

Steve Austen

Where is the Citizen?

Talking about citizenship and more in particular about civil society in Europe, one has to look carefully into the world of existing non-governmental (NGO's) and quasi autonomous non-governmental (quango's) organisations as well as MoNGO's (my own NGO) that are competitors on the market for influence, power and commercial or political interests.

Now that the Treaty of Lisbon, effected in December 2009, has come into force, a legal framework has been introduced that has unmistakably changed the relations between the member states and the European Union in favour of a transnational definition of citizenship. The Dutch parliament anticipated this move in 2008 by referring to the EU as a union of member states and citizens.¹ Although this introduced dual citizenship, the instruments for promoting (European) citizenship have not been adapted to this new situation in any of the member states. The question of the role that the up-coming well educated and mobile class can play in the growing international public space has to be analysed. One can observe that in practically non of the member states the issue of European citizenship has inspired the usual political analysts, newspaper correspondents nor radio- and tv-commentators to discover this novelty in the lives of all citizens as something worth to pay attention to.

The success of the common market enables a continual improvement of the working of it and makes it more accessible to all stakeholders, including the European citizens and their informal and formal civic initiatives. In this respect the role of the so called opinion leaders has undergone a substantial change.

There is no intellectual community of opinion-makers to be found anymore like the one that was so decisive for the post war social and cultural debate. How this community would have formulated their ideal in the "new" member states is not clear, simply because these societies were not defined by the principles of the liberal democracies in the former West. Part of nowadays differences in attitudes towards European borders, migrants and so on, lies in the divergent developments in East and West, to put it mildly, which is quite understandable.

¹ Parliamentary proceedings *Kamerstukken II 2008-2009, 31 702, no. 3.*

As it was perfectly understandable for the residents of the sunny side of the iron curtain that they wanted to boost their self-awareness and belief in their own strength along with their regained freedom after 1945 as soon as possible.

As a result, the construction of national identity received an enormous boost. Dutch identity for instance, certainly as it was to be propagated abroad, could not consist of anything other than: tolerance, freedom of thought, forbearance and internationalism. So ideal types of Dutch character and national virtues came in handy, all the more so because the very recent history had not given much cause for cheerfulness: it is simply hard to imagine how a people that until 1940 had been primarily interested in themselves and their mercantile activities were suddenly, five years later, to undergo a massive spiritual development that would change each and every one of those citizens into independent-thinking cosmopolitans. By now it is clear that the moral uniqueness and superiority of the Netherlands that was propagated for years by the official government bodies and others was above all a marketing concept.²

It is obvious by now that offering scope for pluriformity as it has developed, can also have unwelcome side-effects, but I see that as part of the deal. How that is to be dealt with is an almost permanent object of debate among politicians, figures in authority, parents and teachers, social institutions and the public.

The enormous number of solid contributions by readers to the opinion pages of the major European papers concerning individual freedom, sovereignty and identity is ample proof that a more democratic, self propelled intellectual and administrative élite welcomes the opportunity to take an intensive part in the social debate. These “active citizens” do so no longer as representatives of some nomenclature, whether self-appointed or not, but as individuals, as responsible citizens. For some this is not enough and they publish essays, collections of articles or pamphlets, under their own imprint or that of a publisher, which are then discussed in various old and new media. However that may be, all those different insights, opinions and analyses appear on the internet and are commented on there by anyone who wants to do so. Talk programs and discussion evenings follow, often leading to renewed interest, so that the cycle starts anew.

To conclude: the vertical communication that determined the relations in the social debate to a large extent before the arrival of internet has gone. The era of paternalism, including its enlightened form, is over, although it must be mentioned that in some of the new member states of the EU frenetic attempts are being made to return to pre-democratic forms of government interference. No matter how threatening this may be for the development of a flourishing civil society, it will presently become clear that this is a rear-guard action. Moral authority no longer belongs as a matter of course to a privileged élite, although it is by no means clear how authority is to be handled nowadays. It seems that generally applicable

² Austen, S., *De Europese Culturele Ambitie*, SMO, The Hague, December 2004.

frameworks can no longer be taken for granted, that citizens themselves want to decide whether to conform to certain insights or forms of behaviour.

This by no means implies that the transfer of knowledge is a thing of the past. On the contrary, if you want, you can find all kinds of things that can adjust insights in the field of society, politics or ideology. A genuine proliferation of courses, workshops, conferences, study trips, lectures and information networks is the result. The participants are curious and are prepared to pay, to travel and to exchange experiences and information in order to obtain more insight.

The idea of culture playing a more prominent role in local, regional, national and European processes than before, does find more and more acceptance.

By implementing the new rules of the game, the EU can no longer be seen as primarily an economic project. Inclusion of citizens' aspirations in ALL fields of policy changes the paradigm from economic to cultural notions.

When citizens have common cultural aims, even if the cultures themselves are different, the decentralised cross-fertilising of ideas becomes a way for active citizens to develop a common Europe while keeping their own sense of who they are intact.

I guess that the above sentence will be defined by most readers of this contribution as a "cultural" phenomena. Identity, ideas, intercultural dialogue and more buzz-words related to the worldwide globalisation debate, were and still are the domain of the social- and related studies at numerous universities.

The European Union primarily a treaty for economic cooperation and the abolishment of government interference in the working of the free European market, does not seem to play a substantial role in these cultural issues.

The more so since the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) has adopted the subsidiarity principle for culture. This article in the Maastricht treaty gives the member states the exclusive task and right to develop and maintain their own national cultural policy without any interference from Brussels.

In hindsight one can conclude that the most important cultural agreement signed in Maastricht in 1992, was not the so called cultural clause, but the erection of the European Union that replaced the European Economic Community. By instalment of the Union the free market for workers, travellers, students and experts was a fact. From that moment on no citizen of the Union needed visa for working permits anymore to opt for a shorter or longer stay abroad. The era of national control of the international ambitions of their citizens was over. In my personal perspective this should be seen as the beginning of the implementation of the European citizenship as an individual achievement, no longer influenced by group interests, be it from unions, church, political party, family or educational authorities.

The mobility of citizens, especially of those of the younger generation, went along with the mobility of ideas. The success of this development has not yet ended, to speak with Winston

Churchill: “this is not the end, it is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning’.

These developments would not have been possible without the liberalisation of the European aviation policy. Citizens can travel anywhere within the Union for affordable costs. The permanent improvement of the internet does the rest. Although the Brussels’ machinery, looking for communication with civil society still concentrate on the so called representative organisations, the NGO’s and Quango’s; the influence of the non-organised individual European citizen is to be observed in all domains of society. The flourishing practice of social entrepreneurship is the prove of it. The re-discovery of the phenomena of the MoNGO is a promising sign. Is Europe entering a new period of Enlightenment? If so, I hope to be part of it, just like you.

Author

Steve Austen started his first MoNGO when he was 22 years old. After that he never stopped establishing informal and formal civic initiatives and networks in the field of culture, science and citizenship. He writes essays, columns and is a gifted speaker, lecturer and moderator.

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