Is there, or can there be, a ‘European Society’?

1. What is a Society?

Curiously enough, it is not easy to find social scientists who seem to know – and are ready to explain – what a ‘society’ is. Yet it seems possible to put together a number of constituent notions that most authors, more or less implicitly, refer to when using the term. Among those notions, I submit, are the following.

(1) A society consists of individual actors, the number of which is relatively large (relative to members of families, business firms, or localities), yet relatively small relative to the global human population, or ‘mankind’.

(2) These actors are related to each other through a greater density of interaction and functional interdependency than they are related to outsiders, or members of other societies.

(3) The internal density or cohesion of societies is generated by institutionalized rules which impose constraints upon the individually rational pursuit of gain (of power or wealth) or the avoidance of costs. Not everything is permitted, and living in a society means sacrificing some kind of (short term, individual) advantage.

(4) These constraining rules have the quality of trans-individual durability. They (are expected to) last and stay valid for longer than the life time of the individuals who make up a society; some of them are typically still around when, after about three generations, the entire ‘personnel’ of a society has been exchanged.

(5) Members of societies are reflexively aware of these rules as ‘social facts’, and they are also aware of their durability (or rootedness in some historical tradition and the culture that is characteristic of the society); they are further aware of the contingency (‘non-naturalness’, and potential changeability) as well as distinctiveness (relative to other societies) of these rules.

(6) Given the inherent antagonism between these rules and individual self-interest and the temptations resulting from this antagonism, these rules (unlike pure coordination rules) are not self-executing through consensus, spontaneous sympathy, or solidarity. On the contrary, relationships of trust, cooperation, and the observance of traditional patterns depend upon the legal status and backing that the respective institutions enjoy. In modern, least of all ‘post-modern’ societies, society-wide rules are not self-supporting. There-
fore, the making, enforcement, and adjudication of these rules presuppose an apparatus of political rule and control. Thus, beyond very low levels of either size (as in tribes) or cohesion (as in empires), societies depend upon states and their making, adjudication and enforcement of binding rules. Societies (as opposed to tribes) have always extended beyond the number of people whom any of their members is likely to ever enter into direct interaction with. Yet in spite of the fact that most members of ‘our’ society are bound to remain strangers to each of us forever, we still find relationships of trust, common attachment, toleration, understanding, and solidarity, as well as a sense of obligations to our ‘strange’ fellow citizens. All of this is due to the recognition that ‘all of us’ belong to some shared political community, the extent and content of which is defined by constituted state power. Even the ideally autonomous public sphere is a network of ideas and communications that is both guaranteed by and focused upon the constituted political authority of a state and its way of dealing with what we, due to this shared focus, think of as ‘our’ common problems.

(7) ‘Princes’ and other performers of these state functions have an intrinsic and private self-interest in providing and monopolizing the public good of rule.

(8) In order to be able to do so and to impose the rules (as well as to appropriate the benefits of rule to the rulers themselves), they have to make concessions to the ruled in order to secure their compliance/cooperation. This is what, from Hegel to Giddens, has been referred to as the ‘dialectics of control’. If rulers want to impose duties upon society, they can do so only by granting rights to society, thereby binding/limiting themselves in the exercise of rule. If ruling elites want to extract support, taxes, and military resources, they must grant something in return, such as the effective protection of life, liberty, and property, or the credible representation of the society’s ‘national’ identity. The perfect equilibrium of rule from above and consent from below is reached when, as in all contractarian theories, the political regime can be thought of (or can present itself) as freely chosen by the enlightened will of the ruled. Military, legal, and social security, as well as concessions in terms of representative and constitutional government comprise the kinds of ‘services’ and concessions that states must deliver to society in order to ‘earn’ and preserve the privileges of rule and their capacity to impose duties such as, most importantly, the duty to pay taxes, to put one’s life at the disposition of military, and the duty to comply with the curricular regime of public education. Through the use of their military, fiscal and educational powers, states shape societies to the same extent that they must concede the right to being shaped in their practice of governance by society.

(9) Not only do societies depend upon states and their capacity for making and enforcing rules. In providing that service, states endow societies with rights and thereby engage in market making and other forms of ‘society mak-