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Patrick J. Geary: The Myth of Nations

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Introduction



The Crisis of European Identity

Just a few short years ago, when Western Europeans looked to the future, their thoughts were almost entirely on the full implementation of the European Community's economic and financial reforms of 1992. Some awaited with relish the prospect of currency unification, the elimination of internal tariffs, and the free circulation of citizens. Others did so with hesitation or even fear. Still, by and large, the nations of the Community saw the problems facing Europe in a particularly narrow perspective. First, they took a remarkably parochial view of what constituted Europe. Second, they saw their challenges relating more to the economic problems of the future than to the emotionally explosive problems of the past. The very name of their organization betrayed the comfortable myopia that the postwar political configuration had made possible. The "European Community" was no such thing. It was actually the Western European Community, to which the addition of Greece had already created considerable problems. For these nations, "Europe" stopped at the so-called Iron Curtain: Beyond that lay the Warsaw Pact nations, poor but blessedly distant cousins,

largely irrelevant to the economic and, increasingly, even to the military concerns of the Community.

Within this “little Europe,” the old problems of nationalism, economic competition, and social tensions seemed, if not entirely solved, then at least manageable. Separatist movements in Northern Ireland, Corsica, and northern Spain continued to shed blood, but these were limited in scope and geographically isolated. Elsewhere, as in the South Tyrol, Brittany, and Catalonia, the micro-nationalist movements of the 1970s had largely devolved into folkloric tourist attractions. Even the antagonisms between Walloons and Flemings in Belgium had subsided, as Brussels moved forward as the capital of the Community. National boundaries, for centuries *causae belli*, had not only been fixed by treaties and guaranteed by the Helsinki Accords, but, with implementation of the 1992 program, they seemed destined to become irrelevant. England continued to be uncertain about whether it wanted to be part of Europe, but the rest of the United Kingdom had no such hesitation, and the “Chunnel” promised to unite France and England in a manner that would permanently end the island’s geographical and psychological isolation. After four decades of irritating military and economic dependence on the United States, the European Community was about to emerge as an equal partner in world affairs, challenging not only a faltering United States but a mighty Japan as the dominant economic power. In the Brave New World that was to be the Europe of 1992, the old problems of nationalism simply had no place.

How incredibly naive such a view now seems. In a few tumultuous months, that Iron Curtain, which had not only isolated the East but sheltered the West, rose to reveal a vast and profoundly dangerous Europe that stretched east to the Urals. The initial wildly enthusiastic reaction on the part of Western democracies soon turned to dismay and fear as wave after wave of seismic shocks rolling out of Moscow irrevocably altered the political landscape

of Europe, in place since the end of the Second World War. At the same time, the effects of forty years of government policies to provide cheap labor in France and Germany and to settle the obligations of Empire in Great Britain touched off a crisis of identity and a xenophobic reaction in these Western democracies.

Nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism—specters long thought exorcised from the European soul—have returned with their powers enhanced by a half-century of dormancy. The last great European Empire, that of the Soviet Union, has crumbled into autonomy-minded republics, many of which are no more stable than the Union they sought to throw off. The once-formidable Warsaw Pact no longer exists, replaced by a series of struggling, debt-ridden polities, themselves torn by ethnic tensions and seeking a place in the New World Order. A united Germany is searching for a new identity, and shouts of “Germany for Germans” are heard in the streets. The Balkans, the powder keg of the last century, once more erupted into civil war. These extraordinary and continuing events have shaken the West no less profoundly than the East. The result is a deep crisis of identity, which raises the question of how Europeans see themselves, their societies, and their neighbors.

“How ironic, that at the end of the twentieth century, Central Europe appears just as it did at the end of the nineteenth.” The truth of this remark, made by an Austrian historian in 1991, is even more evident today. In the Balkans and the Baltics, in Ukraine, in the Russias, in the Crimea, the ancient claims to national sovereignty are heard once more. Ethnic communities forced to live under the internationalist banner of socialism now find the freedom to renew ancient blood feuds. The intractable problems of minority rights, and religious and linguistic differences, which precipitated two world wars are once more at the forefront of European attention. Not only is communism discredited, but everything socialism opposed is now again in vogue. Not only does this mean that capitalism and individualism have become popular, but anti-Semitism, re-

ligious chauvinism, and atavistic racism as well. Polish politicians compete to see who is the most Polish; Hungarians renew their disputes with Romanians to the east and Slovaks to the north. Serbs and Croats kill each other and both kill Bosnians in the name of national rights. Serbs launched a massive attempt to eliminate Albanians from their sacred Kosovo, and, after the terrors of a NATO aerial war, Kosovars retaliated against the Serbian minority with the same brutality they had been shown by their former oppressors. Ethnic groups scattered across the corpse of the Soviet Union demanded the right of political self-determination. No one can yet say whether the horrors of Chechnya are precursors of future violence.

All these peoples inhabit areas that contain other ethnic minorities, and most also have members living as minorities within areas dominated by other peoples. As a result, demands for political autonomy based on ethnic identity will inevitably lead to border conflicts, suppression of minority rights, and civil strife, as each group goes about the grisly task of “ethnic cleansing” to ensure themselves of an ethnically homogeneous territorial state.

Even more troubling to political stability in the West than the potential for the rebirth of traditional regional separatist movements are the new ethnic minorities, particularly in Germany and France.

“The *Bundesrepublik* was a good fatherland,” a German colleague told me with nostalgia and concern in 1990. Whether the new Germany will be as good to its children is unclear. The unification, combined with the presence in the united Germany of thousands of refugees from the East, has precipitated a crisis of proportions unprecedented in the last half-century, deeply affecting how majorities see themselves and others. The generation that created the German economic miracle is now entering retirement, and their children and grandchildren, raised in the comfort of the Bonn regime, do not seem eager to surrender a portion of the good life to their poor cousins in the East. What the Eastern Germans are

receiving is the share of the Western economy previously granted to Germany's silent partners in the *Wirtschaftswunder*: the Turkish and Balkan "guestworkers" who are being pushed out of Germany and into France and Belgium by the crowds of eager German laborers from the former DDR. These latter, facing unemployment at home and largely low-level jobs in the western *Länder*, look with suspicion on the Turks and Slavs already established in Germany and with undisguised loathing on the Poles, Romanians, and others seeking a better life for themselves in the new Germany. In the meantime, the diversion of federal funds into the old East Germany away from the old Federal Republic creates antagonism and tensions on the part of those accustomed to a generous and supportive state system.

The extreme reaction is the rebirth of racist violence in the cities in the East. A less extreme but perhaps even more dangerous reaction is the renewed debate about who has the right to share in the German prosperity. Already, the German constitution allows for a "right of return," privileging descendants of German-speaking inhabitants of Eastern Europe, who have never seen Germany and may not speak any German, over Turks born and raised in Germany. Who is a German? Can an immigrant become German, or is German identity a matter of blood, of race? These questions have been asked before, with terrible consequences.

Germany is the most intimately involved in the transformation of Europe, but the German dilemma, while the most obvious, is by no means unique. In France, the presence of millions of Muslims—both descendants of North Africans and recently arrived immigrants, legal as well as clandestine—are leading to a reexamination of French national identity, with troubling results. Fear of the Islamization of France has led to a resurgence of the French xenophobic right, which now claims as supporters upwards of one-third of the popular electorate and for whom "French" is more a racial and cultural than a political category. In September 1991,

for example, former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing termed immigration into France an invasion and called for the substitution of the *droit du sang* (right of blood) in place of the *droit du sol* (right of soil) as the criterion for acquiring French citizenship.¹ At the same time, France and Belgium are attempting to cope with secondary refugees, pushed out of Germany, who must now compete with the millions of unemployed or underemployed North Africans. Italy and Greece have faced a flood of Albanian refugees, fleeing a destitute economy and a bankrupt political system. Austria, initially fearful of being drawn into the civil war on its border, is now attempting to cope with thousands of refugees and migrants from Romania, Bulgaria, and the former Yugoslavia. This country, which had long basked in the myth of "the first victim of Nazi aggression" while enjoying the status of neutral ground for the conduct of cold war interaction, has seen a party with strong chauvinistic and xenophobic elements emerge as the third largest political movement. Are the nations of the European Community "lands of immigration" or are the benefits of citizenship to be reserved for "real" French, Italians, Danes, and British? The very fact that such questions are being posed indicates how very much alive the discredited agenda of nationalism and racism remains.

If the current events in Europe draw the most attention, one must not forget that the rest of the world, and particularly the United States, are not immune to these ideological tendencies. While today many see the United States as a nation of polyethnic immigration, this has not always been the case, and significant portions of the political leadership continue to draw support by encouraging fears about the loss of a national identity closely tied to the English language and national tradition.² This is hardly surprising: Our third president, Thomas Jefferson, had originally wanted to place on the great seal of the United States replicas of Hengist and Horsa, the first Saxon chiefs to arrive in (and begin to conquer) Britain. Jefferson argued that it was Hengist and Horsa

“from whom we claim the honor of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed.”³ Through the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, racial Anglo-Saxonism as an ideology excluded Irish, southern Europeans, and Asians from America. Today, politicians of hate can ignite enthusiasm by raising the specter of an America where English is not the only official language.

A historian of the early Middle Ages, who observes this problem firsthand, who listens to the rhetoric of nationalist leaders, and who reads the scholarship produced by official or quasi-official historians, is immediately struck by how central the interpretation of the period from circa 400–1000 is to this debate. Suddenly, the history of Europe over a millennium ago is anything but academic: The interpretation of the period of the dissolution of the Roman Empire and the barbarian migration has become the fulcrum of political discourse across much of Europe.

In France, National Front leader Jean Marie Le Pen declares himself the champion of “the French people born with the baptism of Clovis in 496, who have carried this inextinguishable flame, which is the soul of a people, for almost one thousand five hundred years.”⁴ On June 28, 1989, the Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic organized an assembly, reportedly numbering more than a million people, on the “Kosovo polje,” the “Blackbird Field,” where on that same date in 1389 the Serbian army was defeated by the Ottoman Turks. His stated purpose: to reaffirm Serbian determination never to part with this disputed territory.⁵ But the Albanian majority’s claim could take precedence over that of the Serbs: The latter, after all, had only controlled Kosovo for less than three hundred years, that is, since conquering it from the Byzantines in the eleventh century. The former, by contrast, claim descent from the ancient Illyrians, the indigenous inhabitants of the region, and, thus, according to the same deadly logic, the people with “the best right” to Kosovo. Such claims and counterclaims

led directly to the horrors of the Kosovar war, horrors by no means at an end as this book goes to press.

It is not only nationalist political leaders who play history for politics. Reputable scholars are drawn into the polemical uses of the past as well. In Transylvania—a region fortified by Hungarians in the eleventh century, settled by Saxons in the twelfth, ruled by the Turks, the Habsburgs, and the Hungarians, and, since 1920, a part of Romania—the debate about political legitimacy is couched in terms of ninth-century history and carried on in part by professional historians and archaeologists. Did the nomadic Magyar horsemen arrive in a region inhabited by a thriving “indigenous Roman” population or in one already laid waste by Slavic invaders? Romanians interpret the scant archaeological evidence to answer *yes*, claiming that their ancestors, the Vlachs, had inhabited this region since Roman times and, thus, in spite of a thousand years of interrupted rule, have a legitimate right to the region. Leading Hungarian archaeologists and historians, on the other hand, argue that the evidence suggests that, by the time that the Magyars arrived in the area, the remains of Roman society had long since disappeared and that, therefore, Transylvania should by rights belong to Hungary. Another example of how easily medieval scholarship is drawn into contemporary politics comes from the Austrian province of Carinthia, home of Austria’s right-wing politician Jorg Heider. Are hill forts recently excavated in southeastern Carinthia evidence of sixth-century Slavic settlement or the remains of indigenous “Roman” defense works? When an Austrian archaeologist publicly supported the former hypothesis, he was cautioned against that view by rightist Carinthian political leaders who considered that such hypotheses lent political support to the notion that Slavs might have rights in Carinthia.

Such examples could be multiplied across Europe. Early medieval historians, not accustomed to being at the center of political debate, find their period of history suddenly pivotal in a con-

test for the past and their rhetoric being used to lay claims to the present and the future.

Unfortunately, policy makers and even most scholars of both East and West generally know very little about this period and even less about the actual process of ethnogenesis that brought European societies into existence. Probably no other period of history is as obscure and obscured by nationalist and chauvinist scholarship. This very obscurity makes it easy prey for ethnic nationalist propaganda: Claims can be based on the appropriation of the migration period with impunity, since few people know any better. Once the premises projected onto this period have been accepted, political leaders can draw out policy implications to suit their political agenda.

These demands, justified by reference to ethnic migrations of Late Antiquity and long-vanished medieval kingdoms, threaten not only the political entities of the East but those of the West as well. Can the European Community recognize the “rights” of the Lithuanians but not those of the Corsicans? Can it condemn the aggression of the Serbs against the Bosnians but not that of the English against the Irish or the Spanish against the Basques? If the Moldavians and Slovenes have the right to their own sovereign state, why not the Flemings, the Catalans, and the Sorbs? If long-integrated regions of the Soviet Union, such as Belorussia, can suddenly find a national consciousness, is this not also possible for Bavaria, Brittany, Friesland, Sardinia, and Scotland?

Many fear that the scenes broadcast from Brindisi of thousands of rioting Albanian refugees and the images from Berlin of Romanian Gypsies begging in the streets are but an avatar of Giscard d’Estaing’s invasion of desperate peoples from the East, driven by hunger, civil war, and anarchy toward the West, a vast migration or *Völkerwanderung* of the sort Western Europe has not known for a thousand years. For the present, at least, the Kosovars have been able to return from their refugee camps in Albania and Macedo-

nia to Kosovo. Will the next “people” driven from their ancestral homes by ethnic hatred and modern weaponry be as fortunate, or will their hosts find them permanent and increasingly unwelcome guests?

And yet, in the history of Europe, such mass movements have been the rule rather than the exception. The present populations of Europe, with their many languages, traditions, and cultural and political identities, are the result of these waves of migrations. First came bands of peoples, probably speaking what are known as Indo-European languages, who replaced or absorbed the indigenous populations of Greece, the Balkans, and Italy. The Celts, another Indo-European people came next, spreading from what is today Czechoslovakia, Austria, and southern Germany and Switzerland to Ireland in the sixth century B.C.E., pushing back, absorbing, or eradicating the indigenous European population until the only survivors were the Basques of southern France and northern Spain. From the first century B.C.E., Germanic peoples began pushing the Celts from the east to the Rhine, but they and the Celts confronted a different invader: the expanding Roman Empire, which conquered and Romanized much of Europe as it did Asia Minor and North Africa. New migrations of Germanic and Central Asian peoples began in the third century, eventually replacing the Roman imperial system with a mosaic of separate kingdoms. In the East, bands of Slavs filtered into the Alps, the Carpathian Basin, the Balkans, and Greece. The last major population influxes of the first millennium were the arrival of the Magyars in the Danubian plain and the Scandinavians in Normandy and northern England. Although many scholars pretend that the “Migration Period” ended with the end of the first millennium, its final phase actually came with the arrival of Turkic peoples in Greece and the Balkans in the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. Now, at the dawn of the third millennium, Europe still lives with the consequences of this migration period, while fearing yet another. The parallels are

being explicitly drawn. In an article appearing in *Le Monde*, the French journalist and commentator Claude Allègre suggested that one need only read my own *Before France and Germany*, perversely subtitled by the marketing department of the French publisher *The Birth of France (Naissance de la France)*, to see “how presumably controlled immigration . . . caused a world which seemed indestructible to explode violently from within.”⁶ Presumably, some want to see contemporary history as a re-enactment of the fall of the Roman Empire and hope to find in the lessons of the past a means of preventing contemporary European civilization from being destroyed by new barbarian hordes.

Any historian who has spent much of his career studying this earlier period of ethnic formation and migration can only look upon the development of politically conscious nationalism and racism with apprehension and disdain, particularly when these ideologies appropriate and pervert history as their justification. This pseudo-history assumes, first, that the peoples of Europe are distinct, stable and objectively identifiable social and cultural units, and that they are distinguished by language, religion, custom, and national character, which are unambiguous and immutable. These peoples were supposedly formed either in some impossibly remote moment of prehistory, or else the process of ethnogenesis took place at some moment during the Middle Ages, but then ended for all time.

Second, ethnic claims demand the political autonomy of all persons belonging to a particular ethnic group and at the same time the right of that people to govern its historic territory, usually defined in terms of early medieval settlements or kingdoms, regardless of who may now live in it. This double standard allows Lithuanians to repress Poles and Russians, even as they demand their own autonomy, and Serbs to claim both historically “Serbian” areas of Bosnia inhabited by Muslims and areas of Croatia inhabited by Serbs. It also allows the Irish Republican Army to demand major-

ity rule in southern Ireland and minority rule in the North. Implicit in these claims is that there was a moment of “primary acquisition,” the first century for the Germans, the fifth for the Franks, the sixth and seventh centuries for the Croats, the ninth and tenth for the Hungarians, and so on, which established once and for all the geographical limits of legitimate ownership of land. After these moments of primary acquisition, according to this circular reasoning, similar subsequent migrations, invasions, or political absorptions have all been illegitimate. In many cases, this has meant that fifteen hundred years of history is to be obliterated.

Equally disturbing is the very great extent to which the international community, including even pluralistic societies such as the United States, accepts the basic premises that peoples exist as objective phenomena and that the very existence of a people gives it the right to self-government. In other words, we assume that, somehow, political and cultural identity are and have a right to be, united. Surely, if Lithuanians or Croats have their own language, their own music, and their own dress, then they have a right to their own parliament and their own army. True, the international community must attempt to limit the inevitable consequences of ancient ethnic antagonisms, such as inter-ethnic warfare, but the principle of the ancient right of ethnic self-government is hardly questioned. Indeed, one can go still further: The claims to ancient ethnic rights and inherited blood feuds are useful to isolationists both in America and Western Europe. If these people have “always” hated each other, if their identities and their antagonisms are fixed and immutable, then intervention in the hope of settling these wars is futile. By embracing the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism, even while confessing to abhor it, the rest of the world can justify the creation of ethnically “pure” nations as the only alternative to genocide.

Actually, there is nothing particularly ancient about either the peoples of Europe or their supposed right to political autonomy.

The claims to sovereignty that Europe is seeing in Eastern and Central Europe today are a creation of the nineteenth century, an age that combined the romantic political philosophies of Rousseau and Hegel with “scientific” history and Indo-European philology to produce ethnic nationalism. This pseudoscience has destroyed Europe twice and may do so yet again. Europe’s peoples have always been far more fluid, complex, and dynamic than the imaginings of modern nationalists. Names of peoples may seem familiar after a thousand years, but the social, cultural, and political realities covered by these names were radically different from what they are today. For this reason we need a new understanding of the peoples of Europe, especially in that formative period of European identity that was the first millennium. We also need to understand how the received tradition, which has summoned millions of people into the streets and sent millions more to their graves in the twentieth century, took form a little more than a century ago.

The following chapters attempt to present an overview of this new understanding. We shall start with a brief examination of the origins of modern ethnic nationalism and modern historical studies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then we shall examine briefly the development of intellectual and cultural categories by which Europeans have distinguished and categorized themselves from the fifth century B.C.E. until Late Antiquity. Only then will we be ready to examine the historical circumstances within which the “peoples of Europe” developed in that crucial period that was Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, that pseudo “moment of primary acquisition,” which once more looms large in European mythology and which has come to be one of the guiding principles when dealing with “ethnic” issues worldwide. No one should be so naive as to expect that a clearer understanding of the formation of Europe’s peoples will ease nationalist tensions or limit the hatred and bloodshed that they continue to cause. At

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best, one hopes that those who are being called upon to assist in the actualization of demands based on these appropriations of history, whether in Europe, the Middle East, or elsewhere, will be more skeptical of them. Failing even this, historians have a duty to speak out, even if they are certain to be ignored.