

EUROPEAN IDENTITY: WHAT IS IT?

An English Essay for a new European identity

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The debate about what a European identity really means, reminds me of what happened in the United Kingdom a few years ago. It regarded statements made by the BNP, the British Nationalist Party. The BNP is an extreme right-wing party with an unreasonable racist ideology.

Their statements were along the lines of “Britain should belong only to the British” and sparked serious academic debate about the so-called “original Briton”. Which of course doesn’t exist. What is an “original Briton”? Is he a Celt? Or maybe a Pict? If it is about skin colour, then perhaps those with Danish or Norwegian blood from the Viking invasions in the 9th Century are more white. Does this make these Britons more “British” than those with blood from French or Spanish settlers in the south of England and Ireland? After all, they might tan better and like garlic and wine, as opposed to fish and beer. What a ridiculous argument it becomes.

Today, in this day and age of terrorism, there has been great concern and debate about whether British Muslims are getting properly integrated into British society.

A recent census places Pakistanis as the largest section of the British population originally from a foreign origin. Most Pakistanis are Muslim, many just as well educated as their English peers, but even 2 generations on, they are still very much torn between two worlds. Young Muslims who have not mastered the balancing act feel somewhat marginalised in modern British society. These disaffected youth are the favoured targets of recruiters for extremist organisations. There have been calls by moderate and liberal Muslim academics that when a British Muslim is asked where he is from, he or she should not answer: “I am Muslim” but should answer: “I am British”. It is hoped that by creating a pride in being British, young Muslims will come to love their new country so that they will make a greater effort to be a part of it, without neglecting their

beliefs, and thus not bring violence upon it. There is no reason why religion and the concept of being British cannot exist together.

To anyone with a piercing philosophical or intellectual mind, nationalism and patriotism come to be regarded as just semantics and sometimes a disease that devours reason. To the anthropologist or sociologist, it is our psychobiology expanding our built-in social circuits, modernised to include flag colours and coat-of-arms and traditions as a badge of group identity.

I perceive the European identity in the same detached manner as the philosopher or the sociologist. But this doesn't make me ignorant of how necessary it is to have some common bond to unite people. As much as everyone would like to think they are free-willed self-aware beings, we cannot escape our evolutionary social programming. Modern life and the sheer number of people in Europe are overwhelming for social circuits that took millions of years to develop, suddenly asked to cope with civilisation in less than 10,000 years. Today's political and social borders are those delineated partly by the limits of our biology, as well as historical, linguistic and geographical factors.

In short, European identity is whatever we *choose* to make it. Ask anyone and question them long enough and hard enough, they will eventually come to accept or consider that a European identity is just an idea. It isn't real.

However, just because it is not something that can be pinned down, does not make it any less important to getting along with each other. It gives us a connection to everyone else. It helps to lay foundations to bring people together in peace and, very importantly, to stand together for when times are hard or leaders are wicked. The European identity can be built on traits that are common to all human beings and perhaps on common dreams and common ideals, although these will be harder to find as common to absolutely everyone.

As an idea *and* an ideal, the European identity should be built on other ideas, and they should be the highest and greatest ones that everyone can share.