

jpr/

Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe

Introduction to the project

Dr Diana Pinto

Project Director and Senior Research Fellow, JPR



Introduction to the project

by Dr Diana Pinto

'Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe' is a three year project funded by the Ford Foundation and housed within the JPR. In this part of the JPR website you will find all the reports, papers and programmes which have been produced since its inception in August 2006.

The original remit of the grant was to address one of Europe's most pressing problems today: the loss of a sense of the common good in our pluralist democracies, with a consequent erosion of feelings of shared belonging and the emergence of new types of tribalism. The project has deliberately used the Latin term for the public good to distinguish its goals from other types of intercultural or inter-religious dialogues, seeking to promote a more harmonious 'living together'.

The *res publica* project chose to bring together independent critical voices from different religious, cultural, ethnic and secular backgrounds, each speaking in his or her personal capacity, in a series of small, closed and off the record national round tables – each lasting for two and a half days in a residential setting outside big cities. The national round tables were intended to open the way for a more pan-European shared reflection on the *res publica*.

Each round table tackled the conflicts, underlying fears and deep defensive reflexes that exist in each

country and within each minority or majority group; in other words, those factors which have led to a weakened common public space. The project intentionally sought to broach difficult questions in a context of mutual trust - questions linked to national identity, the role of the law, citizenship, the role and rights of (often silent) majorities and (often vocal) minorities, secular responses to collective religious demands, and the link between civil society and the state. The round tables were also intended to address the tensions between national cohesion and a 'Europe without borders', especially their impact in two areas: integration and the struggle against racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism. To facilitate the discussions, round table participants received a carefully planned set of questions and issues that they were free to address, challenge, or revise in the round table discussions.

The project was launched with a European Jewish round table held at Missenden Abbey in England in December 2006, which brought together over twenty participants from ten countries. It aimed to test some of the hypotheses which underpinned the project as a whole by focusing on the European Jewish context. We wanted to explore the key issues of identity and belonging, the positive as well as the negative aspects of integration, the impact of internal group divisions, community organization and historical commemoration in the renewed dialogue between Jews, the state and their non-Jewish fellow citizens. In brief, we used the European Jewish post-1989 experience as a test case for the *res publica* questions we wished to address during the project as a whole.

This preliminary round table proved to be most useful and instructive, not least because its participants emphasized in their debates the difficulty of trying to isolate a given group (in this case 'the Jews') as a discrete entity within society. The Jewish 'case' allowed us to refine our questions and encouraged us to pursue the search for the *res publica* in a more nuanced manner, with a preference for individual voices rather than group statements.

The project itself comprised six national round tables (in the UK, Poland, Sweden, France, Germany and the Netherlands) over slightly more than

eighteen months (from April 2007 to November 2008), ending with the first European round table. Each national round table was held in conjunction with a national partner: the British round table with the think tank Demos, the Polish one with the Warsaw university Collegium Civitas, the Swedish one with the publishing house/Foundation Natur och Kultur, the French one with the review *Esprit* and La République des Idées, the German one with the Einstein Forum and the Dutch one with the Felix Meritis Foundation.

Choosing the round table participants was one of the most demanding aspects of the project. They were selected in close cooperation with each national partner. The participants had to include a mixture of 'old' national voices, and 'new' immigrant ones, Christian, Muslim, Jewish and secular voices, while respecting the different hues within. The same voices also had to double up in professional terms: academics, judges and lawyers, social and political activists, writers of opinion pieces, ensuring that different generations and geographical regions were represented. Personalities were also taken into account. We deliberately sought out those who were able to listen to others and rethink their own positions, but above all, the key criterion was that these voices had to be independent and unofficial, and not representative of any formal group. The choices did not meet strict sociological or political criteria; nor did we wish to invite the 'usual suspects' whose views were already widely disseminated in the media and research. The 'proof' of the project was in the 'talking' and in the 'networking'.

You will find here the analytical reports which I wrote after each national round table. In keeping with the 'off the record' policy of the round tables, the reports do not identify those who spoke, and specific attributes (such as a 'Muslim voice', a 'Catholic view' or a 'Jewish position', a 'judge', or a 'civil society activist' were only mentioned when the person specifically chose to speak in that capacity. It is important to stress that each round table was held in the national language, so that we could have access to the best possible participants while allowing them to express themselves fully on these complex topics with all the hues of their mother tongue. We were aided in this by a superb team of

simultaneous translators in each of the countries, apart from the UK and the European round tables, which were held in English. The reports will allow you to get a feel of the interactions as well as the 'spirit' of these round tables.

At the end of the six national round tables we began composing the first European round table, bringing together a cross-section of 'voices' from each of the national round tables. To set the tone of the debates, we commissioned a set of five papers from each country which addressed the five key themes which emerged from the round tables: national identity, the status of minorities, the law, religion, and the state and civil society. The papers (which are also available on this website) constituted a basis for the debates for this round table.

We are now beginning the second half of our project which will involve one or two more European round tables and the public dissemination of our findings. This website is part of this new phase, which we hope to supplement with comments, interactions and reflections. We are now setting up a steering committee which will prepare the second and third European round tables with their reports and policy recommendations, before the Ford sponsored part of the project ends in the autumn of 2009, to be followed by a continuing intra-European dialogue.

February 2009

jpr/ Institute for Jewish Policy Research
7-8 Market Place
London W1W 8AG
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7436 1553
Email: jpr@jpr.org.uk

www.jpr.org.uk