# EVOLUTION OF DISCOURSES ON EUROPE. THE RISE OF NATIONAL-POPULISM AND THE IDENTITY MALAISE

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## ABSTRACT

For the past twenty years, the "rise of populism", to use a common designation in the media, has been a phenomenon marking national and European elections. Why has Europe become a divisive issue, often even controversial? A widely used interpretation in political commentaries presents the phenomenon as the consequence of the economic crisis. This paper focuses on the conflict between the identity promoted by the institutions and the identity issue in the populist rhetoric. Doing this, the second part of the article returns to the quarrel over identities between heritage and construction. Finally the paper discusses the effects of the different conceptions of identity on the understanding of migration processes.

**Keywords***: Europe, European Union, Political Discourse, Populism, Identity.*

For the past twenty years, the "rise of populism", to use a common designation in the media, has been a phenomenon marking national and European elections. A widely used interpretation in political commentaries presents the phenomenon as the consequence of the economic crisis. The stagnation of incomes would therefore be the cause of a decline in identity, encouraging the perception of the processes of globalization of trade (both economic and cultural) and immigration as a threat to national identities. However, it should be noted that, in most European countries, national identity was brandished by the "national populist" current (Taguieff 1984) well before the 2008 crisis; while the most violent national demands (those of the Balkans) date back from the 1990s. Thus,

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the rhetoric of identity is available and mobilized well before the economic crisis and before the migration crisis, the explosion of which only really dates back to 2014–2015.

On the basis of this observation, the main inquiry of this paper is why the European Union, a new post-war political order, exacerbates anxiety about identity. The relationship of political parties and citizens to Europe was characterized for a long time by a "permissive consensus" (Lindberg and Steingold 1970), a situation based on tacit consent and the positive a priori of citizens with regard to European integration. The relationship with the European project will remain in effect for a long time little conflictual and depoliticized. It is in particular that Europe is born from the rubble of the Second World War and appears as the expression of a shared will ("it is the birth not only of a goal in European construction, but of a true European common good, the Pax Europea", Belanger 2015), peace encouraged by the balance of terror, nuclear anxiety and the Cold War. It is therefore the out of the arsenals that made Europe and not the other way around. The break is twofold. On the one hand, the European nations affirm their will to suppress war as a legitimate political action. On the other hand, they argue that peace must prevail as the end of a new political order.

Why has Europe become a divisive issue, often even controversial? European values are presented as universal while the member states carry specific cultural and national identities (historical events, often warlike, places of memory, national heroes etc.). There should be a minimum of coherence and common identity or, in practice, an emotional embodiment of these values. However, beyond the absence of clearly defined borders (regular integration of new members), Europe has neither a real capital (rather two artificial centers, Brussels and Strasbourg), nor historical heroes (Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman initially built an economic Europe which is rightly perceived today as a constraint and not as a protection), nor of genuine symbol charged with history if not negative symbols like Auschwitz. On what ultimately rests the identity promoted by the institutions? This is the question addressed in the first part of this paper. Between heritage and construction, the second part returns to the quarrel over identities and then to the adoption by the national populist current of an essentialised conception of identity that is both national and European, civilizational, we might say. Finally, in the third part, the paper will discuss the effects of such a conception of identity on the understanding of migration processes.

## 1. TERRITORIES, SPACES, VALUES, BORDERS

What is "Europe" the name of? If we refer to the etymology, we first meet Europe in the guise of a Phoenician princess (Greek mythology), the initial referent

of the name that this text naturally leaves aside. "Europe" has a semantic vagueness which allows it to return all at once:

– to a geographic area delimited by the Atlantic Ocean to the West, the Mediterranean to the South, but whose limit to the East remains unclear (we could remember, for instance, of General de Gaulle's dream of a Europe that would go "from the Atlantic to the Urals");

– to a long history since the Roman Empire, largely made up of conflicts (whose traces and vestiges very often constitute fundamental landmarks of national cultures);

– to a set of cultural traits of which we will cite the Judeo-Christian tradition in which all of medieval Europe participates (Roman tradition in the West, Byzantine in the East)[1], the language (made up of part of the Latin heritage and the other Anglo-Saxon languages, more recently Slavic languages) and literatures (the translation of which encourages circulation on the continent).

The European nations thus share a historical past, common foundations (Christianity, Reformation, Renaissance) and values (Christianity, Enlightenment, and, broadly, ideals of the French Revolution) without abolishing the national identities reinforced in the 17th century by the link to the territory in the treaties of Westphalia (1648). However, all projects of unification or perpetual peace are based on Kantian cosmopolitanism: "The state of peace among people living next to each other is not a state of nature (*status naturalis*): this is much rather a state of war [...] the state of peace must therefore be instituted". Consequently, the current challenge addressed to Europe is therefore that of the opposition between what is given-inherited (the national past, which separates nations) and what remains to be "instituted" and constructed (cooperation and new forms of shared sovereignty).

### 1.1. THE FOUNDING TEXTS: SPACES *VS.* TERRITORIES

#### *Europe as a superposition of functional spaces*

The preamble to the Treaty on European Union (known as the TEU or the "Maastricht Treaty", effective since 1993) and its Title I ("Common provisions") set out the basic principles. Far from defining Europe territorially, it defines a set of constituent common values. First are evoked "values" from a common heritage (§2): "inspired by the cultural, religious and humanist heritage of Europe from which developed the universal values which constitute the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, as well as freedom, democracy, equality,

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[1] The inclusion of "Judeo-Christian roots" in the European constitution was the subject of heated debate in 2004 in France. The religious reference had finally been abandoned.

and the rule of law". Then are evoked "principles" (§4): "confirming their attachment to the principles of freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law". Finally, "spaces" are mentioned. The preamble thus evokes "an area of freedom, security and justice"; Article 3 proposes "an area of freedom, security and justice without internal borders within which the free movement of people is ensured"; Article 8, meanwhile, envisages an "area of prosperity and good neighborliness, based on the values of the Union and characterized by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation".

The notion of space is therefore closely associated with the values promoted by the European Union. They constitute functional spaces: the space of security, freedom of movement, justice; the space of money and free trade; the space of a citizenship which "adds to national citizenship but does not replace it". It should be noted here that these different spaces do not overlap since the economic space (the "internal market") includes the 28 states (27 after Brexit), the monetary space (the "Euro zone") has 19 members and the security area ("Schengen Europe") brings together 22 member states and 4 associates. This great legal complexity and this differentiation of the various functional areas of Europe certainly contribute to the relative weakness of readability of the European institution.

### *Identity and values*

Europe of the Treaties is a Europe of values. And let us recall here that the TEU provides, in its article 7, that the non-respect of these values can lead to the suspension of rights (see, for instance, the current lawsuits against Viktor Orban`s Hungary or the recent tensions between the Commission and Jaroslaw Kaczynski`s Poland). The problem facing Europe is that the values supposed to constitute its identity base remain very abstract to mark its own identity. Japan or Australia, for example, mobilizes in part the same values to assert their national identity. These values are therefore not able to found a specific identity (therefore a distinction) capable of defining a European specificity. The appropriation of Europe therefore requires the recognition of a base of shared values and not the sharing of a territory (symbolic space for the projection of belonging which is not akin to the functionality of space) susceptible to draw a more or less fixed opposition between us, Europeans, and them, non-Europeans.

<center>1.2. BORDERS, HISTORY, IDENTITIES</center>

There is a strong conflict between the cultural identity claimed by the European institution and national plurality. Marc Bloch showed it: Europe has arisen when the Roman Empire has collapsed. The identity was built around a few

elements: church and feudalism, with places (cathedrals), religious orders (monasteries), universities etc. From a mediological point of view, it is all of these institutions that will give unity to European culture (to which we must add, at the outset, a common language, the Latin). But, at each stage of its construction, Europe experienced political fragmentation, from the Reformation and the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. So much so that Europe has built (treaties of Westphalia) a model of nation states quite original if we compare it to the model of the city (Athens), the one of the empire (Rome), or even cities – Hanseatic States (the historic association of trading cities in Northern Europe). But there are still rivalries and conflicts. Thus, European identity has long been thought of at the crossroads of the global (Continent) and the local (Nations).

We have seen that the term "territory" is absent from the TUE except, once, in adjectival form to recall that among the "*essential functions of the State*", there are those "*who have as their object to ensure its integrity*". Similarly, the term "border" is mentioned only once (Article 2), in a passage relating to the free movement of persons "*in conjunction with appropriate measures for the control of external borders*". Why this new absence? No doubt because the aim of the treaty is to affirm the principles of cooperation which authorize its enlargement to other Member States. Without doubt for the first time, the Union's bet is to show that a great political structure can exist without being an empire: as such, the question of borders is foreign to the very spirit of the treaty. Indeed, Europe is moving. And the successive enlargements respond to the principles of the Union because they are the effect of pacifications (Yugoslavia), reconciliations (GDR/FRG), and stabilizations. Here we find Marie-Eve Bellanger (2015)'s thesis that the disappearance of borders and territorial expansion is the inherent condition for maintaining the community political system. To be astonished at the little passion that supports European construction, if we compare it to Russian "messianism" or American "nationalism", it is to forget that there is no identity without borders: "What we consider to be culture is first of all a matter of closure. Intelligence needs a wall, a palisade, a border [...] which will counter the dispersion of forces and lives [...] To close a space is to open up the times." (Debray 1980, 18).

The European Union is a puzzle more than an organic unity, if we judge by the abstract dimension of the universal values of Europe. Europe has become "the West" (thus associating the old continent with the new American world) so that Europe has ceased to be a model to become a receptacle for what cannot constitute its own identity. Furthermore, the indistinctness of the ever-changing European political space would not contribute to constructing a distinction capable of founding a political community. This is where the question of populism and identity claims arises.

## 2. POPULISMS, ETHNICISM, NATURALISM

Europe had to face a challenge: to build a solid "European identity", which citizens are called upon to appropriate, and complementary to their national identities. The halt to the continuous increase in purchasing power in Western democracies has renewed the relationship with the other, the non-European. For a long time, European identity was indeed built on the opposition between "we" – European democrats, richer and freer and "them" – communist countries, less wealthy and less free. The validity of the model has crumbled with the blocking of economic progress in the West. In addition, the fall of the USSR had a considerable effect: anti-Sovietism lost its structuring function in Western identity discourse in favor of another rhetoric which draws on the awakening of the nationalities of the 1990s which will notably lead to the dramas of the Balkans.

It should also be noted that the rise in uncontrolled migratory flows directed towards Europe has clearly renewed the discourse on migration: everywhere in Europe, far beyond the far right, leaders are now claiming failure of the multiculturalist model hitherto claimed (Cameron in Great Britain or Merkel in Germany, for example). This questioning is obviously not unrelated to the terrorist acts which have plunged many European countries since the mid-2000s. Multiculturalism is said to be a cause of social disintegration and the fragmentation of national identities.

The European identity bet is part of today's context of questioning long-promoted models. And, an additional challenge the European institutions must now deal with is the rise of the national populist movement in a majority of European states. Faced with uncertainty, this movement opposes the "reassuring" vision of an unchanging and refuge nation, a nation erected as a bulwark against the onslaught of the outside world: economic globalism and migratory surge. Consequently, the European Union is presented by the national populist current as the "Trojan horse" of a savage globalization which the nations must fight to avoid disappearing[2]. Faced with "European cosmopolitan globalism", it is the assertion and the claim of the "substantial" character of the national identity, which refuses the European identity construction for the benefit of an ethnic community, anchored in a common culture and territory sometimes fantasized. The Hungarian nostalgia for the lost unity of the Magyar territories before the dismantling of Austria-Hungary is one example among others. To understand the national-populist conception of identity, its ethnic substratum and its ability to naturalize and essentialize national cultures, it seems necessary to examine the quarrel around identities and its challenges.

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[2] In between metaphor and historical example, the image of the Trojan horse is recurrent in far-right discourse: it allows associating the idea of disclosure and revelation with the identification of the threat. This metaphor is mobilizing in the sense that it encourages collusion: you and I are not duped.

2.1. THE QUARREL OVER IDENTITIES: NATURE OR CONSTRUCTION?

There are so many examples from elsewhere: the Swiss referendum against the construction of minarets (and the "yes" victory of over 57%), the building of the wall between the United States and Mexico etc. National populism, in its diversity, is not specific to the European institutional space, but it finds itself at ease there. National identities would be doomed to disappear under the double effect of the loss of sovereignty (associated with globalization), and the dilution of national identities in multiculturalism. This fear of the loss of identity has firstly an ideological origin. This is the principle of hierarchical affinities defined by Charles Maurras (1954): family-commune-province-nation constitute as many protective circles of human encirclement supposed to be natural, and not the products of learning.

This identity populism has an ethnic basis and is rooted in a history built around heroic figures such as Clovis, Jeanne d'Arc or Charles Martel in France, while in Central Europe it is often resistance to Turkish invasions that offers the identifying resources necessary for the glorious promotion of the nation (siege of Vienna by the Ottomans in 1529 for Austria, for example). It is also based on hereditary transmission. This is important since it prohibits the appropriation of national identity by the other, who comes from elsewhere. From these three elements emerges the rather ambiguous idea of an identity that is as well strong, eternal and unchanging, and fragile because it is threatened "from the outside". Thus, in a striking shortcut, sovereignty is essential to protect oneself and perpetuate the independence and integrity of the members of the national "community". This is how the legitimacy of the only nation is imagined, because of its "natural", and not because of its political-historical origins. For the national populist current, unlike nations, supranational organizations cannot have an emotional base or elective affinities with the territories. It is the recurring condemnation of "uprooted elites", the "above ground elites". Those are the two designations that have become clichés. In the elite/people opposition that forms the basis of populist rhetoric, the elite is cosmopolitan, the people are rooted. It is therefore the territorial inscription of the identity that would distinguish the nations of the European space.

However, the reference to larger groups than the nation is not absent from the national populist current. National affirmation can indeed be accompanied by a reference to a large area of civilization designated as "European" or "Western". With its manifesto, the British National Party, for instance, claims to defend "the English, the Scots, the Irish, the Welsh, as well as the populations of European descent who have arrived over the past centuries and who have fully integrated into British society". In the program of the Norwegian Fremskrittspartiet (Party of Progress), the values claimed are those "of the traditions and the cultural heritage

of Norway and the West, inspired by a Christian and humanist vision of life". These two examples illustrate an ethnic rather than a political approach to identity, an essentialist approach. Identity can only be the result of alliances and struggles against the external invader and cut across the area of medieval Christianity. This identity, stemming from Antiquity, Christianity, Humanism and the philosophy of the Enlightenment, gave Europeans the values that distinguished them from the rest of the world: Europe would therefore be a civilization with distinctive characteristics. Europe overlaps here with the Christian West, the one of the Crusades.

This approach moves national populism away from a political apprehension of European identity defined by political values thought to be universal (freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights). Where political identity is founded on legal bases ("constitutional patriotism", according to Habermas 1992), cultural identity refers to a romantic vision and is not based on universal principles (Kant 1984), but on particularistic and emotional presuppositions. In his 1990 program, Jean-Marie Le Pen thus cited "Marathon, Salamine, Lépante, Poitiers, Tolbiac", (the battle of) "the Catalaunian plains" as strong and constitutive moments of Europe, that is to say periods which oppose the West to the East, especially to the Muslim world. While Europe is clearly made up of wars and internal fragmentation, national populism presents it as constructed in the face of a common external enemy. The national populist conception of identity, based on hereditary assignment, thus departs radically from a conception of the nation as "imaginary political community, and imagined as intrinsically limited and sovereign" (Anderson 2006, 6) in which nations naturalized in modern times under the effect, in particular, of the development of printing and linguistic unification.

Identities feed on relationships with the others. The European "we" that became institutionalized following the two world conflicts was long reinforced by opposition to a clearly identified "them": the communist threat. With the fall of the wall, opposition to communism largely lost its structuring function. Within the national populist movement, Islam and Muslims therefore appear to be the threat against which Europe must protect itself.

## 3. THE CHALLENGES OF IMMIGRATION, THE NEW FRONTIERS

An important discursive feature of the national-populist parties is ethnically based xenophobic nationalism, of which anti-immigrant xenophobia is the clearest illustration. The recent rise of the extreme right in several countries where the effects of the economic crisis are weaker than elsewhere (Switzerland and the Netherlands, for instance) indicates that it is not the result of a cyclical revolt of the losers, but rather driven by strong identity claims facing the socio-cultural challenges of globalization.

## 3.1. THE INITIAL PARADOX

According to the Eurobarometer results, immigration has become the most important problem of the European Union in the opinion of Europeans. The increase is impressive: 12% in 2011, 34% in 2018 (ahead, in order, of climate change, the economic situation, the state of public finances of the Member States and terrorism). On the other hand, at the national level, the most important problem is considered unemployment, and for the individuals themselves, the prices rise, health, pensions and education. The relatively low place of immigration in individual concerns, however, does not prevent it from entering the political and media agenda, election after election. But the most remarkable is undoubtedly that part of the national-populist parties whose privileged themes are immigration and security experienced electoral breakthroughs long before the various migration crises. To cite only two examples: the first breakthroughs of the FN (Front National in France) date from the early 1980s (during the municipal elections in 1983, then the European elections in 1984, thanks to which the party sends 10 deputies to Strasbourg); the Austrian FPÖ (the Freedom Party), led by Jorg Haïder from 1986, obtained its first good results in the 1990s (it notably obtained 27% in the legislative elections of 1999). These two examples and many others (Bulgaria, Poland, Italy etc.) illustrate that the success of the national-populist parties largely preceded the placing of immigration on the European agenda, along with the demands for a restriction of the legal immigration, a return to the reception conditions for asylum seekers, the expulsion of illegal immigrants.

## 3.2. THE RECOVERY OF FAR-RIGHT SPEECH BY THE TRADITIONAL RIGHT

The partial discursive alignment of the traditional right with the national-populist current is particularly clear in the countries of the former Soviet Bloc where it leads to new ideological alliances. The case of Hungary is perhaps the most remarkable with the coming to power of the liberal Viktor Orban supported by the extremist Jobbik party. Elsewhere, recovery is less evident in the sense that it does not necessarily upset traditional political alliances. However, proposals hitherto confined to the far right are more and more taken up by traditional European rights: proposals for quotas for non-European immigrants, refusal of the minimum integration income for immigrants for 10 years etc.

This alignment is reflected in discourse by the circulation of certain formulas beyond their original scene of utterance. The argument made by the example of the "Polish plumber" to condemn the free movement of workers in the Schengen area in the debate on posted workers, originally put forward by Philippe de Villiers in 2005, would subsequently be widely taken up by the right traditional approach to

condemn the free movement of workers in the Schengen area (Sarale 2015). Another example, the metaphor of fluids to designate migration ("migratory tsunami", "migratory tidal wave", "colander Europe"…) will be taken up in 2015 by the French president Sarkozy comparing the arrival of migrants to a "flight from water"[3]. As we have noted elsewhere, "the reference to liquids contributes to a staging of the unaccountability of migrants. […]. It is also to accredit the inexorable nature of migration and thus to account for an uncontrolled or even uncontrollable situation of which the political opponent [here the European Union] is the artisan or the accomplice" (Auboussier 2018, 101).

### 3.3. THE NATIONAL-POPULIST ARGUMENT

The argument of the "Polish plumber" shows that the fears associated with migration can be economic and draws an East/West opposition, an axis which with no doubt partly replaces the Northern Europe/Southern Europe axis which has today partly disappeared from the made of the economic development of countries such as Portugal or Spain.

However, it is above all at the cultural and identity level that migration turns out to be a threat to the national-populist current. The other, when he is a Muslim, poses less threat to the jobs of nationals than the very identity of the host nation. The criticism of the porosity of the external borders of the Schengen area makes it possible to update the theme of "the migratory invasion", even the theme of the "great replacement"[4]. The fears of national populism find here their consistency in the figure of the Muslim migrant who would threaten the way of life, the traditions and the national identities. Party programs insist on the Christian foundations of Europe. Dansk Folkeparti (Denmark), for example, recalls that "Christianity finds a secular consecration in Denmark and is inseparable from the life of the people", while the FPÖ underlines that "the European values of Christianity, Judaism and Enlightenment" are threatened by "fanaticism and extremism". The threat today is less economic than cultural. It is a culturally dominant xenophobia: the other cannot be assimilated due to cultural differences. And the European Union is responsible for the threat because its migration policy would lead to the erosion of borders. Implicitly, the theme of the great replacement supports these discourses by

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[3] Making fun of the Commission's proposal to distribute asylum seekers across the EU, Sarkozy, in front of Republican activists in the Val d'Oise, uses the metaphor: "I have seen absurd proposals but we have passed an unmatched bar [...]. In a house, there is a pipe that explodes; it spills into the kitchen [...]. The repairman comes and says I have a solution: we will keep half for the kitchen, put a quarter in the living room, the other room in the parents' room and if that is not enough, we still have the children's room."

[4] The theory introduced in France by far-right writer Renaud Camus (2011) that the European population will soon be replaced by populations from black Africa and the Maghreb leading to the demise of European civilization. By interest or ideology, political and media elites would encourage the phenomenon while denying it to the general public.

making the European Union the accomplice of a phenomenon which would lead to the disappearance of economic sovereignty (acceleration of trade and market opening), political (slow disappearance of nation-states in the benefit of a global governance) and cultural (ethnic and religious fragmentation of national communities). Finally, the idea is indeed that the European Union, by claiming an area of shared peace, acts against nations: European and national interests are irreconcilable. The national-populist current thus brandishes the model of a "closed society" (Popper 1945), major theme of the inherited and intangible identity, threatened by migrations and institutions presented as accomplices of the disintegration of the nations. From there, it seems dangerous to explain the push of extremist parties by the economic crisis alone and the stagnation of living standards. The place taken by the national-populist parties on the European political scene is not a cyclical reaction to the crisis, but the expression of an identity claim against the process of opening borders which weakens national identities. This seems to proceed from a past, or backward-looking, vision of wanted or fantasized sovereignty as national independence. However, current sovereignty comes from the necessary cooperation between peoples: the protection of the national territory depends on cooperation. Same observation for economic questions, for the fight against terrorism, or global warming: "post-modern" sovereignty presupposes subsidiarity because the national level of action is no longer relevant. Let us note, with a touch of irony, that this is what was proposed in 1984 in the book *Les Francais d`abord* [The French People First] one of the emblematic leaders of the European national populism, Jean-Marie Le Pen: "since all the evils of which we speak – immigration, insecurity, unemployment, low birth rates, terrorism – are evils which are as European as French, it is a common European policy which must be elaborated" (Le Pen 1984, 114).


**CONCLUSION**


Europe, who succeeded in reconciling peoples at war after 1945, does not highlight its successes and its assets, and has not built a strong image at a time when the economic slowdown is making globalization and immigration threatening. Europe was built on a quasi slogan ("Never again!") whose strength has been exhausted confronted with renewed threats (after 1945 the war, today, the economic and identity crisis). There was in "Never again" more than a simple opposition to war (like pacifism), but the expression of a desire to renew the political order, a renewal likely – and this is not nothing - to take the form of a transfer of sovereignty. This desire was and remains very clearly political, while national-populism opposes to it only an ethnic and naturalistic nostalgia.

As Pierre Nora recently reminded us (*Le Monde*, 11th March 2019), all countries are now confronted with a long series of global problems which none can

solve alone. We can draw up a summary list: demographic revolution (passage to 10 billion inhabitants in 30 years); ecological revolution: man destroys nature he thought he had mastered; climate revolution: irreversible changes are in sight; geostrategic revolution: the West has lost the government of the world; economic revolution: unexpected collapse of industrial civilization; political revolution: exhaustion of traditional democratic systems and very large rise of movements that call themselves "anti-system"; finally, religious revolution: rise of Islam in the world and in the West. In addition, our societies are witnessing the rise of a society of individual which leads to a breakdown in solidarity.

Confronted to all this, Europe is currently destabilized by national populism which has only a regressive and potentially dangerous vision of the solutions to bring, because it pushes the most fragile populations towards authoritarian systems, and History taught us to what disasters they lead to.

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