

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **THE BORDERS OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY**

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## **Abstract**

Border crossing into the Western world is increasingly becoming a central political question in the beginning of the XXI century. Notably, the growth of populist forms of nationalism in parts of Western Europe and in the Anglosphere is joined by the strong nationalist stances of Eastern Europe's governments that categorically reject non-European immigration. Overall, these political forces are united in their repudiation of the effects of globalisation, focusing their critiques on how global migration negatively impact national identities. Nevertheless, national-populism is more based on an instinctive reply against unwanted consequences than on a substantive doctrine. Hence, this article goes beyond national-populism and focuses instead on how the criticism of the liberal order is being articulated by identity driven forces, shedding light on their post-liberal visions of the future. Namely, it highlights the growing influence of the political philosophy of the *Nouvelle Droite* via the multiplication of identitarian movements in the Western world. It argues that border crossing into the West is strongly contributing to the rise of Europeanness.

**Keywords:** Migration, European Identity, *Nouvelle Droite*, Political Philosophy, Identitarianism

## Introduction

Western liberalism is a powerful force with various social effects. Its capacity to disrupt social identities through mass migration and fluid citizenship is particularly powerful. Unsurprisingly, liberalism's discontents often point towards its negative impact on communal identities (Sandel, 1982). At the level of party politics, the rise of national-populism in the Western world is a strong symptom of an identity crisis. By raging against mass migration into the West, populists pit what they consider to be the "real people" against uprooted liberal elites (Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017), but the question of what the identity of a people is often remains to be clarified.

Formally, a collective identity is intrinsically relational and comparative. That is, it is constructed not only via the affirmation of itself but also through the contrast between identities. Borders are not simply physical barriers on the map. Instead, they normally represent the boundaries of group identity. Consequently, international migration waves generate strong emotional reactions. A mass migration represents a moment in time where identity is put into question; that is, it forces the receiving and the moving population to rethink who they are, a disruptive moment with diverse consequences. Still, it is possible to visualize two general outcomes: either identity profoundly changes with migration, or migration strengthens identity through the contrastive contact with "the other". These seem to be the two possible results for the contemporary West in the face of international mass movements of people into its lands.

This chapter discusses the impact that border crossing into the West has on European imagine identity.<sup>1</sup> Attempting to understand the reaction to this contemporary phenomenon, it focuses on the vision of identitarian nativist forces, highlighting their post-liberal conception of the future and the strong influences of the *Nouvelle Droite*. It argues that the crescent adherence to this vision is underpinned not only by an intense discontentment with a perceived weakening of national identities, but also by a latent concern with the fading out of European identity itself. Hence, by providing a direct contrast with "the other", global migration into the West substantially contributes to the rise of European consciousness.

The analysis of the article is structured as follows. I start by presenting a general overview of the discontents of liberal modernity and of the opponents of mass migration into the West, with a special emphasis on the rise of identitarian movements.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not attempt to reach a substantive definition of European identity. That is beyond the scope of this article. I use the term to refer to the European people and its diaspora in their historical commonalities.

Afterwards, I expose current identitarian political thought, which comes mostly from the *Nouvelle Droite* (a post-liberal school of political philosophy). Finally, I analyse how the identitarian movements operate along transnational lines in a technological world and I also assess how the intense migration into the West can impact European alliances and identity. The conclusion summarizes the main points.

### **Western discontents**

Border crossing into the Western world is progressively generating reactions at the political level. The hard nationalist claims by Eastern European governments (e.g. the Visegrad group) and the proliferation of national-populism in Western Europe and in the Anglo-Sphere seem to challenge the liberal consensus of the post-war era. The European Union is increasingly divided between an Eastern Europe that broadly opposes non-European migration and a Western Europe that, despite the rise of populist parties, is still upholding the liberal understanding of open societies. It is difficult to predict how exactly this situation will develop. Still, what seems clear is that national-populists in Western Europe and in the Anglosphere have not offered any visions of the future beyond general protests against uprooted elites and mass migration. Their calls for a return to the sovereign nation-state controlled by the “real people” are reminiscent of the liberal spirit of the French revolution and sound mostly anachronistic. There is a lack of substantive doctrine regarding their claims, which reveals that their actions are more based on a discontentment with the consequences of Western globalisation than on a properly designed alternative.

Yet, cultural, and political movements that uphold identity as a major value are growing both in Europe and in the United States. These are known as the identitarian movements (Zúquete, 2018), and they are a direct expression of the demographic transformation of the West as a result of mass migration. Although these movements are a consequence of an acute discontentment with global border crossing, they carry a cultural and philosophical baggage that aims at turning the liberal Western paradigm into a post-liberal one. The militants operate online and in the public realm, focusing more on cultural change and meta-politics than on party politics. In the United States, the identitarian movement known as the Alt-Right (Hawley, 2017) came to prominence with the ascension of Donald Trump to power. Although it is difficult to assess the extent to which these two phenomena are connected, they appear at a moment of general discontentment with liberal globalisation, with the movement providing a cultural background that can influence party politics.

The same can be said about the identitarian movements in Europe, whose ideas can quickly permeate party politics, potentially offering current national-populists a substantive doctrine that they lack. Even centrist parties can be affected.

The identitarian Euro-American transatlantic network represents a shift from a classic nation state allegiance to a transnational allegiance based on European identity. Given the fast migration flows and fluid citizenship that characterize the contemporary West, identity is becoming dissociated from nationality and international networks begin to define the future of politics. It is therefore of importance to understand the main ideas driving these movements, ideas that, to a large degree, were developed by the *Nouvelle Droite* school of thought.

### **Against liberalism and homogenisation**

Born in the late 1960s with the foundation of the French think tank GRECE<sup>2</sup>, the *Nouvelle Droite* gathers ideas from authors such as Oswald Spengler, Antonio Gramsci, Friedrich Nietzsche, Julius Evola and Martin Heidegger. Although defining itself as a philosophical school beyond left or right (Griffin, 2000, p. 47), the *Nouvelle Droite* is often regarded as a right wing political force (McCulloch, 2006, p. 176). Yet, the school sees the political right as part of the problem of the liberal paradigm. According to Alain de Benoist, the founder of the school, “one of the tragedies of the right (...) is its inability to understand the need for [attention to] the *long term* ... it has not understood the importance of Gramsci” (Benoist, 1979, p. 62). This reveals a common belief of current identitarian movements, that is, the belief in the importance of changing culture by engaging in cultural and philosophical activism, a practice known as metapolitics. At its heart, the *Nouvelle Droite* is a post-liberal school (Lindholm & Zúquete, 2010, Chap. III). More than simply dealing with the question of mass migration, it aims at overcoming liberalism and the metaphysical doctrine that gave origin to it: Christianity. Hence, the *Nouvelle Droite* turns to European paganism and to systems of organisation that underpin the rediscovery of European ancient roots in future contexts.

By highlighting Christianity’s desacralisation of nature, promotion of universal egalitarianism and promotion of “one-world-one-God”, the school sees the Judeo-Christian ethos as devaluating nature, therefore becoming a destructive homogenising force of the unique diversity in the natural world.

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<sup>2</sup> Groupement de recherche et d’études pour la civilisation européenne.

In the words of Guillaume Faye, another main intellectual figure of the school, the Western liberal order is the “monstrous child of ... the egalitarian ideologies created by Judeo-Christian monotheism” (Faye, 1980, p. 5). The radical separation between God and nature underpins the problem that the Christian European tradition of the last centuries brought: the destruction of true European culture, that is, the erasure of immemorial traditions. By clearly pointing the finger at Christian theology, Alain de Benoist explains how this vision is responsible for the uprooting of identities:

Throughout its history, the West has constantly sought to make the world recognize “universal” values, themes, social, political, and organisational methods that, in reality, are intrinsic [to the West]. The way employed to reach this goal has always been by mimetic injunction. First, the West claimed to bring the dogmas of the “true faith” (Christian) to other cultures. Next, [the West] aimed at exporting “civilisation” and “progress” through colonisation. Today, it advocates “development” and the “rights of man.” Successively, the “three M’s” (missionaries, the military, and merchants) have tried to *convert* other peoples to a form of religious, political, and economic universalism that today we know very well to be nothing but a veiled form of ethnocentrism (Benoist, 2004, p. 4).

Furthermore, this tradition of homogenising the world is now carried out by the United States, decisively shaping Western modernity. Therefore, human rights are regarded as tools of this continuing colonisation process that aims at homogenisation. For the *Nouvelle Droite*, the concept of human rights lies on a

contractual and above all individualistic anthropology, on the idea of an abstract man, prepolitical in nature and nonsocial, promoted as self-sufficient, and with the sole aim of perpetually searching his material self-interest (Benoist, 2004, p. 4).

Alternatively, the *Nouvelle Droite* takes inspiration from the Nietzschean doctrine of affirming life in all its natural dimensions. The endorsement of this form of paganism pervades the philosophical school. As Guillaume Faye explains:

Paganism is essentially the cult of the real and of life in all its dimensions (biological, astronomical, physical) and, contrary to the religions of salvation, it refuses to build a meta-reality, a lie, a phantasm ... rather, it looks directly at the sweet and hard tragedy of living (Faye, 2001, p. 128).

Accordingly, it is understood that the recognition and the proper preservation of diversity within nature require a polytheistic pagan worldview.

Thus, as Faye claims, “new Gods must be invented” (Faye, 2001, p. 128). It is through the invention of rooted Gods that European culture can be spiritually regenerated and truly flourish.

The *Nouvelle Droite* is extremely critical of liberalism, especially focusing on its detrimental effects on community life. It identifies several modern pathologies. To begin with, liberalism brought moral individualism, which daily contributes to the destruction of communal life and to the current understanding of the self as detached from lineage, history, and collective responsibility. Massification is regarded as another liberal pathology, bringing standardisation of lifestyles and behaviours across borders. Another identified modern problem is radical moral universalism, that is, the idea that all societies should be functionally built according to a one-size-fits-all social model, one constituted by liberal democracy and markets. For the *Nouvelle Droite*, the result of these liberal pathologies is the increasing feeling of anomie that pervades the West, with the foundations of identity that can provide real meaning being progressively eroded (Krebs, 1997, p. 76).

For this school, mass immigration into the West is therefore the logical conclusion of liberal pathologies. After all, if only individuals are recognised as ultimate moral agents, borders that are based on historical collective identities make little sense. If all individuals should normatively pursue their desires without major restrictions (John Stuart Mill’s harm principle), the erasure of borders is required to allow for the maximisation of preference satisfaction. Hence, Western capitalism brings non-European immigrants into Europe in order to remove both the identities of the host societies and of the immigrants themselves (Benoist, 1993b). Notably, even proponents of multiculturalism subordinate group rights to liberal values (Kymlicka, 1995). For Alain de Benoist (2011), the main driver of mass immigration into the Western world is capitalism. In order to break economic unions and keep wages down, liberal capitalists bring increasing amounts of immigrants into the West, a capitalist strategy akin to what Karl Marx named *the reserve army of capital*.

### **Plans for the future: Pan-Europeanism and ethno-pluralism**

It may be surprising for many that the *Nouvelle Droite* rejects nationalism. Instead, it openly embraces European identity against the divisive model of European nationalism that reached its peak during the XIX and XX centuries. The proposed model is a federalisation of the European peoples on the basis of European identity.

Yet, it is a federation/empire that aims at protecting regional identities by employing a robust regionalism, therefore avoiding the homogenising processes intrinsic to the nation-state (Bar-On, 2001, p. 344). The imperial/federal model is chosen because it has “always sought to establish an equilibrium between centre and periphery, between sameness and diversity, unity and multiplicity” (Benoist, 1993a, p. 97). Hence, these theorists point towards a project of progressive political union between European countries and their Diasporas (Bar-On, 2008). Particularly influent is the vision of Faye (2010): *The Eurosiberia*. It is the vision of an ethno-state from Lisbon to Vladivostok, built on the basis of the bio-civilisational identity of Europe. This project would have the goal of preparing Europeans to tackle the cultural, demographic and military competition of continental blocs like Asia and Africa.

Inspired by Carl Schmitt’s notion of friend and enemy, the *Nouvelle Droite* intends to root politics in European identity. Thus, it rejects the existence of friend and enemy dynamics among European identities (e.g., French, Spanish, etc.). Instead, intra-European rivalries are replaced by ethno-continental rivalry. Following Carl Schmitt’s model of a “*new nomos of the earth*”, these intellectuals envision a multipolar order of autonomous civilisational blocks, which, in their vision, allows for a more robust international balance of power. Europe would therefore be allowed to develop its own civilisational project and to shape its unique destiny and identity, with the same happening with other continental units (Benoist, 2004). But how would this European continental block be politically structured? The envisioned European continental polity of the future operates at two different levels: at an imperial (elitist) level from the top and at the radically democratic and decentralised level from the bottom (Benoist, 1993a, p. 97). While the imperial element is regarded as important to maintain unity, democratic regionalisation is seen as a guarantor of ethno-pluralism.

Ethno-pluralism is based on the idea that group identity should be protected from political processes of homogenisation (such as liberalism). Hence, ethno-pluralism regards groups as having the right to self-preservation and differentiation (Spektorowski, 2003, p. 118). Both native Europeans and non-European migrants are regarded as having the right to protect their identities from modern globalising forces. More recently, Faye (2016, pp. 81-84) has criticised the school’s unbalanced emphasis on the communitarian philosophy of ethno-pluralism, mostly for practical reasons. He thinks that radical communitarianism hinders the cooperation and the coming together of European ethnicities and gives competitive advantages to well established (and expanding) non-European communities in European lands. Ultimately, the defence of European identity seems to trump the radical communitarian doctrine of ethno-pluralism.



As a critic of this school of thought puts it, the *Nouvelle Droite* endorses “ethnic diversity within a federation of European ethnicities, banned to non-Europeans” (Spektorowski, 2003, p. 61).

### **Identitarian movements within technological modernity**

Collective identity in the modern West seems to be under stress due to the Western belief in the moral primacy of the individual over groups. Nonetheless, at the practical level, technological means are connecting the world in unparalleled ways. This capacity to communicate and to rapidly travel through great distances inspires the rise of the cosmopolitan individual. Yet, as communitarian leaning philosophy reminds us (Sandel, 1982), the individual cannot exist in a vacuum and the social group largely shapes his or her social identity. Because tribalism is a pervasive mechanism of social evolution (Faria, 2017), it is necessary to understand how this tribal phenomenon can be manifested under the new paradigm of technological interconnectedness.

Online activism is now the main method that Euro-American identitarians use to produce meta-politics and cultural change (Nagle, 2017). Moreover, the Internet is currently facilitating the creation of networks, that is, the creation of identity-based interest groups that may become political players in their own right without being necessarily attached to states. Due to the increasing difficulties for states to coalesce around a strong identity and to solve collective action problems, transnational actors can more easily exert political influence by taking advantage of the current Western paradigm based on flexible mobility and fluid citizenship. Because nationality is becoming disassociated from social identity (e.g., multiculturalism), each state is subject to pressures from several identity groups within its own jurisdiction. Under the current technological paradigm, allegiances are often made with those that share identity across borders, and not necessarily within borders. The transformation of the state into a legal-bureaucratic one, without attachment to any particular group, facilitates the work of transnational policy lobbies.

With its technological advancements, the Western paradigm is also facilitating the rise of different spheres of belief and perception within national jurisdictions. In particular, the Internet provides segregated perceptions to individuals living in the same geographical space. Hence the rise of what came to be known as the post-truth era (Drezner, 2016), where the intense proliferation of fake news or of extremely biased news becomes the norm. Different social groups can now live side by side while merely consuming information that caters to their collective worldview.

It is in this context that identitarian coalitions are being played out. Due to high technological interconnectedness and the use of English as *lingua franca*, new pseudo-cultures are being formed online, with their own language and moral frameworks (Nagle, 2017). As expected, these identitarian cultures are formed based on Schmittian friend and enemy distinctions, with the most common distinction now being European vs non-European. Although these transnational cultures keep developing narratives and political philosophies that aim at influencing perception across nations (Bar-On, 2011), states are not irrelevant players in this identitarian battle against Western modernity. It is by capturing states that these cultures can build political stepping-stones for the crystallisation of their worldviews. Moreover, their state-based post-liberal philosophies ultimately require such capture. Nonetheless, if and how such development will take place is yet unclear.

### **The rising borders of European identity**

Border crossing into the West is at the heart of the growing popularity of identitarian ideas. Yet, the sense of European civilisational decline has been around at least since Oswald Spengler wrote his *magnum opus: The Decline of West* (Spengler, 1991). In it, he identifies the European man with the Faustian man, that is, a man with a nature that seeks transcendence and overcoming. Notably, for Spengler, European man transformed Christianity (a middle eastern religion) into a European belief system. In his own words:

It was not Christianity that transformed Faustian man, but Faustian man who transformed Christianity--and he not only made it a new religious but also gave it a new moral direction (Spengler, 1991, p. 177).

Yet, he postulates that European civilisation's time of expansion and vital creativity is finished. For him, like plants, cultures go through the cycle of birth, expansion, decline and death. In the particular case of the European model, he thinks it is nearing the end. He believes that "we have to reckon with the hard cold facts of a *late life*" (Spengler, 1991, p. 31). Yet, it can be argued that the pursuit of Western liberalism and universal egalitarianism represents another expression of Faustian man. That is, Westerners are now attempting to overcome themselves by transcending in-group particularism and proselytising liberal morality throughout the world. As Alain de Benoist (2004, p. 4) notes, Western man has been engaged in this proselytising mission throughout the last centuries, first with Christianity and now with liberalism.

While the sense of civilisational decline is not exactly new among broadly identitarian political forces, mass immigration into the West is creating a context that strengthens this sense and makes its resolution urgent. Specifically, in modern times, there is not simply a sense of civilisational decay but also a sense of dispossession and loss of identity. Hence, the identitarian doctrine of ethno-pluralism is defensive in nature. It comes at a time where intense migration is not flowing from Europe to other continents (which in the past allowed for European expansion), but from other continents into Europe or, more generally, into the West. It is not a coincidence that the embracement of the doctrine of ethno-pluralism (which focuses on group rights to their own specificity) happens at a time when millions of non-Europeans are moving and settling in the West. Moreover, ethno-pluralism stands in contrast with previous notions of European superiority and of right to rule that characterised so much of the colonial period, which was a period of migratory expansion. Instead, we currently observe a contraction of European demographics (Faria, 2017, pp. 312-314), both via low fertility rates and via receiving migrants from continents producing demographic growth. This contraction is potentially creating the type of shock that makes the *Nouvelle Droite's* ideas more seductive. This shock is forcing not merely an adjustment of immigration policies and political representatives, it is also forcing a rethinking of the current liberal paradigm, which increasingly has to deal with the consequences of identity clashes within the West.

Ultimately, the contact with the non-European world within the Western world is potentially creating a more unified perception of European identity. While European nations have often in the past defined “friend and enemy” in relation to their European neighbours, the migratory phenomenon is shifting “friend and enemy” distinctions from European nations to non-European identities. Put differently, the “enemy” is becoming less the European neighbour states and more the non-European in direct contact. Hence, the European/Western peoples who feel threatened by these non-European newcomers increasingly become the new “friend”. Via this process, a stronger notion of Europeanness is being constructed. Certainly, this is a complex process that will also generate a fusion of worldwide identities within the West, but one of the consequences of border crossing into the West is precisely to bring together all the identitarian groups united around the notion of Europeanness.

Furthermore, the substantial rise of identitarian forces (Hawley, 2017; Zúquete, 2018) reveals the growing appeal of identitarian political philosophy, and this rise is most certainly propelled by the shift in the perception of friend and enemy. Because this friend and enemy distinction underpins the *Nouvelle Droite's* strong pan-Europeanism, the school's seductive power in this new age and context increases.

Interestingly, it is in these times of dissolution of nationhood through the forces of liberal individualism and interconnectedness that a greater perception of European commonalities can arise. The process of bringing Europeans together via the liberalisation of European nations is a process occurring for some time now, of which the European Union is the most striking result. Important thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (2008) already noticed this process of coming together more than one century ago. He understood the liberal democratic movement within Europe as the catalyser for the creation of a conformist and homogenous European man, which would then be unified by elitist action. For him, already in the 19th century there were “the most unmistakable signs that Europe wishes to be one” (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 203). Ultimately, it is possible to divide this ongoing process of strengthening European identity into two phases: 1) The heightening of Europeanness via the liberal erasure of national identities and 2) the intensification of Europeanist identitarianism due to the contemporary border crossing into the West. The latter migratory phenomenon is creating a sense of pan-European existential danger that strengthens alliances along the lines of European identity and weakens standard notions of “friend and enemy” that are based on intra-European rivalries.

### **Conclusion**

The most recent periods brought visible dissatisfaction with liberal globalisation. The rise of national-populism throughout Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world is the most evident aspect of this dissatisfaction. Yet, these populisms reveal a lack of substantive political doctrine, relying mostly on criticisms of elites. Along with these populisms we are witnessing the growth of identitarian movements, who aim at providing the ideological basis for what is until now merely forms of crude discontent.

Mass immigration into the West is propelling the growth of these identitarian movements and of the appeal of their philosophies. The movements rely considerably on the political philosophy of the *Nouvelle Droite* and its Europeanism, which intellectually underpins the transnational dimension of these anti-globalisation dissidents. While technology has connected the world at the level of mobility, news and knowledge, it has also connected the identitarian forces that increasingly act as a transatlantic alliance. This technology, in particular the Internet, begins to affect mainstream politics in unpredictable ways as the spheres of perception become more radicalised and separated. As a consequence of Western multiculturalism, identity networks are increasingly separated from nationality, becoming transnational by nature. These transnational identitarian forces interact with states in unpredictable forms.

In particular, the political capture of states appears to be increasingly complex due to states becoming disconnected from traditional (homogenous) identities, with many internal and external players involved.

Holding the identitarian forces together is the shift in the notion of “friend and enemy”, which has gone mostly from intra-European rivalries to a European vs non-European dichotomy. Put differently, mass migration into the West has weakened intra-European rivalries by creating a common threat to European identity. Furthermore, the strengthening of European identity is a process that has already been ongoing, mostly via the dilution of national identities caused by Western liberalism. Ultimately, the contemporary border crossing into the West can be understood as another phase in the reinvigoration of Europeanness. Given the transatlantic dimension of this identitarian phenomenon, the explicit issue of European identity has the potential to become a major part of Western politics.

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