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Can Europe Do Away with Nationalism?

By Emanuele Ottolenghi

A united Europe is not far from becoming reality. A European identity that transcends the national identities of Europe's member states, however, is still a distant dream. But Europe's rapidly changing demographics cannot wait for this dream to come true. Identity is a crucial component of social cohesion, and the rapid influx of immigrants, mainly from the Muslim world, demands a choice: Should immigrants be encouraged to integrate into the national cultures and identities of the EU member states? Or should Europe instead pursue a multicultural model, in which patriotism is discouraged in favor of a society divided by different identities, values, and historical narratives, but united by abstract rights and duties under EU treaties and regulations? Is a third way available, a common European identity for all Europeans, old-timers and newcomers alike, that can transcend narrower communal loyalties to find a new common home? And if a third way were possible, what kind of European identity would it yield anyway, given the post-national utopian vision on which Europe is built?

Europeans need a mobilizing myth now more than ever if they want to successfully confront the double challenge of transforming an ever-expanding union into a coherent polity while successfully integrating an unprecedented wave of immigration, mainly from the Muslim world. A common European myth is still lacking. Local nationalisms are such readily available vehicles of identity. A united Europe should encourage their use as an instrument of integration and social cohesion.

The Question of European Identity

While the institutional framework of a united Europe inexorably marches on, the fabric of a shared supranational European identity lags behind. Yet, the realization that this identity is badly needed should be obvious if one looks deeper into the founding principles of the European ethos. The preamble to the EU Constitution proclaims that, “While remaining proud of their

own national identities and history, the peoples of Europe are determined to transcend their former divisions and, united ever more closely, to forge a common destiny.”¹ There is no common destiny, however, unless there is a sense of cohesion. A common identity promotes it, but a united Europe, for the time being, rests only on vague notions of rights and prosperity at home and peaceful internationalism abroad.

Post-1945 Europe views itself morally bound to create a peaceful and prosperous society that will forever ban war: first from the continent, then from the world. To achieve this goal, Europe wants to do away with nationalism. Europe considers nationalism the main cause of its troubled past: it bloodied the continent until the defeat of Nazism gave way—no doubt under the benign protection of the American umbrella—to a post-nationalist European Union where war is forever banned and peaceful trade and diplomacy have become the sole instruments of power relations in the world. If nationalism caused Europe's twentieth-century tragedies, rejection of nationalism engendered Europe's post-1945 age of unity and prosperity: hence the exhortation to transcend

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nationalism in the name of a common European vision, which the preamble aptly characterizes as “united in diversity.”

This view is reinforced by “influential intellectual trends in the advanced world that deny the legitimacy of nationalism altogether as an atavistic concept. Their adherents regard nationalism as an obstacle to human rights, international harmony and economic rationality.”² Replacing communism after its abject failure, this new internationalist doctrine quickly dismisses nationalism as a genuine and authentic force and portrays it as a concocted identity. In this view, elites selectively (and consciously) tap into an often imagined past to forge a group identity based on a powerful mobilizing myth. Opponents of nationalism see nations as Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities,” not modern elaborations of pre-existing identities; either way, for its critics, nationalism is not only an intellectually flawed construct, but also a dangerous force:³ whether one imagines it or not, it is the wrong kind of imagination. The push for a united Europe is animated by this view: self-styled Europhiles support abandoning old allegiances in favor of an identity built exclusively on a doctrine of rights, the abating of frontiers, and the triumph of a common market. Nationalism, in their view, invariably begets brownshirts.

If Europe actively discourages nationalism and the identities that gave rise to it, can it offer an alternative? Pan-European nationalism, even if based on a narrative that transcends the small confines of local identities, would still be a variant of nationalism and unquestionably an artifact of powerful elites. Besides, a pan-European national identity hardly exists, and it still awaits the laborious input of those intellectuals clamoring for one to arise. Can the peoples of Europe transcend their local identities and forge a common destiny based only on abstract values? As the editor of the British magazine *Prospects*, David Goodhart, put it, “Modern liberal societies cannot be based on a simple assertion of group identity—the very idea of the rule of law, of equal legal treatment for everyone regardless of religion, wealth, gender or ethnicity, conflicts with it.”⁴ Yet, at a very basic level, humans need to identify. As Goodhart notes, abstract notions of common humanity and universal values clash everyday with the choices public institutions must make—on welfare distribution and public funding of education, on health care and foreign aid. In making these choices, priorities are often based on identity. It follows that more narrowly based

national identities still matter in Europe. They are more compelling to people than a European set of symbols and institutions that only a few recognize as truly their own. But the purveyors of the post-national ethos on which a united Europe is being built are doing everything in their power to chastise patriotism and national identity within the member states:

The “European Idea” rests somewhat more openly upon hostility to European nations and their national identities. Its justifying claim is that the European Union has overcome the shameful legacy of the European nations that were responsible for two world wars and threaten the peace of the Balkans today.⁵

Opposition to local national identities as both flawed and dangerous is not necessarily going to offer a compelling alternative, even after the amazing lure of European citizenship and the benefits it offers are taken into account:

Citizenship is not an ethnic, blood-and-soil concept, but a more abstract idea—implying equal legal, political and social rights (and duties) for people inhabiting a given national space. But citizenship is not just an abstract idea about rights and duties; for most of us it is something we do not choose but are born into—it arises out of a shared history, shared experiences and, often, shared suffering.⁶

Yet, Europe seeks to replace local identities with an abstract “European idea,” actively advocating the disposal of a powerful vehicle for integration and social cohesion at a time when the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from foreign shores and alien cultures demands a vigorous policy of integration. Abstract notion though it may be, the question of European identity is not an abstract exercise in lofty utopian philosophy. For a polity to function, one needs its people to be united by the bonds of citizenship before they are divided by the conflicting loyalties of partisan politics. But citizenship cannot be made of abstract laws alone. It is built on shared values as much as shared memories. To command loyalty, Europe needs to be more than a geographical extension of territory that bestows rights to those who happen to inhabit it and castigates those holding onto allegiances considered both historically

obsolete and socially pernicious, especially since those allegiances may hold the key to Europe's successful integration of its growing immigrant communities.

Europe's effort to replace local national identities with a European idea devoid of nationalism is thus a serious mistake. Ideally, Europe's political project would need a nationalism of its own that was potent enough to give its citizens a sense of shared history as much as of shared destiny. That in itself would be an arduous task: "Pre-existing loyalties are an obstacle to any new political identity that is striving to assert itself."⁷ Some of the crucial elements of a national identity are sorely lacking—there is no common language, there is no common history, there are few powerful unifying myths to which Europe can turn to as a way to inspire its masses, and aside from the promises of material wealth that Europe grants its citizens, there is no sense of a common destiny uniting the peoples of Europe. If anything, there is apathy in the face of unification—only 42 percent of Spaniards participated in the referendum on the EU Constitution—and fear at the prospects of further enlargement, as emotional responses to Turkey's possible accession to Europe indicate. The only glue that seems to cement Europe and mobilize people is anti-Americanism and the fantasy of a European superpower bent on taming America,⁸ hardly a promising foundation for "European-ness." What remains is the very nationalism Europe's post-national utopia wants to dispose of. If its more virulent strains are kept at bay, nationalism might still offer the key to integration.

Dilemmas of Identity and Integration

Europe is not promoting a new, broader European nationalism. It is discouraging all forms of nationalism. And even if a new European identity were high on the agenda of its leaders, identities, no matter how artificially construed they are, are still a product of long histories, not laboratory experiments, elaborate international treaties, and Brussels seminars.

Thus, in its devotion to an abstract notion of European identity that is devoid of any nationalist or patriotic tinge, Europe is creating an impossible dilemma that is liable to tear the very fabric of the European project.

The weakening of national identities—and the lack of a meaningful and more inclusive replacement—means that new immigrants have no compelling identity to embrace. The success of their integration relies exclusively on societies' ability to show inclusiveness

based on abstract notions of common humanity, something that, given Europe's historical record of minorities' treatment and recent record of interethnic relations, does not offer a solid foundation. As national identities are pushed to the margins, their ability to command loyalty will wane and lose their appeal to immigrants who have little inclination to feel "British" or "French" or "Belgian" when old-timers themselves and the society around them discourages such identification in the first place. But lacking a strong pan-European alternative identity that immigrants can embrace, newcomers are likely to turn to their ethnic and religious backgrounds as their primary identities.

This problem is particularly acute because while Europe is slowly developing into a politically unified continent, with a shared currency, a coordinated foreign policy, joint institutions, open borders, and a free movement of workers and goods—all means to transcend local identities and forge a sense of a new common destiny—Europe is also absorbing an unprecedented wave of immigrants from the Arab and Muslim worlds. Both trends present formidable challenges: Can Europe convince Latvians and Portuguese, Poles and Greeks alike to see themselves first and foremost as Europeans and identify with the political institutions and values of a united Europe? Can this identity appeal enough to Muslim immigrants to overcome their strong ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds and to help them integrate within the fabric of Europe? And are the Europeans ready to fully welcome an alien culture in their midst?

Critics of nationalism are quick to dismiss it as an exclusive ideology. In an age of globalization and universal human rights, doctrines of exclusion have a hard time selling. No doubt, to command loyalty from newcomers, societies need to be inclusive. No doubt, nationalism may manifest intolerant strains and, if too narrowly defined, can engender exclusion. But inclusion cannot be achieved at the price of renouncing collective identity: not only would that be a humiliating act of cultural self-negation, but it would also be counterproductive. Newcomers would be left without a tool to encourage their integration into their host societies. Old-timers, feeling threatened in their core allegiances, would react by resorting to stronger versions of their nationalism, something that is already happening across Europe with the rise of anti-immigration parties and the swelling of xenophobic incidents.

Renouncing nationalism would deprive societies of a vital component of social cohesion, namely a common

narrative both old-timers and newcomers can relate to and identify with. No doubt, in an age of increased diversity within societies, Europe needs to encourage the expansion of its boundaries of inclusion while at the same time recognizing that its commitment to liberal universal values need not be so broad as to become meaningless. Ultimately though, people still need to identify and feel they belong. Identity matters, and the future of Europe will largely depend on which identity will ultimately command the allegiance and loyalty of Europe's citizens. This is a task that member states and their national identities are better equipped to perform.

Therein emerges Europe's central challenge of the day: Europe's institutions and leaders make opposition to nationalism central to European integration. This opposition may generate two opposite but equally dangerous types of reaction. Muslim immigrants have no incentive to develop an allegiance to their home countries in Europe because Europe discourages that behavior and the general social tendency is to denigrate nationalism and patriotism as forms of reactionary and dangerous ideologies. They might turn to Islam instead as a result. Old-timers who prize their ethnic and national allegiances may react to the pressures of Europe's post-national utopia by seeing a causal correlation between immigration and loss of national identity, with the consequent anti-immigrant backlash. The push for a Europe devoid of nationalism might ironically beget a Europe where unbridled nationalism and radical Islam will ultimately clash.

Denigrating national identity leaves another question unsolved. Lacking a real, rather than artificial, imaginary European "common destiny," can people coexist in societies that offer no cohesive identity? The answer is no. Faced with unprecedented immigration from the Muslim world, Europe is not offering its newcomers a European equivalent of the American dream with its powerful mix of liberal rules and national narratives that form the American way to patriotism.

Islam's history should also offer a cautionary tale. The historical track record of Islam is not one of inclination to assimilate. European Muslim communities live for the first time as minorities in a society that encourages them to take residence and citizenship while granting them the freedom to remain culturally alien to the host country. Meanwhile, integration has largely failed, as Euro-Muslims are underrepresented among the cultural, economic, and political elites, and overrepresented among prison inmates and the unemployed

across Europe. One of the central and most urgent challenges for Europe will be to promote their integration. In a continent of close to 500 million citizens and twenty-five countries, there are today approximately 15 million Muslims. In twenty years, with European demographic trends showing little growth, the size of Europe's Muslim minority will rise significantly—in both absolute and relative terms. A return to strong national identities within member states is the immediate answer. Nationalism can be conjugated with liberal values; Europe can live with both universal rights and local identities; and its citizens can feel loyalty and commitment to, and appreciation of, both their local national identity and a broader sense of "being Europeans."

Integrating Islam?

Related to the success of the above vision is the answer to a pressing question in Europe today: what identity will Euro-Muslims ultimately embrace? Varied geographic origins still account for marked differences among them, but as time passes their ties with their lands of origin could fade. Both Islam and more ominously its radical variant are competing for the primary loyalty of Euro-Muslims. That prize must be won over by their host-societies instead. In the absence of successful absorption policies, the alternative to a weak and unappealing European identity will increasingly be Islam. The mosque will offer a meeting point for immigrant communities to mingle and share the two elements they have in common—the immigrant experience and Islam—in their efforts, and often in their failure, to fully integrate into Europe. If radicals gain control of mosques, their primary goal will be to heighten grievances and channel them to violent action.

Islam has always been a key component to Muslims, both within and outside the Arab world. But as Steven Simon argues, while religious allegiance competed with other loyalties in the past, "Muslims are now increasingly inclined to stress their religious identity over other affiliations, whether citizenship, tribe or class."⁹ Simon also suggests that "this globalisation of Muslim identity is helping to fuel a revival of a shared interest in which North Africans are more likely to identify with the struggles of Muslims in Central Asia and European Muslims with conflicts in the Middle East."¹⁰ This should worry Europeans. In the post-9/11 and 3/11 era, a key component of this global Muslim identity—which travels fast through Internet and satellite TV, making

Muslims in Marseille and Brixton, Jakarta and Jeddah, Cairo and Mazara del Vallo all members of a virtual global community—is a sense of grievance toward the West and a feeling that Western nations and Western values are at war against Islam.¹¹

Identification with Muslim causes abroad goes hand in hand with a sense of grievance for Muslim issues at home. Since 9/11, a string of high-profile incidents in Europe heightened public awareness to the risk that radical Islam poses to the fabric of Europe. For many, the murder of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands in November 2004 became a symbol of the simmering “clash of civilizations” that is about to play out in Europe’s restless suburbia. Others have interpreted the clash over the headscarf in France as a sign that Islam can hardly be assimilated into French mainstream. And while other episodes have earned less attention, the list is long. Nevertheless, such high-profile incidents obscure a harder truth. At a socioeconomic level, Muslims have failed to integrate, and Europe has fallen short of absorbing them into the mainstream:

In less than a decade, there has been a radical shift in France’s prison population, a shift that officials and experts say poses a monumental challenge. Despite making up only 10 percent of the population, Muslims account for most of the country’s inmates and a growing percentage of the prison populations in many other European countries, an indication of their place at the bottom of the Continent’s hierarchy.¹²

Recent reports agree that this phenomenon poses three troublesome challenges. A disproportionate Muslim component among criminals is a reflection of a failure to integrate (and be integrated); the growing Muslim prison population is targeted by radical Islam as a recruiting ground for potential terror operatives;¹³ and the growing resentment of imprisoned Muslims over lack of proper services to the Muslim prison population spills over to Muslims outside prison, as lack of concern for Muslim inmates and their religious needs is seen as a reflection of a broader social neglect of Muslims.¹⁴ An explosive cocktail emerges: “The growing Muslim prison population is evidence of an Islamic underclass that is developing across Europe and, at its margins, is increasingly sympathetic to the coalescing ideologies of political Islam,” a French scholar of Islam recently told the *New York Times*.¹⁵ This difficulty is compounded by

the lack, so far, of a locally bred version of Islam that is at ease with European values and culture: “France has 1,200 imams, or preachers, of which more than one third don’t speak French and about 75 percent are foreigners who remain ignorant of French culture.”¹⁶ Efforts are underway across Europe to address this issue, but the underlying problem remains: a growing sense of alienation that is the product of both a sense of socioeconomic inequality and a lack of an appealing identity.

That Euro-Muslims and mainstream European values may be at loggerheads is further demonstrated by the recent refusal by several mainstream Muslim associations across Europe to participate in Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations on January 27, 2005.

Holocaust remembrance is a central theme to a new European identity slowly taking shape in the continent. It affirms a commitment to memory, a rejection of violence, and a dedication to pluralism and respect for minorities. It could reasonably become part of the shared European legacy on which “European-ness” may develop over time. Since 2001, January 27 has been an official day of remembrance, where government officialdom and civil society join to pay tribute to the dead and pledge never again to foster the culture that made Auschwitz possible on European soil.

This year though, representatives for the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the Union of French Islamic Organizations of France (UOIF), the Union of Italian Muslims (UMI), and the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations of Italy (UCOII) refused to attend official commemorations.¹⁷ The UOIF leader, Lhaj Thami Breze, and the head of the MCB, Iqbal Sacranie, expressly chose not to attend commemorations, arguing that Holocaust Memorial Day was not inclusive and therefore not worthy of their presence. Objecting to the uniqueness of the Jewish genocide, Sacranie supported instead a “Genocide Memorial Day,” where all victims of genocides, past and present, would be commemorated,¹⁸ and where “peace with justice” was to be promoted for those continuing to suffer in the world, especially “in Palestine”:

In order to help ensure that such crimes against humanity do not recur and repeat themselves we believe that the Memorial Day can better be observed by making it inclusive to cover the ongoing mass killings and human rights abuses around the world, notably, in the occupied Palestinian Territories, Chechnya and Kashmir and

also recent mass killings and genocide on Bosnia, Kosova and Rwanda. Genocide is the most abhorrent and outrageous crime and we are not going to prevent it by selectively remembering only some of its victims.¹⁹

This argument was disingenuous: as alleged victims of genocide, Sacranie mentioned only Palestinians, Chechnyans, and Kashmiris, the three emotional issues feeding into a strong sense of pan-Islamic grievance within Europe and across the Islamic world. As genocides past and present, he quoted Bosnia, Kosovo, and Rwanda. His agenda thus was clear both in its sins of omission and of commission.

Omission of Armenia and Sudan from the list of genocides past and present aimed to shroud in silence those two tragedies where the murderers were (and still are) Muslim armies and Muslim governments. Mention of Palestine as a place where genocide is allegedly taking place is a trivialization of the Holocaust that also borders on denial. Inclusion of Bosnia and Kosovo—where ethnic cleansing on a large scale took place—Kashmir—where interethnic conflict is happening—and Chechnya—where vast human rights abuses and massacres still do not amount to genocide—is meant to blur all differences and make all suffering become genocide.

Blurring differences and omitting tragedies is meant to cloak Muslims in a mantle of victimization and to force Europe to accept such distortions for the sake of accommodation. But those who pursue this line are sorely mistaken. Refusal to recognize the Holocaust as central to Europe's painful past and to its new identity will only broaden the already worrisome gap between Europe and its Muslim minorities and their alienation from the mainstream.

Fortunately, not all of Europe's Muslim leaders agreed with the MCB. In fact, many condemned, criticized, or contradicted their decision. Dalil Boubakeur, the head of the French Council for Muslim Faith (CFCM) attended a commemoration ceremony in Paris. Mario Scialoja, Italy's representative for the World Muslim League expressed strongly worded criticism at the MCB's stance, and many Imams in Italy rejected the positions taken by the UCOII and the UMI and joined in the commemorations.

Finally, Albania, a European secular Muslim nation, was the first Muslim country to pass legislation making January 27 an official day of remembrance of the

Holocaust. Official ceremonies in Tirana were well attended, and Albania's prime minister flew to Auschwitz to attend the sixtieth anniversary official commemorations.

National Identity as a Tool of Integration

Turning Europe's national identities into instruments of social cohesion is not a lost cause. Neither is Islam in Europe. But both can become so if Muslims are left to be an easy prey to radical Islam. Deep divisions and the cultural alienation of Muslim minorities, if left unchecked, may threaten the very fabric of Europe. This trend must be countenanced—the future of Europe is at stake. For integration to succeed, promoting moderate Islam is not enough; narrowing socioeconomic inequalities is also not enough. Both are necessary steps Europe and European Muslim leaders—secular and religious alike—must undertake in close cooperation. But as an overarching and transnational Muslim identity grows, no countervailing force is yet on the horizon. Currently, Europe discourages integrationist policies, offering only a stark alternative between assimilationism and multiculturalism. There are grave consequences to this state of affairs: "Large numbers of [young Muslims] believe they are Muslims first and European citizens only as a matter of administrative necessity rather than cultural allegiance."²⁰ If Islam, and not Europe, commands the allegiance of young Euro-Muslims, how will this serve the fabric of Europe?

Herein emerges the challenge of identity in Europe today. While Europe actively discourages nationalism and patriotism, it does not offer a strong pan-European identity and a successful and functioning model for harmonious integration. It is imperative for Europe to turn Euro-Muslims into fully integrated Europeans, living in harmony with other groups within European societies and fully sharing a common identity. In order for Europe to succeed, European institutions and governments must realize that if the European project cannot offer a compelling common identity—shared values for all citizens of Europe old and new—a set of compelling alternatives must be provided instead. Failure to provide a European identity that creates the conditions for a common citizenship based on shared values would create a vacuum for narrower identities to reassert themselves.

Hence, Europe must realize that nationalism is not necessarily a force of evil. Identities matter, as they

form the indispensable glue that cements societies. Unless European elites can confidently say that a new ready-made pan-European identity is in the making—an artificial blend of symbols, narratives, and memories that will somehow appeal to almost 500 million citizens of twenty-five countries—they should be careful about the consequences of abandoning nationalism and ponder instead the need to both strengthen national identities and encourage Muslim immigrants to identify with their newly adopted countries. National identity is not only a dividing force: it can be a powerful tool of integration. And nowhere is integration needed more than in Europe today, as the continent is set to see its Muslim minority more than double in the course of the next two decades.

Notes

1. European Union, *Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe*, preamble, 10.
2. John O'Sullivan, "In Defense of Nationalism," *The National Interest*, no. 78 (Winter 2004–2005): 33–40.
3. Ibid.
4. David Goodhart, "Discomfort with Strangers," *Guardian* (London), February 24, 2004.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. O'Sullivan, "In Defense of Nationalism."
8. Juergen Habermas & Jacques Derrida, "El 15 febrero o lo que une a los europeos," *El País*, June 4, 2003.
9. Steven Simon, "Unavoidable Clash of Islam and the West?" *Newsweek Polska*, January 23, 2005.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Craig S. Smith, "Growing Muslim Prison Population Poses Huge Risks; France's Struggle with Radical Islam," *New York Times*, December 9, 2004.
13. Renwick McLean, "Terrorists Recruiting in Prisons; Common Criminals in Spain Transformed into Islamic Militants," *International Herald Tribune*, November 1, 2004.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Claude Salhani, "Europe's Tolerance under Stress," United Press International, December 9, 2004.
17. Muslim Council of Britain, "Muslim Council of Britain and the Holocaust Memorial Day," January 23, 2005; available through www.mcb.org.uk.
18. Iqbal Sacranie, letter to the editor, *Guardian*, January 27, 2005. Sacranie writes: "The view held by the MCB since the inception of Holocaust Memorial Day in 2001 is that the subtext of the Memorial Day—'Never Again'—is diluted by the exclusive nature of the event. The memorial day would in our opinion be better served by covering the ongoing mass killings and human rights abuses in our world, and thus make the cry 'Never Again' real for all people who suffer, even now."
19. Muslim Council of Britain, "Muslim Council of Britain Statement on Holocaust Memorial Day," January 24, 2005; available through www.mcb.org.uk.
20. Simon, "Unavoidable Clash."