

## From ethnicity to empathy: a new idea of Europe

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24 July 2003

*The dynamic intermingling of peoples in contemporary Europe is challenging definitions of the continent's identity based on ethnicity, indigeneity and myths of origin. This unstoppable and enriching diversity calls for a distinct new politics – one that reframes the very idea of Europe in terms of empathy with the stranger.*

One question worth asking in the context of the current European Union debate surrounding the Constitutional Convention is whether, given contemporary processes of rapid cultural and ethnic hybridisation, the perennial values supposed to define the 'Europeanness' of life on the old continent as well as uniting Europeans into a common project, make any sense.

Taking this as their departure point, the authors of *People Flow* are right to invite fresh thinking on the kind of Europe we want to live in. Europe is now home to millions of people from non-European backgrounds, many religious and cultural dispositions, and networks of attachment based on diaspora connections and cultural influences from around the world.

Much of Europe has become multi-ethnic and multicultural in ways that are no longer reducible to its 'indigenous' ethno-cultural traditions. Europe is a site of longings rooted in myths of origin and tradition – regional, national and European – as well as a site of

transnational and trans-European identities and attachments.

But the latter are no longer confined to so-called 'third country' people or cosmopolitans in the fast lane of global travel. They also affect most 'ordinary' people, routinely enmeshed in plural and global consumption norms and patterns, even if consciously averse to all things 'foreign'.

This paradox is masterfully captured by Iain Chambers as he muses over what to make of the presence of a traditional Arab scribe who has set out a stall on the corner of a busy street in the centre of Paris:

“Wearing sandals, a turban, wrapped in a *djellaba* against the autumnal chill, sitting opposite a brand new school, a multicoloured tubular-steered piece of postmodern architecture, the immobile dignity of this public writer emphasises the disturbing presence of the stranger. His pen, his

language, his being, is coeval with mine. I could turn away and pretend that he no longer exists; that he is merely a quaint remnant of yesterday's immigration from the 'Third World', from the Maghreb. I can choose to see in his presence merely the intrusion of the exotic and the archaic in the mundane of modernity..."

### Ideas of the old Europe

What is it to be European in this context? What can such diversity weave around in the name of a shared or common identity – one that does not work with a hierarchy of worth based on ethnic or racial markers? The Idea of Europe that has stood for so long as a defining feature of the old continent – in opposition, at different times, to tribal 'barbarism', religious society, communist or communalist organisation, and American individualism – draws on four core values that are supposed to define Europe's contribution to modernity.

The first is a commitment to the rule of (Roman) law; the second is solidarity based on Christian charity and mutuality; the third is a commitment to the institutions of liberal democracy, rooted in the recognition of the rights and freedoms of the individual; and the fourth value is an appeal to community based on reason, and other Enlightenment universals that bind humans wherever they are in 'civilised' association.

After 11 September 2001 and all that it has led to in terms of the many rushed and thoughtless associations claimed between Islam, rogue states and terrorism, many western liberals have consciously returned to these core values to propose them as a new world standard of cohesion and civilisation, against the excesses of Americanism and, above all, the 'terrors' of religious fundamentalism.

But an appeal to this old Idea of Europe is dangerous on two counts in the new Europe of multicultural and multiethnic belongings, despite its claim upon universals of civic and public culture stripped of ethnic or nationalistic moorings.

First, the murmur of a war of crusade between Islam and the secular west arising out of the debris of Bosnia, 9/11, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq, is forging a Eurocentric imaginary of a world split into two camps:

a 'West' seen to be peace-loving and civilised because of its Enlightenment and Christian humanist values and an 'East' seen to be bellicose and infantile or irresponsible because of its religious zealotry and tribal behaviour.

The old Idea of Europe is once again lending its name to demarcate a space of progress and superiority against other worlds defined in ethno-religious terms. The consequence, wittingly or not, is that the Idea of Europe has become synonymous with white, Christian, reasoning Europeans. Because of this association, it will be seen as culturally exclusionary by the world majority that is judged to be infantile and irresponsible. Western liberal intellectuals are arrogant to believe in the superiority or universalism of the kind of thinking that underlies the Idea of Europe.

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Second, as universalistic moral pretensions come to be challenged by other world views – from Islam to post-colonial ideologies and various new global social movements – the old Idea of Europe will prove to be increasingly vulnerable as a motif for unity in Europe. Who will it appeal to and who will care enough to be carried by it? What will it mean to cosmopolitans and everyday consumers riding the swell of global, made-up-as-you-go, affiliations? How will it fire the imagination and loyalty of minority ethnic groups with loyalties split between host nation and imagined communities dispersed around the world and set in non-European histories?

Indeed, will it mean much to the growing number of everyday folk in majority communities, who, destabilised by the presence of strangers in their midst, as well as by the complexities of multiple assaults on their identities, yearn for the simplicity and security of local community and ethno-national belonging?

These yearnings for cultural difference and distinction within Europe itself – some territorial and others dispersed – make the old Idea of Europe a blunt instrument for unity in a Europe that paradoxically is both too big and too small for too many people as a commons.

### Ideas for a new Europe

The lack of a unifying ideal will tear an increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural Europe apart. But, given the above reservations, any new Idea of Europe

will have to be de-ethnicised as well as universalised in ways that allow for difference and diversity both within and beyond Europe, with no hierarchy of worth implied. The starting point cannot be the *Europeanness* of Europe, for example, or the appeal to philosophical principles whose ethnic and cultural biases are never far from the surface.

I propose, instead, to locate the alternative Idea of Europe within a philosophical ethos that publicises *empathy and engagement with the stranger as the essence of what it is to be 'European'*. As it happens, this ethos draws deeply on the pre-Socratic and Socratic tradition of defining freedom as the product of dialogue and engagement.

Two pillars of a non-racial Idea of Europe spring out of this interpretation of what it is to be free. The first is the principle of *hospitality*, which Julia Kristeva links etymologically to the original Greek 'ethos', defined as the habit of regular stay or shelter. This is an inspiring motif of belonging in Europe, one that Derrida too has appealed to recently, in arguing for a recovery of European cities as sites of refuge and hospitality for travellers and those in need of sanctuary.

In a Europe in which we all might be strangers one day as we come to be routinely on the move – whether virtually or physically – from one cultural space to another, the principle of refuge will serve the interests of more than just the minority currently needing protection from persecution and hardship in their country of origin.

If the Europe to come increasingly resembles 'an atterritorial space in which all residents of European states would be in a position of exodus', as Giorgio Agamben speculates, the consequence will be that 'the status of "European" would mean the being-in-exodus of the citizen ... decidedly opposing itself to the concept of nation'. The ethos of hospitality, and the various rights and protections that accompany it, might have to become something more than its current status as a grudging obligation by states towards marginals such as refugees, immigrants and asylum-seekers.

The second pillar of a new Idea of Europe implied by the Socratic idea that we are not born free, but become free through engagement, is the principle of *mutuality* as the basis on which identities are formed. Freedom follows from engagement with, and publicity for, the stranger in and among us, not least because without the stranger constituted as 'Other', the self cannot be defined. But it is also the case that the stranger – whether we like it or not – works away at our certitude

of the purity of self-identity. For the stranger always comes with the paradox of self-assuredness and loss of self-identity. Iain Chambers therefore, proposes a different way to look at the Arab scribe on the street corner of Paris:

"... But I can also register a trace, not merely of another world largely hidden from my eyes and understanding, but rather the trace of a language and history that seeks a response, and a responsibility, in mine. Apparently a foreigner, this, too, is clearly his city – certainly more than it is 'mine'. Forced to consider the composite realisation of modern space as it comes into being in this cosmopolitan place called Paris, I also register the alterity that is both integral to it and to the modernity I presume to possess.... Separate, yet indissolubly linked, his presence both interrupts and reconfigures my history, translating the closure of my 'identity' into an aperture in which I meet another who is in the world, yet irreducible to my will."

#### A politics of engagement

In a multi-ethnic and multicultural Europe, any failure to openly acknowledge the principle of mutuality and all that it represents in shaping identities as well as ensuring cultural change, will play into the hands of ethno-nationalists and xenophobes – abundant in number in both majority and minority communities – interested in perpetuating the fiction of pure, homeland, cultural identities and territorial boundaries in Europe.

Europe has a clear choice to make. It can deny the processes of cultural heterogeneity and hybridisation daily at work and allow ethnicity-based antagonisms to grow, aided by an overarching White Europeanist ideal of the good life. Alternatively, it can recognise the coming Europe of plural and hybrid cultures and affiliations and seek to develop an imaginary of becoming European through engagement with the stranger in ways that imply no threat to tradition and cultural autonomy. This requires a Europe stripped of ethnicised and racialised judgements concerning the worth of those who find themselves there as citizens and residents.

Moreover, our argument implies a completely different understanding of what it is to be political. A notion of freedom based on becoming rather than being (given to a prior cause) points towards a new politics of

Europe. It moves on from a programmatic politics based on pre-given notions of where Europe's historic mission for itself and for the world at large lies, towards a politics of making Europe through the democratic clash of a multicultural and multiethnic public which, through engagement, becomes European in ways that have yet to be defined.

In Deleuzian terms, the latter can be described as a diagrammatic politics, in the sense that it makes visible and traces potentialities, immanent tendencies and inter-cultural negotiations at or below ground level. Thus, neither a 'major' politics of grand normative designs for Europe – multicultural or otherwise – to be delivered by the state machinery at national or European level: nor a 'minority' politics of recognition based on fictive ethnicities crying out to be rewarded.

What we need instead is a 'minor' politics modest enough to see that 'in some sense we are all potentially from a strange "nowhere" prior to "territorial" definitions', a 'people to come'.

The proposition of a minor politics for Europe is not as bizarre as it first sounds. Indeed, we already live to some degree in a time of minor politics, even if those caught up in it pretend certainty of motive, origin and destination. Hidden under the shadow of state politics and grand narratives exists the febrile activity of a vast network of complementary and conflicting institutions and movements also shaping the cultural map of Europe, and tapping deep into the cultural practices of different communities.

In the field of ethnic relations alone, this network includes the politics of national imaginaries of assimilation and integration, structures of opportunity, welfare and cultural autonomy, business, popular and media practices towards majorities and minorities, the clash of racist and anti-racist organisations, public rhetoric on nation, Europe and strangers, and everyday negotiations of race and ethnicity in the labour market, in public spaces, in schools, and in neighbourhoods. Such assemblages are *de facto* an arena of minor politics, pulling people in different directions of ethno-cultural practice and attitude dependent on the balance of power and formative influences in given spatial and social contexts.

### People to come

What an Idea of Europe based on the ethos of empathy with the stranger can do, is to inflect minor politics in the direction of fruitful cultural dialogue and exchange. There is nothing intrinsically progressive or regressive about minor politics as such. A new Idea of Europe alone, however, is not enough. Other actions, at different levels of Europe, are necessary for a politics of engagement in Europe.

One reform that seems vital at the level of Europe, is the upward harmonisation of citizenship rights, but now offered as rights of residence too, in order to ensure that long-standing residents without EU citizenship are protected by adequate social, economic and political rights. A constitutionally protected Europe of the commons that offers to all in Europe a harmonised set of generous welfare protections, basic economic rights, and the right to political expression and protection, will help to buffer some of the politics of envy that currently exists between national communities, and between disadvantaged or socially-excluded groups, which fuels ethnic and cultural suspicion and intolerance.

The offer of universal rights of 'personhood' based on residence rather than citizenship alone, will facilitate the 'being-in-exodus' that Giorgio Agamben anticipates. Underpinning this condition of existence with equal mobile rights will help to reduce knee-jerk vilifications of the stranger and the xenophobia that feeds on competition for scarce material resources. Both the European Charter on Fundamental Rights and the Constitutional Convention currently under debate could be re-imagined as the bedrock for a new politics of engagement based on mutuality and hospitality.

A politics of engagement, though, must also attend to the local everyday. The authors of *People Flow* choose as one of their core principles, the premise that, 'The immediate environments of neighbourhood and school should be the major focus for efforts to respond constructively to diversity'. It is indeed in sites of daily encounter, from schools and the workplace to associations and public spaces, that the direct experience of race and ethnicity is shaped and negotiated.

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The riots in Bradford, Oldham, and Burnley in northern England during the summer of 2001, together with ample evidence of local ethnographies of race negotiations elsewhere in Europe, confirm the powers of the local everyday in shaping the nature of encounters with, and attitudes towards, the stranger.

Racial and ethnic relations vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, shaped by the intersection of local and wider currents of cultural influence in any given site. A new politics of inter-culturalism cannot ignore these site influences, or the potential of local experiments in dealing with ethnic and racial suspicion and conflict, through prosaic negotiations of cultural difference.

Many are the experiments of cultural transgression and understanding that can be cited, from the use of legislative theatre to help confront latent prejudice, through to the use of communal gardens, urban art, and school exchanges to foster cross-ethnic projects based on real engagement in common ventures, and new experiments in urban planning that encourage cultural exchange in public spaces as well as multiculturalism in the public culture. Though remote from the common actions fashioned in Brussels or Strasbourg, these experiments of the everyday that have lasting effects, also have a role to play in an Idea of Europe committed to becoming through engagement.

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