practices, and life outlook, interacting with one another across borders, and organized to some extent in order to further their interests and way of life. My research, as well as other people's research suggests that such European social groups are slowly emerging, but more as segments of their national groups of origin than as distinct social ones. The term Europeanization is the one that best captures differentiation processes that are taken place within national upper, middle, and working classes, but which do not yet produce clear social and political cleavages.

The process of segmentation is probably most advanced at the top of the social hierarchy, where a tiny but powerful segment of the corporate class has developed a distinct economic interest in the expansion of the European market, whose members interact with and marry one another, who organize and articulate their interests through European policy planning boards, such as the European Roundtable of Industrialists or Business Europe, and whose lives evolve between flats or houses in different parts of Europe. We know little about their identifications as members of particular communities. I suspect, however, that they identify as both European and national, with neither of these identifications being particularly salient at the subjective level.

When we move down the social ladder, into the middle class, one could argue, and Georgakakis's work testifies to this, that another tiny European social segment, even tinier than in the corporate class, has developed, which comprises individuals directly or indirectly connected with the European Union institutions and bureaucracy. Their interests and lifestyles overlap to some extent with that of the European segment of the corporate class but they probably distinguish themselves from it through a stronger European identification and greater commitment to strengthening the power of European Union institutions.

Beyond these very small social segments, Europe is still largely structured around national social groups. Research in the last fifteen years at most reveals incipient segmentation within the middle classes and even less so within the working classes. It is to these social groups, especially the middle class, that most sociologists, included myself, have directed their research efforts. The mechanisms that have propitiated this incipient segmentation have been the removal of barriers to movement, deregulation in both the transportation and telecommunications sectors, and the European Union's promotion of student mobility across Europe. These mechanisms have contributed to a massive increase in short term mobility across Europe. Short term mobility, however, have been socially transforming, however, only to the extent that it has been followed by the development of relatively strong and stable transnational ties, such as friendship and marriage or cohabitation. Because of their greater command of foreign languages, members of the middle class are more likely to have developed this sort of ties than have members of the working class, which have reinforced an incipient pan-European, cosmopolitan, outlook and identification. European in some of their practices, such as their interest in European affairs, eating habits and travel propensity, this group of cosmopolitans remains, however, primarily attached to the national communities in which they were socialized and they are not altogether different from their more sedentary middle class counterparts. The same can be said about the very small group of middle class and working class Europeans who, for different reasons, have settled permanently in another European country. The latter, in particular, are more likely to develop bi-national identifications than pan-European ones.

My recent book on binational couples between Europeans illustrates what I have just said about middle class and working class short-term and long-term movers. The empirical data that I collected and analyzed demonstrates the distinctiveness of these two groups with respect to their sedentary counterparts. Their family and social networks are more transnational to begin with, which translates into regular and seasonally structured travel to the foreign partner's country of origin. This and the fact that they belong to different European nationalities makes them more aware of being European. Beyond these similarities in practices and identification, middle class and working class binational couples differ in their distinctiveness with respect to other members of the middle class and working class in their respective countries. The former have smaller and more work-centered social networks in the country of residence. While they fare well professionally, they are disadvantaged when it comes to deal with everyday problems and tasks. This relative disadvantage may reinforce an outward outlook, expressed in cosmopolitan taste in music, food, information, stronger identification as European and less identification with the place of residence. The latter, on the other hand, especially the foreign partner to these working class couples, suffer some disadvantage in the labor market, a disadvantage that they compensate in part with a more extensive and supportive local social network. This in turn reinforces an inward outlook, expressed in relatively strong identification with the place of residence.

Processes of social segmentation in the middle and working class are thus taking place, but they are at the very incipient stage, partly because we are talking about relatively small numbers of

people who either settle in a different European country or who partner with another European. For the process to accelerate, greater long-term mobility would be needed. The European Union can contribute to this through daring policies, such as the development of a common European pension system. The main obstacle, however, is still language barriers. National educational systems and parents, however, still invest very little in foreign language instruction. Because of this, a European society is a long distant prospect. It will take place certainly and faster than it took for national communities to form, if we use the emergence of the modern state in the 16th century as our reference point. But neither of us will get to live in this European society.

This brings me to the second question that I raised at the beginning: do the social changes described above contribute to strengthen support for the European Union and to the consolidation of the European Union as a polity? To answer this, we must take into account that social groups differ in the resources that they can mobilize to effect change. In democracy, numbers are a source of power, but other transformative resources do not depend so much on numbers. The Europeanized top of the corporate class and Eurocrats are certainly forces of EU strengthening and consolidation even though they are very small. The problem I see is that their projects do not necessarily converge, with the former more interested in the market and the latter more interested in political deepening. Below these two groups, the Europeanized segments of the middle class and working class will continue to grow, but slowly. This and the fact that their identifications are still primarily national means that European Union strengthening and consolidation from below is unlikely to be the main and more decisive force of change, if there is change. If anything, the European Union will face stronger and stronger resistance from below as it attempts to strengthen the power and reach of its institutions. It seems to me that the European Union will become stronger and deeper, not because of pressure from below, but mainly because there is no other option for the sustainability of national states in Europe, as we saw with the financial crisis, and we have recently seen with Covid and are seeing with the war in Ukraine. It is this dialectic, based on the contradictions generated by the national states' actions to survive in the global stage, that will propel the European Union project forward and faster than we think.