

DOI: 10.24193/OJMNE.2018.28.12

SME: CULTURAL SCOPE OF EUROPEAN ECONOMY

AN ESSAY ON THE STRENGTH AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ENTERPRISE EUROPEAN STYLE REFLECTED FROM ITS CULTURAL PROFILE

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Abstract: *This paper is about entrepreneurship European style and European economy as a culture, by means of a theoretical model that is constructed of the distinctive features of Small and Medium Enterprise (SME). This is not a quantitative but a qualitative model, stemming from historical experience, that can be considered as a visionary image of the future form of European economy and its position in the globalising world. Based on such a forecast a back-casting analysis can be developed: a problem-solving-oriented analysis of the extremely complex crisis where the European Union finds itself in at present. The cultural identity as well as the success of the economy European style lays in the incalculable risk factor of the human involvement in the enterprise, that in the neo-liberal shares-value oriented economy is systematically factored out; involvement of man, not just as 'manpower' (knowledge and labour force), but the central presence of man as such, determining the whole of the organisation by 'proximity'.*

Keywords: polycrisis, European economic culture, SME cultural model of enterprise, proximity, EU a social project.

Introduction

This paper is an essay: it presents a critical reflection on the weakness and strength of European economy, a logical initial step towards eventual further research.

The theoretical framework and layout structure of this paper are outlined. Firstly the weak and threatened side of Europe is briefly sketched in terms of the continue and extremely complicated crisis situation where the European Union finds itself in (section: Crisis).

The reflection is entirely centred on the concept of economy and enterprise as cultural phenomena. A social – ethical definition of ‘European culture’ is formulated (section: European culture).

The strong side of European enterprise is perceived in the unique cultural dimension of European economy. This is clarified by means of the SME form of enterprise as the model of European economic and entrepreneurial culture. Characteristics of the SME are summarised in the one key characteristic ‘proximity’, that is: direct personal engagement (section: SME as the model of European economic culture).

‘Proximity’, including the involvement of all stakeholders in the enterprise, is the essential core of the SME cultural model of European economy, rooted in European history and the unique competitive asset of European economy in the future, amidst the globalisation race dominated by the (neo)liberal financial - economic system based on shareholders value. Within the theoretical framework of this essay the SME model shows how European economy should be working: it offers a *forecast*, a future destination perspective, implicating a problem-solving-oriented *backcasting analysis* of the current complex crisis (section: Economy European style in the globalising world).

Some examples and data may illustrate the significance of the SME model of European economic culture (section: Cases).

Threats and opportunities of European economy confronted with globalisation are summarised in terms of scale, internet and innovation (section: The SME model in the globalising economy, is it sustainable?)

Reflection on European economy as a culture is situated in the context of the European Union as a social project (section: Europe: a social project?)

Crisis

The situation Europe currently finds itself in can be characterised as a stack of crises, a *polycrisis* (expression from Edgar Morin (Morin 1999, p.73). Perceptible in daily life on top of the stack lays the social aftermath of the worldwide financial–economic crisis, especially in Europe:

(youth) unemployment, increasing inequality of income and equity, precariousness of human labour and labour earned income in the future. Deeper layers of crisis – populist division between political, economic and cultural ‘elite’ and ‘the people’, division between eurosceptic nationalism and confidence in the European project, division between northern and southern and between western and eastern European Member States, the migration wave from war-ravaged and developing regions to supposed land of milk and honey Europe, climate change - cannot be seen in isolation from the crisis of the dominant, neo-liberal financial-economic system, underlying the *polycrisis* in the world and in Europe. This system is not a mere coincidence of historical circumstances or fortuities, it is an ideology. The deepest layer of the polycrisis in Europe and in the world is a crisis in thinking about man and world, morality and politics, macro- and micro-economic relationships and behaviour, in fact a crisis in culture.

European culture

At first must be emphasized the integral character of the concept of culture. Here we touch a vital element in philosophy and history of culture: everything is linked with everything. This general insight has been focused by Pierre Bourdieu on the economic value of culture and vice versa (i.a. Bourdieu, 1972, 1986, pp.241-258). Jenniskens et al. (2011, pp.39-55) take the theory on culture as capital of Bourdieu as point of departure of a plea for a new paradigm of research on entrepreneurial innovation (on innovation see below) and cultural diversity in European context. And Tomáš Sedláček (2009) in a series of paradigmatic episodes from world history shows the connection of economy and ethics, imagination and practice, of mind and matter. Culture is economy and economy is culture. An economic system is in fact the product and the expression of culture, in its practical application as well as in its theoretical groundwork.

Europe is a unity in a much older, broader and deeper sense than the European Union, the European single market, let alone the Eurozone. Europe is a cultural unity. The anchor concept in this paper is the concept of culture. Thinking about the crisis and of the future of Europe as a unity must start here.

The concept of ‘European culture’ may seem in contradiction to the multitude of differing ethnic, regional and local cultures, that is so characteristic for the European continent. In this essay cultural diversity is seen more as an argument in favour than as an objection against Europe envisioned as one culture. ‘Our diversity is an asset, our unity brings strength’ (European Council

2014, p.1). From old this continent was the magnetic terminus for successive groups of migrants, each with their own cultural identities. Then what is it that attracts all these diverse groups up till today and brings them together here? What is it that they – with relative preservation of their identity – bring about of shared historic awareness, way of life and fundamental values? Living together in Europe in cultural diversity presupposes the deep underneath supporting reality of one shared ‘European culture’. In this essay this unique culture, consciously or subconsciously sought after and shared in Europe, is defined by means of three essential elements:

1) The ideological continuum in European cultural history (in contrast to the in historiography generally expressed view of a radical ideological break):

- from the biblical image of man as God’s image, having dominion over all the earth and knowing good and evil, via the Enlightenment principle of freedom for all citizens, to the modern, universal human rights of freedom of communication, conviction and conscience;

- from pre-modern care for the weak and the needy based on Christian charity, via the Enlightenment-principle of equality for all, rich or poor, strong or fragile, to modern, legally structured economic and social justice and security in ‘the social state’.

2) Solidarity in the sense of the political, democratic, legal principle that forms the basis of the modern social state European style: the sharing of interests and costs by all stakeholders in society. Solidarity is essentially a moral behavioural norm; this makes the political principle extremely vulnerable, but also gives it a unique, society-creating strength.

3) The conversion of those high-minded values of freedom, equality and solidarity into concrete practical, elementary freedom of movement and settlement and equal access to social-economic quality and security of existence for all.

This ethical focus on the basic social and economic living conditions for all provides a definition of ‘European culture’ that is essentially different from current definitions which focus on aesthetic heritage (Chartres, Shakespeare, Bach) and even more so on scientific and economic achievements.

SME as the model of European economic culture

The label SME suggests a limited scope in activities, turnover and personnel. However, the essence of this form of economic activity does not lie in the physical size but in the personal

relationship between the owner / employer, the workers, and the other stakeholders. In this general sense the SME is the source and the first stage of all economic activity, providing an existence firstly for the own family. The prototype of the SME is the family company. This is the case across the world but especially in Europe from of old up till now: the farm, the workshop of ‘the patron’, the owner and master tradesman with his co-workers and apprentices, the corner shop, the specialised retailer, the local bank with its clients as owners.

Fayolle et al. (2005a, pp. 1-33, 2005b, pp.227-253) have theorised about a specific European view of entrepreneurship, in comparison with a prevailing USA approach. They state that US entrepreneurship often precedes innovation, whereas in Europe innovation generally comes first, leading then to entrepreneurial activities, eventually to new startups.

In the theoretical framework of this essay innovation is a specific concept in the context of knowledge economy and business. The in this essay proposed model of European economic culture may be regarded as a model of innovation in the comprehensive (neo-schumpeterian) sense of a ‘disruptive’ development fase, not just in technology and economy, but also and above all in social and cultural life in society. ‘From a general point of view the future developmental potential of socio-economic systems i.e. innovation in a very broad understanding encompassing besides technological innovation also organizational, institutional and social innovation has to be considered as the normative principle of Neo-Schumpeterian Economics’ (Hanusch and Pyka 2007, abstract). Radically deviating from the large-scale anonymous organisational structures and shareholders-value-orientation of the prevailing economic system the SME cultural economic model - inspired by the highly succesful qualities of European economy in history – means innovation by direct human involvement in all sections and levels of the enterprise.

Based on historical research the mentioned authors argue that entrepreneurship in Europe was more a collective social effort than in the USA. The issue seems highly topical nowadays, to judge from very popular TV series like *Undercover Boss* (CBS, BBC) and recent publications like *Six Reasons Why Companies Lose Their Best Employees* (SmartDraw Software 10-07-2018). In accordance with the mentioned authors in the research paradigm for economic enterprise European style should be included at any rate:

- the characteristic European cultural diversity as an asset,
- enterprise as a collective social activity,
- innovation preceding entrepreneurial activities.

Starting at this threefold outcome of research, what follows is a more or less complete outline of economic activity European-style with the SME as qualitative, cultural model.

- The SME is pre-eminently placed for technological and economic innovation, through personally involved co-operation and exchange in the interest of all, through the creative contribution of every fellow worker. This essay is following the position of those researchers who define technological and economic innovation in the enterprise primarily as social innovation (i.a. Volberda and Bosma 2011).

- Innovation within and from the SME is directed by long term vision: the enterprise is not in first instance concerned with the immediate financial gain of the shareholders, but aimed at the interests of the stakeholders i.e. co-workers, customers, society, the planet.

- SME operates on a scale that corresponds with 'human size', not in physical terms of scale, but in terms of social and human relationships: SME characterised not, as in mega concerns, by distance, abstraction and anonymity, but by 'proximity': mutual familiarity between and direct involvement of all employees, from high to low in the company.

- In the SME all co-workers, from high to low, share the responsibility and the risks. This is not a threat but an opportunity for all the workers. The SME ties all workers to the business through recognition of their individual, irreplaceable contribution and through great work satisfaction.

- SME stands for high quality of product through 'artisanal' skill and productivity, and a combination of commerce and services.

- SME generates good and stable jobs, instead of the multitude of senseless, superfluous or even damaging 'bullshit jobs' in today's private and public sector as well (Graeber 2018).

- The SME has an irreplaceable function promoting social cohesion in society - in neighbourhoods, cities and regions.

The above-listed characteristics of the SME as the model for European economic culture can be summarised in the one key characteristic 'proximity', that is: direct human engagement. Stripped back to its essence the SME can be looked at as a 'family': an organisation based on joint relationship as well as on the economic interests of all parties involved.

Economy European style in the globalising world

The guild in the high-medieval European free city is the early-modern form of corporate organisation of entrepreneurship, with freedom and equal dignity for all workers with different

skills taken into the enterprise, with its ideology modelled on the religious fraternity, the precursor of the modern social-political principle of solidarity. The guild lives on in the modern SME. Just as the guilds exchanged their products and their professional expertise via the networks of the cities across early-modern Europe, so does the European economic activity of today show a growing number of examples of co-operation between cities and urban regions, based on the ‘triple helix’. This formula indicates the special focus in innovation on exchange and sharing of knowledge and potential in general between enterprise, innovative science and government. ‘The Triple Helix model of university – industry – government relations ... has been used as an operational strategy for regional development and to further the knowledge-based economy’ (Leydesdorff 2012, p.1; p.3).

Like the guilds the SME as economic model shows two sides: domestic as well as border-crossing. The situation at home is not an end in itself but the beginning of an open economy and a border-crossing, outward looking culture.

In order to remain a prominent economic player Europe has to look for a gap in the world market which is dominated by the (neo)liberal capitalist financial system based on shareholders value, the marketable value of companies, the system that disconnects economy from immediate human engagement and interest (Marx’s ‘alienation’). Europe has to play differently on the world market. It must find its own economic strength in holding on to the ‘human size’ as its unique competition power in the globalising world.

The SME is a theoretical model of entrepreneurial culture. We should not cling therefore to ‘small and medium size’ in physical sense. There are various kinds of SME, depending on scale (personnel, turnover), type of organisation, the type of product or service. Large concerns can still sustain or even encourage the characteristics of SME and SMEs can expand in investments as well as turn-over. There are hundreds of SME suppliers dealing with mega-concerns. Not only are the small ones dependent on the large ones, the large ones are also dependent on the small ones, as regards price / quality rate, product quality, continuity, expertise and reliability.

This essay on SME as representing the unique cultural dimension of European economy provides a double perspective: it is focussing on ‘what is’ and at the same time on ‘what should be’. The given factual crisis situation is approached, looking ‘back to the future’ - so to say - as the desirable perspective. The SME model shows how European economy should be working because that is what economy European style in essence is.

The conceptual approach within the theoretical framework of this paper certainly does not mean that it would not have connection or consequence as regards to concrete practical questions. On the contrary this paper wants to deliver a relevant contribution to a critical insight in the strengths and weaknesses of European economy face to face with globalisation. Neither does the in this paper developed vision on European economy as fundamentally a cultural reality offer directly ready for use political or economic solutions. What it intends to offer is a *forecast* based on the fundamental cultural nature of the European unity, including European economy. The practical problem-solving orientation of this essay might implicate a *backcasting analysis* of (elements of) the current complex crisis situation in the light of the cultural perspective (Stead & Bannister, 2004).

Cases

A paradigmatic example of an SME currently experiencing a stormy development from small to large scale whilst maintaining its genuine cultural-economic SME character is the Dutch VDL concern now globally operating in transport technology. Characteristics of this concern: manufacturing industry is kept under its own management with its own personnel; within the fast and spectacular scaling-up of the organisation the direction of each department remains fully responsible for the specialized, small size operating risks and opportunities; thus on department or franchise level stakeholders value has priority.

Characteristics of SME as the model of economy European style can be seen pre-eminently in the co-operative structure. Unique in its kind is the Rabobank, today a globally operating banking organisation grown out of several mergers of small Dutch banks, among which the 'Coöperatieve Centrale Boerenleenbank', that was established more than a century ago by a local cleric concerned with the small holder farmers' misery. The bank had a physical presence in the community in the shape of hundreds of small, relatively autonomous branches owned by the customers on a co-operative basis. This formula has been a sensational success - economically as well as socially and culturally: it has had an important emancipating and elevating function for the rural population in modern society. The present ongoing reorganisation deviates from the original small scale service bank to the large centrally controlled business bank.

More eloquent than individual cases are recent figures showing a shift in the labour market. By mere coincidence my eye falls on an article in my daily paper (Charlot Verlouw, editor

economics, *Trouw* 17 – 11 – 2018) headed: ‘On search of the ultimate happiness at work’: ‘A qualified nano technologist says: “I sat there in the lab doing what a manager wanted me to do, without that manager exactly knowing what I was doing, and I not knowing what the person next to me was doing, becoming such a manager as my only perspective.” Research bureau Gallup says 70% of employees is not really involved in the work. The technologist again: “They are physically present, but not mentally.” A happy independent employee thinks in the interest of the company and so he is involved. This is good for the company.’ (cf. <https://corporate-rebels.com>)

On LinkedIn the number of employees in firms with less than ten employees saw an increase of 44%. According to this network platform cultural factors play an important role in this development: young people want to work for non-hierarchical and traditionally run organisations; they want to feel involved in the organisation. According to MKB-Nederland that works out better in an SME than in a multinational. Recent research by the employment advise organisation Young Capital shows similar tendencies.

Can we detect a common denominator present in the characteristics of the SME cultural profile and in the discussed casuistry where it demonstrates a specific European culture? Competition power of European technology and economy seems to lay precisely where technological and economic systems indicate the weak point, namely in the human asset and risk factor, the value of the human person, his personal involvement in the technological and economic enterprise, in one word ‘proximity’ as the heart of European economic culture.

The SME model in the globalising economy, is it sustainable?

No more unfavourable moment than just now - the economy after the 2008 crisis apparently picking up worldwide and also in Europe - to elevate SME as the most successful if not the unique model of European economy in the globalising world. Small and medium-sized enterprises are pushed away from the street scene in the city and village centres, on the one hand by invisible and untouchable powerful property developers and owners operating from the other side of the Atlantic on great distance of the social network of the city, who force up rental in an exorbitant way; on the other hand by increasing internet shopping. Yet small and medium-sized shops and companies apparently have a reasonable chance of survival if they innovate timely and adequately, in the sense of innovation as articulated hereabove. They must dare to distinguish themselves from the big store chains, not so much by competition on prices, but by distinctive assortment and quality

of supply, added experience value (design, opening hours, coffee-stop, chat) and above all by the physically present personal reception and service, information, advice, that the internet cannot possibly provide.

The political climate favouring economic growth by means of large-scale organisations on national as well as on European level has been changing lately in favour of the SME. There is recognition of the dynamic potential of the SME with regards to the provision of new services, the creation of new jobs and the promotion of social and regional development, knowledge, commitment and flexibility in the new economy in Europe. 'The priorities we set for the Union for the next five years are to ... promote a climate of entrepreneurship and job creation, not least for SME' (European Council, Strategic Agenda 2014, p.2)

And once again the argument of this essay, prior to the fate of the individual SME enterprise is concerned with the SME as a model of entrepreneurial culture. It states that the survival and the success of European enterprise, of whatever scale or structure, depends on its affinity to the sketched model, the extent to which its organisation and business policy are defined by human proximity.

Europe: a social project?

European economy reflected from its cultural profile should be viewed in the broad context of the European Union as fundamentally a social project. The European integration process is characterised by the contrast between the values, principles and goals in the Treaties - and their political and practical implementation. From the start, Europe is an economic project. If one can speak of European social policy at all, until now this has almost exclusively been in connection with the economic factor labour, in the framework of a single internal market which is supposed to bring a social market economy, high level employment and social progress. Redistributive social policy (social inclusion, combating poverty, minimum income, social benefits, pensions) is, according to the Treaties, the shared competence of the Union and the Member States, regulated by the principle of subsidiarity, rigorously applied by the Member States. Basically this principle is intended to serve European policy *as closely as possible to the citizen*; in fact it frustrates the much needed co-operation between Memberstates in the field of social policy. It is assumed in this essay that social policy in that wider sense is just as much of border-crossing importance as climate

change, energy supply and security. Convergence of social policy is the absolute condition for the political existence of the European Union (Vandenbroucke 2012; 2014, pp. 151-175).

From the start peace and prosperity for the European peoples were the highest end with economic co-operation by the national states the means. However, partly under pressure of the crisis it seems that the means, the economic project, has become disconnected from the end: Europe as a social project. The European democratic deficit is a broad-based reaction in society to the way in which the Union and the Member States have been trying to control the financial-economic crisis - through a rigorous policy of austerity neo-liberal-style. Once austerity seems to have turned now into spectacular economic growth the middle classes are confronted with increasing difference between well-doing and needy - between social participation and exclusion. Politicians do not have a convincing European 'grand narrative', or even reject a wider vision; at the homefront they hide their impotence behind 'Brussels' bureaucracy', they do not give the citizens the true facts and so – with hiccups of old and new nationalism – they undermine the democratic support for Europe (and for themselves).

The approach of the European Union in the light of European culture does not stop at the national geopolitical borders of the states. At this time social and cultural insecurity and disquiet seem to extend all over Europe among the lower and middle classes. See the recent radical political changes in Italy, in Spain, the street violence in the cities of France ... similarly within the Brexit issue may be perceived a convergence of motives related to social and cultural dissatisfaction among 'the people'.

Europe is fundamentally not a geopolitical but a cultural entity; Europe does not consist of nation-states but of cultural communities and these plainly consist of human beings, European citizens. Europe is a Community of Values, which manifests and realises itself concretely in the basic quality of life and social security for every citizen. Europeans are becoming alienated from Europe and the democratic support for the European integration process is weakening because of the factual and or experienced threat to that basic quality of life and social security through the economic politics. The solution for the European democratic deficit has to be looked for in that direction. 'People are not necessarily anti-Europe, anti-globalisation or anti-foreigner. They just ask simple things: work, a fair income and protection of their cultural capital' (Guilluy 2018). The democratic support of the European Union will only be safeguarded, not by reform of the institutions of the EU, but by the concrete transition of the ideological ground and essence of

European integration, that is the value of solidarity, into the quality of social and individual life for all Europeans. Solidarity in the sense of direct human engagement and the central position of the stakeholders in economy, that is exactly the significance of the SME model of European economic culture.

Conclusion

European culture comprises a pragmatic economic strategy and tactics, based on ideological values and moral rules of behaviour. Almost three decades ago Michel Albert already posited that a revaluation of the Rhineland capitalism would generate more growth in the long run than its Anglo-American counterpart, precisely because of its focus on the human involvement rather than mere profit as its goal (Albert 1991). The historical success of post-war economy in Europe can be explained and understood with the help of the in this essay developed theoretical SME model. It wishes to argue that the same is valid for European economy in the future in the globalising world. The future competitive strength of the European technology and economy will stand or fall with the incorporation of the human being into the technological and economical systems: human competence, engagement and co-operation as well as human unpredictability and fallibility, precisely those factors that in knowledge economy and in large-scale concerns with centralistic top-down management are kept as much as possible extra parenthesis.

What does Europe have to offer the world in the short and long- term future? As far as geographical extent and the scale of economy are concerned, Europe is inferior to its American cousins and losing its lead on the Asian continent. Whether Europe can continue to compete in the fields of science and technology is uncertain; Europe seems to suffer from the handicap of the lead. The competitive potential of Europe in a globalising world lies not in economic and financial superiority, but in the model of a society based on the political and legal principle of solidarity, in which freedom of communication and conscience, social justice and high social-economic quality of life are within everybody's reach.

Slowly but surely it is beginning to dawn at all levels and in all sectors that the polycrisis in the world and in Europe is not cyclical but is here to stay - that this crisis is the beginning of entirely new political and economic relationships worldwide. This realisation does not spring from naïve idealism (moral, social, cultural) or utopian visions for the future, but from hard-nosed, objective observations about the strengths and weaknesses of the dominant system until now. This

paper is about the extremely intricate changeover from an apparently utopic forecast to a realistic backcasting analysis of the polycrisis in Europe and the whole world. The idea of a radical overturn of the global, capital-intensive economic system - from an industrial, unsustainable, climate-changing, largely imaginary needs creating mass-production to a sustainable, meeting of real needs, innovative balance economy - that idea will remain a non-committal, un-articulated mirage unless it is converted into concrete new patterns of behaviour, social structures and economic conditions, which in this essay are put in order with the help of the SME as the model of European economic culture. In such a radical overturn of economic relationships Europe can take the lead in the world on the basis of its culture of technological – economic innovation as in essence ‘social innovation’ and human ‘proximity’ as the essence and the success secret of enterprise.

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