While the preceding chapter has dealt with the different ways that town twinning practices relate to political culture, this chapter turns to the question of how understandings of Europe emerge from town twinning practices. These two questions are obviously interrelated, with ‘Europe’ being one of the major political objects of twinning-related political culture, but they differ in their respective conceptual approach as well as in their methodological implications and presuppositions. As we have seen, the notion of political culture was deployed in Chapter 6 mainly with a view to the socio-cultural constituency of understandings of the political as well as to the different ways that such a constituency can be actualized, transformed, or represented in town twinning practices. That particular notion of political culture displayed a certain proximity to vernacular theories of the cultural dimension of political processes as articulated by the interlocutors, and these theories tend to see that dimension represented mainly on the level of ‘attitudes,’ ‘mindsets,’ ‘stereotypes,’ etc. (which have turned out to be fully in line with modernist ideologies of the subject in general). Therefore, the question of how town twinning engages political culture was one of those questions that, in the interview situation, created a kind of epistemological solidarity between the researchers and their interlocutors. As most, if not all, respondents proceeded from a notion of political culture that could have been taken directly from the pages of The Civic Culture, the paradoxical impression was created that political culture, although never directly observable and thus never given, remains fully transparent and unambiguous.

The strategy of the present chapter turns this epistemology on its head – or maybe, as some might find, on its feet. It analyzes implicit understandings of Europe that are never directly verbalized in the
interviews yet clearly visible for an observer because the practices that carry them are public. Public practices, unlike political culture in Almond and Verba’s sense, are directly observable. However, this publicness of practice does not inaugurate an unequivocality of interpretation; instead, the cultural meaning of these practices, if looked at from a sociological point of view, may radically differ from the perspectives of those involved. Insights about the cultural meaning of such practices may thus come at the cost of losing their immediate plausibility for those engaged in town twinning, disrupting the epistemological solidarity between researchers and respondents. This is because the conceptual apparatus used in this chapter is mostly unrelated to vernacular theories of either political culture or of Europe; instead, it aims at making visible those cultural representations and understandings that are plain to see in their publicness yet mostly taken for granted, and thus remaining unaddressed, by town twinning practitioners.

It is here that the notion of ‘economy’ comes in. Far from only being related to questions of production, consumption, and distribution, the economy (at least according to a modernist understanding) consists of social mechanisms that integrate society behind people’s backs and without their reflective and conscious orientation toward such integration. The famous notion of the ‘invisible hand’ thus indicates not only a foundational moment in liberal political economy, but also contains the implication that society and its mechanisms of integration are of a totally abstract nature, and function independently of people’s reflective efforts, attitudes, and motivations (a mechanism that was later called ‘systemic integration’, cf. Habermas, 1987, p. 186). In other words, this modernist notion of the economy as a systemic and abstract incarnation of society is diametrically opposed to any theory of political culture which locates the substrate of societal processes on the level of orientations, motivations, and attitudes.

Interestingly, the idea of European integration seems to rest historically on such a conception of systemic integration, at least to the same degree as being an attempt to overcome cultural stereotypes and national enmities. Thus, while the project of town twinning was taking shape mainly in a political-cultural idiom, referring (as is still the case) to the growing together of Europe by dint of cultural approximation, exchange of experience, and learning (see Chapter 6), the European Coal and Steel Community was based on the conception that the prevention of a future war in Europe might be better achieved through a systemic interlocking of economic processes that would interconnect national economies, thus anticipating a pan-European society of the future. The