

# **NATION BUILDING AND IDENTITY IN EUROPE**

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# **NATION BUILDING AND IDENTITY IN EUROPE**



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I really appreciate this opportunity to come to you and talk about European identity. You may think it is hubristic for an American, a non-European, to talk about European identity, but I think that issue is central, really, to the future of liberal democracy as such, and as a result of the conflicts over multiculturalism, immigration and integration and then the crisis over Europe that we are living through the middle of, it seems to me that the question of identity is really central.

I want to tell you a story just as a prelude. In May, 2004, I was in the Vatican at a conference of the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences; May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004 was when the European Union was expanded to include a number of Eastern European countries. I was at a table with a German former Head of the Bundesbank and a Polish former minister, both of whom were in their 70s, and as we were talking on this day that Poland was admitted into the EU, it turned out that the German bank president had served in the Wehrmacht and the Polish minister had served in the Polish Army during the war, or in the Polish Resistance. I thought to myself, "What an amazing symbol of what the EU means for that generation of Europeans that these two people are sitting at the same table in an academic conference at the moment that Poland has rejoined Europe after this long nightmare of living under Communism." So I very much appreciate the motives that led to the formation of the EU.

But as I think we're all aware from reading the daily newspapers, the EU is now undergoing a life-threatening crisis over the euro. It is not simply a technical matter to be left up to financiers and to economists; in many ways, it is really a crisis over the identity of the EU and, beyond that, of the identity of Europe and what obligations and responsibilities Europeans feel towards one another; but, of course, the problem of identity is not one that exists only on a European level; it exists in every state in Europe, as well. This is not a question... The question of national identity was one that I think Europeans hoped to be able to avoid in the decades after World War II, but as a result of immigration and the growth of cultural diversity and the rise of multiculturalism, it's an issue that everybody has had to confront. So in this talk, what I want to do, first, is to go over the history of the concept of identity, where it came from and why it exists, and then I want to talk about the meaning of identity, both at the level of individual European societies and at the European level, and then to talk about some of the, I think, grave political issues that are raised by this question.

So if you'll permit me, I want to go back and talk about where identity politics comes from. The first thing to say about it is that it is a modern phenomenon; identity, as we understand it, simply did not exist in Medieval Europe. If you were a peasant, growing up in the outskirts of Geneva, or in Saxony, or somewhere in the English Midlands, in the year 1500, you did not worry about what your identity was, because your identity was completely ascribed to you by your surrounding society, meaning what your religion was, whom you would marry, what your work would be, under whose sovereignty you fell. These were not decisions that any individual could take for himself or herself, and therefore the question "Who am I? Who am I really?" never came up for people in this period. This began to change with the process of modernisation. I would recommend very strongly the book by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, as one of the best introductions to the concept of identity. In many ways, Taylor argues that identity begins with the Protestant Reformation, with Martin Luther, because for the first time, Luther begins to argue that the essence of being a Christian believer is not acceptance of the rituals of the Catholic Church; it is what I believe on the inside and I may conform to the rituals dictated by my society, but God is only looking inside my soul at whether or not I have faith. This opens up the possibility that one's inside and one's outside are different and that the authentic self is the self that dwells beneath all of the layers of social conformity. A secular version of this was, I think, put forward by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *citoyen de Genève*, who in

various of his writings — in the *Promenades*, for example, or the *Discourse on Inequality* — argued that the authentic self was not the social self that was created by the passage of historical time, that that social evolution distorted the true nature of human beings, that the true inner self was expressed in the ‘*sentiments de l’existence*’ that each one of us could feel on the inside that was different from what our surrounding societies told us we should be. Obviously, there are many other thinkers that had versions of this: Johann Gottfried Herder had a nationalist version that said the authentic self is actually a tribal or biological, communal reality and I think the sociological reality of modernisation, living in a competitive market economy, forces a distinction of the inside and the outside, because all of a sudden you have an economy that requires a *carrière ouverte aux talents*: what one becomes in the course of one’s career is not the role that is assigned one by one’s parents, or by one’s social situation; social mobility is possible and therefore the inner self is something that develops over time.

So in many ways, the whole possibility of the inner self and identity being something different from the social conformity that we face living in society can only happen with the emergence of a mobile, competitive, pluralistic, modern society. Recognition is extremely important; it’s not enough to say, “Who am I?” as an inward question unless other people inter-subjectively recognise my identity and my dignity as I understand it as a Ukrainian or as an African-American; it doesn’t count and therefore the search for identity and the struggle for identity is inherently a political act. This is a point that the philosopher Hegel understood well: his philosophy of history held that history itself is driven by the struggle for recognition, by the desire of human beings to have their fundamental dignity recognised by other human beings and that modern democracy emerges when equal dignity, not the dignity of the master, but the mutual recognition of equal dignity, is achieved.

Now, in this context, you get phenomena like modern nationalism; nationalism is a form of recognition and a form of identity which is the one that is the most dominant in Europe, over the last 200 years. Ernest Gellner, the great social anthropologist, I think has written most intelligently on the phenomenon of nationalism. He said that like identity politics itself, nationalism is a modern phenomenon. In an agrarian society, people are bound by social class, by religion, by local ties to the manor lord. All of this begins to change with the rise of an industrial society; it needs a different kind of glue and that glue is typically language and culture, because that’s the common matrix in which people can communicate, exchange with one another and live in a pluralistic, complex division of labour that characterises the modern world. I think we’re all familiar with the nation-building exercises that took place in Europe over the past 500 years; the French example is one to keep in mind. The creation of French nationality took several centuries to accomplish; the Capetian dynasty started as a small enterprise around the Ile de France; it began to incorporate more and more territories that spoke different languages, that had very different customs, different between the *pays d’état* and the *pays d’élection*. Ultimately, as a matter of political will, this was homogenised into the hexagonal territory that we recognise as modern France with a common administration, a common language, a common dialect, but all of this was the product of deliberate, social creation.

Now, the 20<sup>th</sup> century obviously saw tremendous excesses of nationalism and the European project was obviously put in place by wise people in recognition that August of 1914 had really, in some way, spelled the end of European civilisation, certainly the glorious European civilisation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In many respects, Europe could not survive after two horrific World Wars, unless, as Jürgen Habermas put it, Europeans moved to a post-national identity. So, in Europe, I think the discussion of national identity and certainly the promotion of national identity at the level of individual countries became a very politically incorrect subject: Germans were not encouraged to wave German flags at football matches and the like. But it also, I think, made inappropriate the idea of nation-building itself on a pan-European level and this is an issue that I think now comes back to haunt the European Union. We are familiar with the destructive impact of nationalism, this form of identity politics, the aggressive assertion of

national identity and the domination of one nation by another. But national identity and nation-building is absolutely critical for the success of any society. I have spent a lot of time, in recent years, looking at the problems of developing countries, very poor and fragmented countries, failed states and many of the poor states in sub-Saharan Africa. In virtually every case, the central weakness that these countries have is the lack of national identity, the lack of a state, the lack of a common sense of purpose that allows governments to actually formulate and execute policies. Culture is necessary; a shared culture is necessary as a medium of communication, as a way of getting individuals in inherently complex and diverse societies to communicate. So you cannot have a modern, successful society without some degree of nation-building and national identity.

Now, one of the phenomena that have emerged in the last couple of generations is that nationalism on a state level is not the only form of recognition around: we also have sub-national identities or we have the assertion of identities of minorities in pluralistic societies, which is the origin of multiculturalism. Universal recognition of my dignity as a human being which underlies liberal democracy, it turns out, is not enough for many people; people also want to be recognised as a *Québécois* or as a native American, or as a gay person with equal dignity and this has led to multicultural politics of the sort that we readily recognise all over the world today. Much of this takes the form of ethnic group recognition. In many respects, this was invented in Canada with the assertion of the French-speaking community in Quebec to status as a distinct society within the Canadian federal system, brought to a head in the vote on the Meech Lake Amendment to the Federal Charter which would have established separate rules for the way that Quebec is governed differently from the rest of English-speaking Canada. This was a very large departure; this recognition of group rights in Quebec was a very important departure from the liberal principle that the liberal state recognises not groups, but only individuals. I think every society that is *de facto* multicultural has been wrestling subsequently with the question of how to adequately recognise the demands made by ethnic and religious groups for special status as groups. In my country, in the United States, this has taken the form of demands for bilingualism among Hispanics, but also multilingualism in a school system like that of New York City; well over 100 languages are taught in the school system; it has fuelled controversies over affirmative action, because the threat to dignity is always felt most intensely by groups that are excluded, that are marginalised. Rectifying those injustices becomes one of the driving forces of modern politics.

So there are a lot of important theoretical issues that have been raised and discussed in the context of this multiculturalism debate. In a liberal, tolerant, pluralistic society, do we owe the protection of the state to individuals? Are rights held by individuals, or can groups hold rights? This comes up in Europe, in particular, in cases where, for example, a Muslim family wants their daughter to marry somebody back in Morocco or Turkey and the girl doesn't want to and then goes to the state and says, "I want to defend my right to make my own choice in life." This is an issue that European courts have wrestled with. In my view, there is no way to interpret our whole tradition of modern liberalism if you do not take the side of the girl against the family, but that is not the way that every court in Europe has actually interpreted the rights. Some have actually upheld the rights of the family because of a deference to the cultural practices of the particular group involved. So this is, in many respects, a still unresolved and very neuralgic issue.

Now, obviously, the question of national identity was not a great subject of discussion in Europe until the past decade when the question of immigration, and particularly immigration by people from Muslim countries, began to appear as an important political issue. It became particularly acute after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the other attacks that occurred in Spain, in Britain and other parts of the world. These raised the possibility of radical, Islamist groups going after the very foundations of democratic societies.

I think it's worthwhile thinking a little bit about what that religious challenge represents. I believe that modern Islamism in many of its manifestations actually should not be interpreted as a form

of religiosity if by religion one means that people are suddenly converted to a belief in God and to a religiously inspired inner conversion. I think that in fact the phenomenon of the rise of Islamism is better understood as a species of identity politics much like nationalism is a form of identity politics. This is an argument that has been made by a number of people other than myself: Olivier Roy, the French scholar of Muslim affairs, is probably the most prominent advocate of this kind of interpretation and he argues something like the following: that traditional religiosity in Muslim countries is actually very particularistic; that is to say, your religious identity is ascribed to you; it is not something that is freely chosen; it is the product of your local mosque and family and environment; you have really no choice in your choice of religion. What begins to happen though with urbanisation in Muslim countries and particularly with immigration by people from that part of the world to non-Muslim countries is what Olivier Roy calls the deterritorialisation of Islam, particularly for Muslim immigrants or their children living in non-Muslim countries. The question of identity comes to haunt them in a particularly acute way for now they are not living in a society that ascribes a very specific role to religion, that defines their social role, that tells them whom they can marry and how they need to behave. It is for that reason that you have what Emile Durkheim called the phenomenon of alienation or normlessness: that you've lost contact with the society and its norms that governed life, the life of your parents or your grandparents and, all of a sudden, you're put into a new situation in which you may not know what is *haram* or *halal* because there's never been a precedent for it back in Morocco or in Pakistan.

This is the context, I think, in which radical Islamism fills a certain vacuum, because Al-Qaeda and other Salafist preachers can pose an answer to the question "Who am I?" They can tell people in this situation in immigrant communities, "You're not a traditional Muslim. You're not practising the Islam of your forefathers, nor are you accepted by the society into which you have immigrated. Your real identity is with a much purer and more universal form of Islam. You are a member of an enormous *Ummah* or community that stretches all the way from Tangier to Indonesia. That is who you are." It is a much purer and more abstract form, and much more scriptural form of Islam that has tremendous appeal, and it has tremendous appeal particularly to second- and third-generation children of immigrants who no longer are rooted in the localised Sufism or saint worship that characterises the religiosity of their parents, but do not feel accepted by the European societies where they have been living. This is why Olivier Roy describes this in a way as the Protestantism of Islam, because for this group of people, Islam is no longer a social norm imposed by the outside society; it is something that one believes on the inside; when the rest of the secular society around them does a lot of forbidden things, it is really the internal belief that makes one a Muslim. This is why, I think, recruitment has been particularly strong among second-generation Muslims in Europe.

Let me then move on to the question of European identity and why this has posed a particular problem for Europeans of this generation. As I said, European identity is problematic, because the whole European project was founded on a kind of anti-national identity basis. It was intended to get beyond the national selfishness and antagonisms that characterised 20<sup>th</sup>-century European politics. Therefore, there was a belief that there would be a new, universal, European identity that would supplant the old identities of being Italian or German or French or whatever, but it was the case that these old identities never disappeared even though, politically, they were not something that anyone spent much time talking about, and particularly on a popular level, I don't think that any citizen of a European country in the intervening decades ever forgot that they were indeed Dutch or German or Danish or Swiss or whatever. The ghosts of these old identities really became a problem with the influx of immigrants and with the growth of immigrant communities that did not necessarily share those values.

Now, what was the reaction and what have been the kinds of responses to, in a sense, the need for identity? Because I think what the violent terrorism did was to suggest, all of a sudden, to people that there are those in our community who do not share the basic values that we have

grown up with, that are fundamentally hostile and willing to use violence in order to undermine that sense of community; therefore the question of identity and the question of national identity, “What is it that you owe to the community that you live in?” comes to the fore. I think that there has, in fact, been a tremendous variation in European responses with very different impacts on the degree of integration and the success in creating a national identity across different countries in Europe.

Let me just give you these different examples of France, Germany, Holland and Britain. French national identity, in a sense, is the least problematic, because there is a Republican tradition coming out of the Revolution, a tradition that is *laïc*, that treats citizens equally. In many respects, the French concept is, I think, the only viable one for a modern society that grounds citizenship not in ethnicity or race or religion, but in abstract political values to which people from different cultures can adhere. In the French context, it’s also very much built around French language; I’ve always found it very impressive that Léopold Senghor, the Senegalese poet, was admitted to the Académie Française back in the 1940s. It was an important symbol in the way I think the French see their identity that if you spoke French and if you could write beautiful poetry in French, that qualified you for the Académie Française; that was enough, in a sense, to bind you to that community. Therefore, that Republican sense of identity has underlain French citizenship.

A lot of people pointed to the riots that occurred in the French *banlieue* in the mid 2000s as evidence of alienation and some would say an Islamist threat that existed in France itself. I think this is a complete misunderstanding of what happened in that country. There was an Islamist threat coming out of Algeria in the early 1990s that was largely dismantled by the French Intelligence Service, but what was going on in the French *banlieue* was very different. These were people that did not reject French identity; they in fact believed in the goals that French society set for them; it’s just that they were prevented from getting there: they couldn’t get jobs; they were barred by racism from access to opportunities that white, French people had, and that was the source of their unhappiness. So it was, in many ways, much more comparable to African-Americans rioting in American inner cities, as has happened on numerous occasions in recent American history. By the way, I think of all the European countries, in many ways the French are the closest to the United States in having a set of political values to be at the core of identity. I think both of those examples show the way towards what that would mean in a broader European context.

If you take another case that’s very different, it’s that of Germany. Germany had an evolution of its sense of identity that was completely different from France, partly due to the fact that the Germans were scattered all over Central and Eastern Europe. In the process of German Unification, they had to define German-ness in ethnic terms, so legally their citizenship law was based on a *jus sanguinis*, that is to say you could become a citizen if you had a German mother, and not *jus soli*, meaning that you are a citizen automatically if you were born in the territory of the sovereign. Up until the year 2000, that meant that if you were an ethnic German coming from Russia, say, and spoke no German, you could get citizenship far more easily than if you were a second- or third-generation Turk who had grown up in Germany, spoke perfect German and spoke no Turkish at all. The Germans have begun to change that practice, but the cultural meaning of saying, “I am German,” is very different from the cultural meaning of saying, “I am French,” because it has a connotation that is more deeply rooted in blood. It means that when Angela Merkel says that multiculturalism has failed in Germany, I think she is only half right or she would be quite wrong to ascribe that failure simply to an unwillingness of Muslim immigrants and their children in Germany to want to assimilate, because I think a lot of the failure of integration or assimilation comes as much from the side of German society as it does from those immigrant communities.

Then we get to two other, I think, problematic cases: Holland and Britain. In Holland, national identity has always been defined by the *verzuilen* principle: the pillarisation of Dutch society into a

Protestant, a Catholic and a Socialist pillar. The Dutch are famously tolerant, but it's a strange kind of tolerance: they tolerate people as long as they do their thing over there and not in my community. In a certain sense, it was a natural thing for the Muslims to start arriving in the Netherlands and to create their own pillars since all the other religious confessions had their own pillars, traditionally. That led to the emergence of so-called "black" schools in which you had only Muslim students with no opportunity to meet native Dutch people and, I think, has been one of the important obstacles in promoting faster or greater integration of those immigrants into Dutch society.

The last of the list is Britain. This was probably the European country, or the western country, that went in for multiculturalism the most wholeheartedly, a form of multiculturalism that misunderstands the principles of modern liberalism. That is to say, in Britain there was a belief that pluralism meant that you had to respect the autonomy of individual, immigrant communities and that the government had no role in actively trying to integrate them into a broader, British culture. I have a colleague, Robert Leiken, who has written a book called *Europe's Angry Muslims* that will be published in the United States very shortly that gives some fascinating statistics: in terms of the number of minority members recruited into extremist organisations and in terms of the number of attempted violent acts by members of this community on a *per capita* basis, Britain, by far, has the highest rate, much higher than in France or in Holland or in Germany. I think part of the reason for that was the British approach to multiculturalism that simply let radical Imams preach in their local communities without any interference from the authorities and without any effort by the state to actively use the education system to produce people that had the same French-style, basic allegiance to the British state. Again, the British have changed these policies in the last few years in the light of the London subway bombings and other terrorist acts, but it still is a much more problematic relationship between that country and its immigrant communities.

Now, if we look across these different examples to see which of them is the most successful, I think, as you can tell, I actually think that the French have been the most successful. It's a little bit hard to judge these things, because it also depends on the absolute size of the immigrant communities, but I do think, for many reasons, that the political identity, the neutral, Republican, liberal, political identity that France has promoted, is really the model that needs to be followed by other countries. Bassam Tibi, who is a scholar at Goettingen University, is the inventor of the term *Leitkultur*, which was then used by the Christian Democrats in Germany as a definition of what they wanted immigrants to assimilate to. *Leitkultur* was, I think, misused, but he has a very similar idea in the back of his head to French Republicanism. I think, by contrast, the Dutch and the British, in a way, have had the worst experience, because, in a sense, they've not addressed the question of national identity at all; they've not tried to identify a political form of identity that would accommodate people with very different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Now, let me turn to nation-building at the EU level. The next important question is when we pass from the level of these individual European states to the question of European identity as such, what is it and what kind of deficit do we have? I think everybody who has been going through this crisis that we are in the middle of with the euro, realises now, in retrospect, that there were many flaws in the Maastricht Treaty and in the whole process of creating the euro — the absence of a disciplining mechanism, the absence of an exit mechanism out of the euro or the EU itself. A lot of this discussion is dominated by people in finance and by economists, because that's the short-term problem that faces us really: a new recession and a collapse of the European banking system as a result of Europe's failure to address politically these kinds of problems. I don't want to minimise the importance of this at all, but I would point out that, in a sense, there is a deeper failure at the European level and it is a failure, basically, of identity. That is to say, there was never a successful attempt to create a European sense of identity and a European sense of citizenship that would define obligations and responsibilities and duties and

rights that Europeans had to one another, beyond the simple wording of the different treaties that were signed. The EU, in many respects, was treated as a technocratic exercise done for purposes of economic efficiency and I think what we see now is that post-national values are not enough to really bind this community together. So the Germans feel that they've got a sense of, let's say wealthy Germans feel a sense of *noblesse oblige* towards poorer Germans; they feel a sense of social solidarity which is the basis of the German Welfare State, but they do not feel similar obligations to the Greeks, whom they regard as spendthrift and poorly disciplined and very un-German in their general approach to fiscal matters. Therefore, they feel no obligation to take care of them, so there's no solidarity in that broader, European sense. I think for various reasons Europe may finally stumble on to a short-term solution to this crisis, but I do not think that any form of deepening, at this point, is a viable project unless someone pays more attention and is able to answer the question in a more substantive sense of what it means to be a European: not just in the negative sense that we don't want conflict and we don't want old nationalism and war, but what it means in terms of positive values.

Now, let me just conclude by saying that all of these issues that I've discussed, immigration and national-level identity and European-level identity, in the next few years, I think, are going to merge as really the same issue, because these are both the central issues for all of the new, populist parties that have arisen all over the continent of Europe; that is to say, opposition to immigration and Euro-scepticism. We have these older parties like the *Front national* in France with the National Front in Britain, but in the last decade we've seen the emergence of quite a few new ones: Geert Wilders' Party of Freedom in the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party, the Sweden Democrats, The True Finn Party, of course the SVP here in Switzerland. I think that the common opposition to both Europe and to immigration stems from a common source among all of these parties. It is basically a populist impulse; it is a feeling that the needs of ordinary citizens have been ignored by elites with regard both to the deepening of the European Union and to immigration issues. In France, many people that voted for the National Front were extremely resentful of the fact that, for example, living in Marseille, there was a lot of crime and the state was not willing to deal with that problem forthrightly, because the crime was associated with Muslim gangs and so forth. You can replicate this story in many other European settings. The mainstream parties were too politically correct to recognise that these were issues and, as a result, these populist parties then had to take matters into their own hands and to organise. To be quite honest with you, the whole European project, in fact, has been a very elite-driven affair: we know of several occasions in which the issue of agreeing to a treaty was put up for popular referendum and when the people gave the wrong answer, the elite said, "Well, the people were wrong about that and we're going to have to vote again." So I think that, in a sense, the rise of this kind of populism actually reflects, in a certain way, a deepening of democracy in Europe: European publics are not going to be led along by their elites as they were in the first few decades after the Second World War, but it means that there are tremendous dangers for European democracy that lie ahead in the immediate future. I think that we all recognise the EU is at an important crossroads: it either deepens or it begins to split apart; the current middle ground is really not one that is sustainable.

I would just leave you with the following thought: the deepening project, that is to say, moving from monetary union to fiscal union, you may argue at great length about what sense this makes in economic terms. But I think we all need to recognise that this is going to have a tremendous number of political costs that need also to be taken into account. There is, in the first place, absolutely no grassroots support in Europe for this deepening project; this is again going to be very much an elite-driven project undertaken for largely technical reasons. It is actually something that is stimulating, in a way, the re-nationalisation of Europe and so already people have said that fiscal union is, in effect, the Germanisation of Europe. It also forces conditions that amount to the suspension of democracy. You now have technocrats running the governments of Italy and Greece; they were not elected in the normal fashion by their

constituents and the reason they're there is that they answer to the conditions set not by the Italian or the Greek public, but by other parts of Europe. I think this kind of deepening on the part of both the northern countries and the southern ones is going to lead to choices that will be politically unpalatable to both of them; all of this is being undertaken against a background of a prolonged and likely deepening economic crisis. I think, in many respects, this identity problem is one that we all need to think about very deeply; it's one that will come back, I guarantee you, in all politics, in the near future. Since the title of my talk was *'Identités Européennes?'*, I didn't speak about the United States, but we have many of the same kinds of problems; although I think our form of national identity is actually quite accommodating of immigration, we also have a populist backlash against immigration in a sense that our national identity is under threat and so there's no democracy, I think, in the world that is exempt from having to face forthrightly this set of issues.

Thank you very much for your attention here today.