Structuring a Com

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[The decline of the nation-state presents a unique opportunity to form a true European identity]

If Europeans wish to retain their cultural diversity and let it flourish, they must continue to cultivate a European civil society and European identity. Why? Because nation-states are in crisis. National governments are proving themselves incapable of dealing with many of the issues and problems that accompany globalisation. Many of these issues are not tied to specific locations and thus cannot be addressed solely by one state. The sovereign state is now being seen in an entirely new light, and is increasingly dependant on co-operation with other states. As such, Europe requires pan-European institutions. Indeed, much of the debate is not focused around whether or not we need such institutions, but rather how to create them and how to make them legitimate.

No such thing as "European" politics

The only true source of legitimacy for pan-European institutions is a European civil society. The problem of European integration is very closely tied to the problem of European unity. The manner and type of governance in European states and also the overall European political system is increasingly at odds with the cultural and social roots of European society. Though technology is causing shifts in the way we do business, and global economy is becoming ever more prevalent, European identity remains a singularly national affair. This may prove unsustainable in the long run.

A process of European integration lacking a notion of common European identity can only be maintained if there are universal gains for all parties involved. However, any greater social or economic crisis could rock this boat and produce many unforeseen consequences. Without a European citizen-based society and a European identity, rather than seeking common answers and mutually co-operating, we could find ourselves blaming our neighbours and the "Brussels bureaucracy"

The absence of a true "European public," according to many sociologists, is the main problem in Europe. European politics cannot merely be the politics of trans-national governments, answerable only to national populaces. Another problem is the European Commission, which thus far remains answerable to nebulous mechanisms rather than to actual populaces. Only a responsible European public can be a true guarantee of responsible European politics. Without identity, however, there is no public; without the public there are no responsible politicians.

The political discussions within nation-states remain focused primarily on national politics, even when the discussion is at least framed as being European in character. European politics and European institutions have become little more than irrelevant caricatures in the national debate. This then results in paradoxical situations, as was evidenced in the last European parliamentary elections, when a large number of nationalistic and anti-European parties were elected to serve in a parliament designed to serve all of Europe. European issues remained largely off the agenda. To add to the air of irrelevance, many populaces used the elections to protest against national governments, propelling a great deal of opposition parties into the European fold.

All this further added to the impression that European politics is little more than an illusion.

Human solidarity from identity

Human identity is a particularly contextual and multi-layered social and psychological phenomenon. For example, a citizen a particular country can be critical of it whilst at home, but is often likely to be defensive abroad when others criticise it.

The American psychologist Erik Erikson (1902-1994) distinguished between positive and negative identity. Negative identity has as its primary trait a lack of empathy. In this sense, identity is arrived at through the pathological victimisation or domination of a perceived opponent. The long-term effect of negative identity is a growth in hatred, frustration and a loss of self-respect. Whilst a negative identity leads to one-sided debates and attempts at domination, a positive identity is far more productive and inherently leads to a far greater sense of gratification.

In traditional societies, identity was intertwined with a complex system of social ties, rituals and practices. In modern society, identity needs to be repeatedly constructed. As the British sociologist Stuart Hall (1932-) once noted, the problem of identity today is far more a question of routes than roots.

History, language and culture are thus ceasing to be the sources of identity in the traditional sense, and are rather becoming sources of their active features. It is therefore no longer important who I am or where I am from, but rather what I will be and what do I represent.

With regards to politics, in traditional societies there was a dominance of reli-

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gious, dynastic and territorial identities. In modern society, there is a far greater emphasis on national identity. Under the conditions of the modern nation-state, individualism has metamorphosed into its exact opposite, whilst national identity has become has become the basis for the mobilisation of the populace.

The politics of fear

Nothing can be more effective at creating human solidarity (and this can be misused by leaders for their own ends) than a common enemy. The global politics of the 20th century contains many examples of governments creating over-simplified portraits of an enemy. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, we have returned to a sense of perpetual fear, a subject touched upon by the controversial film-maker Michael Moore in his films *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. As regards the Czech environment, the so-called "fear of the Euro-bureaucrats" is the local version of such populist fears.

While the national identity crisis spurned by globalisation is bound to continue unabated, the personal identity crisis will also arguably continue. The European integration process can be grasped as an opportunity for a positive identity, so long as the pathological negative traits of dominance and self-superiority do not rear their heads. In fact, as long as European politics will exist solely within the sphere of the defence of national interests without the emphasis of collective European interests, pathologically negative traits will be strengthened.

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1944-) stated that European integration should be an attempt at both solidifying and easing the European national sen-

se of over-complication. The process of transformation of the national identity should also be a process of de-nationalisation, which means a confirmation of the cultural dimensions of collective, pan-national identities and a reduction of the pathologically negative traits. This view is not based on the creation of a European super-state, but on a notion of liberation from nationalism. This can result in, as the Czech thinker Ernest Gellner (1925-1995) pointed out, a true "spiritual liberation" of Europe.

The problem of de-nationalisation of European cultures is thus primarily a problem of mutual understanding and respect. Prejudices need to be demolished, and national events need to be looked at from a European perspective.

It is arguably wrong to think that political solidarity necessarily leads to cultural homogenisation. Indeed, cultural diversity is a European trait and can be a facet of European identity, which can form the basis for the existence of legitimate political institutions, which will in fact defend this diversity and will encourage its further development.

European identity can be defined as a project of civilisation, based on religion, common history and western values. However, this approach is troublesome. To define European identity on the basis of Christianity would exclude the large and growing number of European indigenous Muslims, in Albania and Bosnia for example. The phenomenon of common history is also questionable. Indeed, historically, Europe has frequently fought with itself, rather than with outsiders. The common history of Belgian, British, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch colonialism is a source of shame rather than pride. Thus, the notion of a common history should be framed as a common learning of mistakes that have led to disaster. Indeed, the lessons of our common past are at the very core and birth of the European integration process. European diversity must be seen as an asset that forms the basis of European identity. ∎
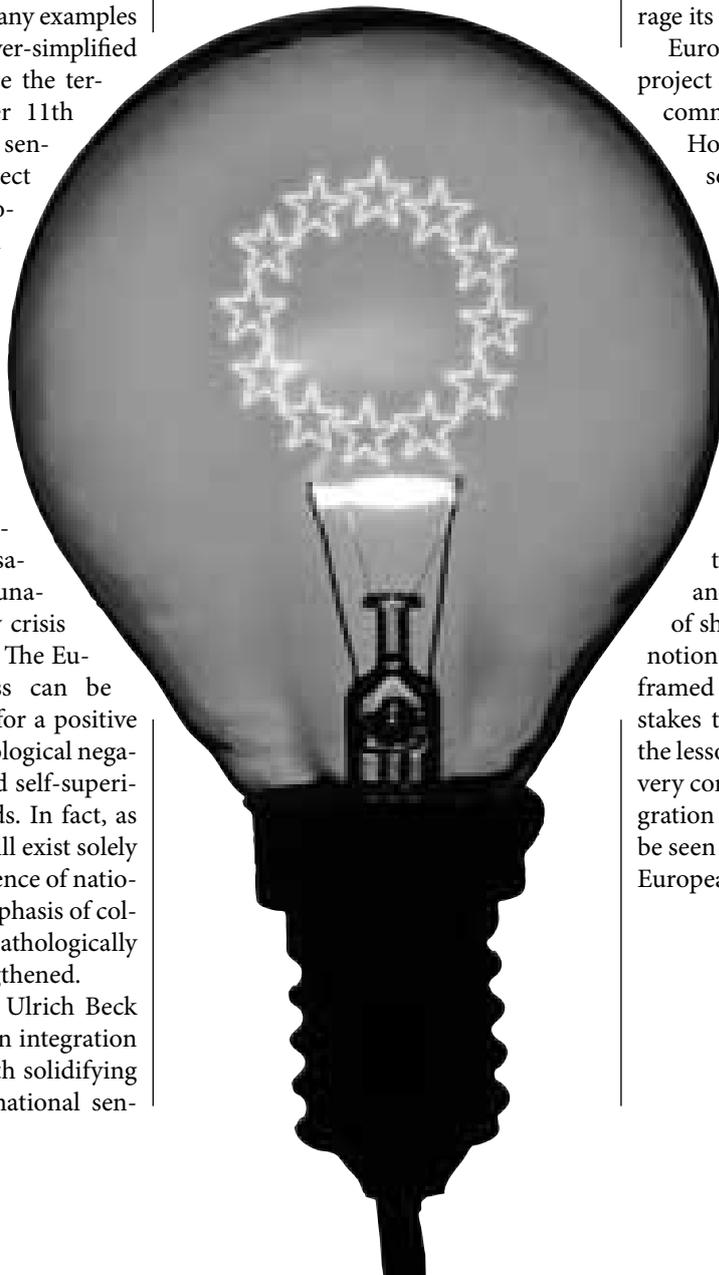
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