

Fear masquerading as tolerance

by Christopher Caldwell

Postwar Europe was built on an intolerance of intolerance and a downplaying of national tradition--a mindset praised as anti-racism and ridiculed as political correctness. It has often made integrating newcomers hard

Christopher Caldwell is author of "Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam and the West," published by Allen Lane on 7th May. This article is an edited extract

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A central problem in welcoming people from poor countries is that Europeans have lost faith in parts of the civilisation to which migrants were drawn in the first place. "Europeans would like to exit from history, from la grande histoire, from the history that is written in letters of blood," wrote the French political scientist Raymond Aron in the 1970s. "Others, by their hundreds of millions, wish to enter it." It is hard to follow Europe's rules and embrace Europe's values, as newcomers are sometimes told they must, when Europeans themselves are rewriting those rules and reassessing those values.

The Europe into which immigrants began arriving in the 1950s was reeling in horror from the second world war and preoccupied with building the institutions to forestall any repetition of it. Nato was the most important of these institutions. The EU was the most ambitious. The war supplied European thinkers with all their moral categories and benchmarks. Avoiding another explosion meant purging Europe's individual countries of nationalism, with "nationalism" understood to include all vestiges of racism, militarism, and cultural chauvinism--but also patriotism, pride, and unseemly competitiveness. The singing of national anthems and the waving of national flags became, in some countries, the province only of skinheads and soccer hooligans.

Prompted by the US, which was addressing its own race problem at the time, and with the threat of communism concentrating their minds, Europeans began to articulate a code of "European values" such as individualism, democracy, freedom, and human rights. These values were never defined with much precision. Yet they seemed to permit social cohesion, and their embrace coincided with 60 years of peace.

Europe was an attractive place for immigrants. But attraction and admiration are not synonyms. The Ottoman empire and China both had a "power of attraction" for westerners in the 19th century. But it was not out of any admiration for their systems of government or their ideals of human rights that Europeans signed treaties with, settled in, and disrupted the national lives of those two countries. It was because they were rich places too weak to look out for themselves.

The EU was not dreamt up with immigrants in mind, but it wound up setting the rules under which they were welcomed. Postwar Europe was built on an intolerance of intolerance--a mindset that has been praised as anti-racism and anti-fascism, and ridiculed as political correctness. Our interest here is neither to defend it as common sense nor reject it as claptrap. It is to understand, first, what Europe was thinking when it welcomed immigrants in such numbers--something it would not have done at any previous moment in history--and, second, what grounds Europe had for dealing with newcomers in the often naive and overindulgent way it did.

Postwar Europeans behaved as if no one's culture was better than anyone else's. In 1996, the Dutch cabinet held that "the debate over multi-culturality must be conducted starting from the principle that cultures are of equal value." The state would confront matters of immigration and ethnicity with a scrupulous neutrality, aided by a set of "universal values" supposedly common to all cultures. It seemed inappropriate to force--or even to persuade--immigrants to assimilate into the old nationalistic loyalties that Europeans themselves were abandoning. "We're not going to bother Turkish children with the occupation, are we?" asked one Dutch administrator during a discussion about education.

Just because they were migrating to Europe did not mean immigrants accepted, understood, or even noticed the European project to leave behind "the history written in letters of blood." On the contrary, many immigrants, and many children and grandchildren of immigrants, considered it a duty to shout from the rooftops their wish for a Palestinian state or a Kurdish homeland or an Islamist Algeria. They kept alive dreams of cultural, national, and even racial glory that were beyond the reach of Europeans' understanding.

In the name of liberal universalism, many of the laws and customs that had held European societies together were thrown out the window. Tolerance became a higher priority than any of the traditional preoccupations of state and society--order, liberty, fairness, and intelligibility--and came to be pursued at their expense. But in recent years Europe's ideology of neutrality has buckled under the weight of mass immigration and become a source not of strength but of what Alsana, the bitchy Bengali housewife in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, called "hosh-kosh nonsense." Looking around her diverse, bien-pensant London neighbourhood, Alsana thinks: "No one was more liberal than anyone else anywhere anyway. It was only that here, in Willesden, there was just not enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing and send it running to the cellars while windows were smashed."

The term "political correctness" was borrowed from American debates to describe the contortions of logic that European universalism required. No one has ever been quite satisfied with the expression. Maybe it is an unduly harsh way to describe the white lies and petty misstatements of the sort that used to be called "talking out of one's hat." The musician Billy Bragg, for instance, declared at a forum on British identity, "When Churchill talked of 'their finest hour,' he meant 500m men and women of different languages and cultures, all coming together on our small island to fight fascism." (No, he didn't, someone should have replied.)

Political correctness is often ridiculous. There was a campaign waged by the Dutch Honour and Reparation society against *Zwarte Piet*, the soot-coloured sidekick of Saint Nicholas, who, according to centuries-old folklore, takes bad children to Spain in a sack. In the British Midlands, the town of Dudley banned certain toys and images from its municipal offices after a Muslim employee complained about a picture of Piglet (the Winnie the Pooh character) on her desk. Such stories have been the stock in trade of the conservative media--some are true, some more or less invented. Yet even when political correctness showed a tendency to authoritarian excess, its self-important perpetrators resembled Gilbert and Sullivan characters more than

Stalinist henchmen.

Nevertheless, by the turn of the century, immigration was an area where even mild dissent against the status quo could be met with sharp condemnations. The range of opinions that one could express on immigration and ethnicity had, beyond any doubt, narrowed dramatically. Was this narrowing something European publics had assented to or submitted to? Had they been convinced or coerced? Were they acquiring manners or losing liberties? This is always a hard line to draw.

Over time, the ideology of tolerance changed in two ways. First, it broadened. The classes of people entitled to protection from intolerance grew, and what constituted an offence against tolerance became arbitrary and ad hoc. In the Macpherson inquiry, ordered by the British home office into the grisly, unsolved 1993 murder of the black Londoner Stephen Lawrence, a racist incident was defined as "any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person." This definition became the working norm in many European countries.

Second, the ideology hardened. It developed real powers of enforcement, partly because it was codified into law, and partly because non-governmental groups acted as freelance enforcers. Offences against the ideology of tolerance now brought not just criticism and ostracism but the possibility of lost livelihoods and encounters with public authorities.

Where these two tendencies--the broadening and the hardening--interacted, the result was punishment for conduct that had been until quite recently considered normal. Gay rights is the most extreme example. In 2006, a husband-and-wife team of Christian evangelists in Britain were interrogated for 80 minutes by police on the suspicion that the literature they were distributing showed "potentially homophobic attitudes"; a 63-year-old Lutheran preacher in Sweden was condemned to a month of prison for citing the Bible's disapproval of homosexuality; and Christian Vanneste, a member of the French National Assembly who had said he found "heterosexuality superior to homosexuality on the moral level," became the first Frenchman convicted of homophobia. What had been a consensus opinion of humanity, from the dawn of civilisation until the tail end of the 20th century, was suddenly, at the start of the 21st, a crime.

On matters of race and immigration, rules were renegotiated almost as quickly. In 1984, Ray Honeyford, headteacher at an ethnically mixed school in Bradford published an article in which he attacked what he called the "race-relations lobby." He argued--much as the American sociologist (and later senator) Daniel Patrick Moynihan had done in his 1965 report *The Negro Family*--that activist government policies could harm the minorities they were intended to help. Neglect, indifference, and hostility did not explain all the failures of Pakistani and West Indian students, Honeyford wrote. Since they needed to acculturate themselves to British styles of learning, programmes urging them to take pride in their native cultures--what we would today call "multiculturalism"--could hinder them in school, and further segregate them from society. Honeyford turned out to be right. But being right, not to mention well liked among students of all backgrounds, did not save him from temporarily losing his job.

In 1990, France's National Assembly crossed a new frontier. In the interest of repressing "all racist, antisemitic or xenophobic acts," it passed a law, sponsored by the communist deputy Jean-Claude Gaysot, that rolled back certain historic

guarantees of freedom of the press. The Gayssot law criminalised not just an act but a belief, specifically the denial of (or minimising the seriousness of) the Nazi Holocaust. Several countries soon followed suit. Once the Gayssot law passed, it became hard to make a strong case against an endless criminalisation of opinion. The episodes upon which grievance groups sought to impose an official truth--the Armenian massacres, colonialism, the slave trade--were, after all, every bit as real as the Holocaust.

The Gayssot law was set up to defeat a straw man. It addressed the populism and fascism of the 1930s that were long discredited and confined to a few cranks. The problems of the 21st century (immigration, Islamism, bankruptcy of welfare states, financial panic, and the every-man-for-himself feeling that people got living in a consumer society) were different. There was a new cast of extremists and many were adept at gaming a legal system focused on the ills of 75 years ago. Each new officialisation of remembrance summoned into being more "moral lobbies," as they are known in France, which pressed their claims with ever more insistence, in ever more central areas of political life. Serious threats could arise while Europe was keeping under surveillance a collection of ageing "fascist" buffoons. Arise they did.

In the three decades that preceded the financial crisis of 2008, for reasons that have to do with globalisation and technological change, authority migrated away from government and towards private interest groups. This drift has been part of the spirit of the age. It has proceeded under all political parties, in domains ranging from diplomacy (consider Bono and development aid) to residential zoning (consider the spread of "gated communities" with elaborate codes of private law). In the business of tolerance and race relations, too, non-governmental groups have taken over important state functions, and have proliferated to the point where, in French, they are called simply *les associations*.

The communist-inspired Movement against Racism and for Friendship among the Peoples (MRAP), for instance, founded in France in 1949 to fight racism and antisemitism, came in later decades to play a different role. In 2002, the journalist Oriana Fallaci wrote an incendiary response to the attacks on the World Trade Centre in the Milan-based daily *Corriere della Sera*. When republished in book form as *The Rage and the Pride*, it became one of the bestselling nonfiction books in Europe. MRAP sued her under laws against incitement to racial hatred and sought to block publication.

There was racism in Fallaci's book. "Thank God," she wrote in a footnote, "I've never had anything to do with an Arab man. In my opinion, there is something about Arab men that is disgusting to women of good taste." But Fallaci was assailed for far more than racism. One of the opinions that offended MRAP, for instance, was: "Any theologian can tell you that the Koran authorises lies, calumny and hypocrisy in defence of the faith." Another was that radical Muslims are "everywhere, and the most hardened are living among us." While open to discussion, these were defensible points.

MRAP's suit was launched as part of a campaign against "Islamophobia"--a neologism often heard in the months after 11th September. It threatened to erase the distinction between the criticism of minorities on intolerant grounds and the criticism of any minority on any grounds. It threatened to extend the *de facto* censorship that already existed on matters of race to matters of religion and beyond--to political acts done in religion's name. Europe's toleration laws were beginning to work to the advantage of the intolerant.

The Finkelkraut affair, which raged in France in the days after the nationwide ghetto riots of 2005, was another landmark. It showed that, to incur the wrath of the "anti-racist" establishment, it was not necessary to show even a hint of racism. The philosopher Alain Finkelkraut gave an interview to the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz in which he dissented from the prevailing view that the riots had been a "rebellion" against social conditions. Finkelkraut noted that this was not the way the rioters themselves described it. In their rap lyrics and their slogans against France and Frenchness, many had cast their deeds in ethno-religious terms. "Imagine for a moment that they were whites, like in Rostock in Germany," he added. "Right away, everyone would have said: 'Fascism won't be tolerated.'" Finkelkraut also questioned the logic behind the argument that the modern exclusion of immigrants was a mere continuation of colonial conditions. "OK," he said, "but one mustn't forget that the integration of Arab workers in France during the time of colonial rule was much easier."

Finkelkraut is mild-mannered and moderate and has spent much of his career unravelling the ethical problems that arise from totalitarian violence. When *Le Monde* reported on the interview and excerpted from it, though, he was subjected to a campaign of vilification. The *Nouvel Observateur* magazine called him a "neo-reactionary." A letter to the editor of the daily *Libération* compared Finkelkraut to a functionary of Jean-Marie Le Pen's fascistic National Front. That is all a normal, if scurrilous, part of French public debate. What made the affair so sinister was its legal aspect. MRAP announced its intentions to sue Finkelkraut, along with H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, a member of the Acad  mie Fran  aise who had made some rather rash statements about the riots being linked to the practice of polygamy among Muslim immigrants, for incitement to racial hatred.

That MRAP dropped its threat to sue just days after issuing it indicates that it did not have much of a case. But that is small consolation. No one believed that would stop the routine judicial harassment of any intellectual or ordinary citizen with the temerity to put forward a dissenting explanation of France's worst social problem.

The policing of tolerance had no inbuilt limits and no obvious logic. Why was "ethnic pride" a virtue and "nationalism" a sickness? Why had it suddenly become criminal to ask questions today that it was considered a citizen's duty to ask ten years ago? Erudite philosophers of tolerance such as J  rgen Habermas might have been able to untangle such questions and draw the proper distinctions. Political elites could resolve them by fiat. But they left the person of average intellect and social status feeling confused and disempowered. A democracy cannot long tolerate a system that makes an advanced degree in sociology or a high government position a prerequisite for expressing the slightest worry about the way one's country is going.

The virtues of the multicultural era were elite virtues. The British sociologist Geoff Dench suspected, with good reason, that favouring elites was a large part of the point of multiculturalism. Conflicts in a striving meritocracy, he noted "can probably be managed more easily where there are groups whose membership of the nation is ambiguous, who are very dependent on elite sponsorship, and whose presence flushes out ethnocentric responses among the masses which can then be held against them. A society tied to the notion of meritocracy may therefore have a particular need for minorities."

So increasingly immigration became a pivot of all European politics, not just immigration politics. That was a big difference between Europe's challenges and similar American ones. In the US, there was a "race problem" and an "immigration problem," and the two did not always have much to do with one another. In Europe, the immigration problem was the race problem. So

declaring immigration a success and an "enrichment" became the only acceptable opinion. To hold immigration a failure was to reveal oneself a racist; to express misgivings about immigration was to confess racist inclinations. The philosopher Pierre-André Taguieff coined the term immigrationisme to describe the ideology that immigration is always "both inevitable and good." Real discussions about the increasing "diversity" of European society, and whether it was a good or a bad thing, were all but shut down.

Diversity described both a sociological reality (there were more foreign-looking people around) and an ideology (there ought to be more foreign-looking people around). The ideology was perfectly in tune with the neutrality among cultures espoused by the builders of the European ideal. Diversity, though, could never really be a stable or neutral ideal because Europeans did not know enough about other cultures to make it one. While Europeans could easily dismantle their own prejudices, the prejudices of other ethnic groups were, quite naturally, invisible to them. At the heart of European universalism was European provincialism.

Europeans who considered churches houses of stupidity, sexism, and superstition didn't know enough about mosques or ashrams to form a judgment, and left them unmolested. They abolished the old and much-mocked nationalistic school lessons about the virtues of nos ancêtres les gaulois, but absorbed the new lessons about the virtues of other cultures, and the justice and nobility of exotic political causes, with a childish credulity. Immigrants could indulge certain comforting prejudices and myths that natives would be disciplined, chastised, ostracised, or jailed for indulging. Effectively, diversity meant taking old hierarchies and inverting them.

The European obsession with third world "causes" was a function of Europe's new, guilt-based moral order. Immigrants and their children were at liberty to express politically their wishes as a people in a way that European natives were not. Grim-faced censure was always at the ready for Europeans who indulged in the merest nostalgic buffoonery, like that of the UK Independence party, which favoured nothing more radical than pulling Britain out of the EU. The only national claims that could be made without provoking accusations of nationalism, racism, or xenophobia were those of foreigners.

Where it interacted with immigration, there was an illogic at the heart of diversity. If diversity "enriched" and "strengthened" nations as much as everyone claimed, why would any nation ever want its immigrants to integrate into the broader society? That would be drawing down the nation's valuable fund of diversity. In this regard Ethiopians are for serving Ethiopian food, and helping substantiate the boasts of suburban school administrators that "our students speak 170 languages in the home"--not for taking jobs as marketing managers and dental hygienists. Or was the supply of diversity meant to remain--via immigration--permanently on tap? No European public wanted that. So European leaders defended mass immigration in one breath by saying it would make their countries different (through diversity), and in the next by saying it would leave them the same (through integration).

Diversity won its most heartfelt assent at the level of consumerism--primarily cuisine and fashion. In the 1950s and 1960s, before immigrants had changed European culture in any significant way, Europeans were grateful for the novelties they brought--from hashish to baba ghanoush. But from the early 1960s on, immigration became less about retail curiosities and more about the core structures of society--the welfare system, the prosperity of important industries, the principles of rights that governed transactions between individuals. Bizarrely, as immigration began to change Europe at its economic and cultural core, the political vocabulary remained the same as when immigration had been a fringe phenomenon. People kept talking about restaurants.

Non-European immigrants may not have been enviable in a socioeconomic way, but they were enviable in an existential way. They were cooler. They were aristocrats of identity. This was the message of a fascinating newspaper, *Gringo*, that was founded in the heavily immigrant suburbs of Stockholm. The ghettoised *svartkalle*--"black head," in the Swedish slang--was stereotypically downtrodden and excluded. But in the pages of *Gringo* ethnic Swedes were patronisingly called *Svennar*, the "Svens," much as American ghetto slang used to refer to white people as "Chuck." Native Swedes were clueless people who probably didn't know how to dance. Every issue carried the motto "Sweden's Most Swedish Paper." The magazine's editor, Zanyar Adami, sometimes said that *Gringo*'s project was to create a new Swedish national identity. This meant, one assumes, getting rid of the dead weight of the old one.

Europe's demographic revolution had long been defended as a means of providing a transfusion of youth. But how much youth did Europe need? And what did Europe need it for? Was it for measurable efficiencies? Or was it to provide a rush of dynamism to a society too old and tired to provide such things for itself? Corinne Hofmann's erotic autobiography *The White Masai*--which describes how, on a holiday trip to Kenya, she cast her eyes on the bejewelled body of a young tribesman and, enchanted, decided to abandon her life in Switzerland--did not just reflect Hofmann's own tastes, but the entire German-speaking world's. The book sold 4m copies and spent several years on German-language bestseller lists.

Europeans began to feel contemptible and small, ugly and asexual. The brilliant novels of Michel Houellebecq, which minutely dissected such worries, sold millions of copies all over Europe. The main character of *Atomised* (1998), for instance, describes the cultural anguish and sexual insecurity he feels while teaching the French classics to a largely immigrant-descended high-school class outside Paris. No one is interested in Proust, and the girl he has a crush on fawns over a macho African student ("this baboon," in the narrator's description) who holds him in contempt. Houellebecq's teacher comes to suspect the high European culture he is peddling is worthless: "What was a banker, a minister, an executive compared to a movie actor or a rock star? Financially, sexually and in every respect a loser. The strategies of distinction so subtly described by Proust no longer made the slightest sense... He was... one of the last Europeans. What he wrote no longer had any relation to reality whatsoever."

By now it is almost second nature for westerners to assume that anything familiar, traditional, and western is to be opposed; and anything discomfort-inducing and foreign is to be protected. So in 2006, Nadia Eweida, a British Airways stewardess and an Egyptian Christian, was suspended from work without pay for wearing the cross, although the airline permits Muslim employees to wear hijabs. (After several days of tabloid outrage, the airline backed down and rehired her.)

The German jurist Udo di Fabio warned in 2005 that the language of multiculturalism and diversity "opens the gates to a new middle ages, in which the model is not the human individual but the harmonious ordering of groups." And the way the groups were ordered often left natives feeling like second-class citizens. According to an official British government report published in 2008, "White people are less likely to feel they can influence decisions at the local level than people from minority ethnic groups (37 per cent compared to 45 per cent). White people are also less likely to feel they can influence decisions affecting Britain (19 per cent compared to 31 per cent)." The relative pessimism of white people about exercising their rights is supposed to strike us as puzzling, or surprising, but of course it is not. It reflects a belief that their aspirations are not the real subject of Britain's politics.

The message that majorities have needs, too, is often unwelcome. Bassam Tibi, a Syrian-born sociologist in Germany, suggested that German culture be understood as the main, or leading, culture (Leitkultur) in Germany's pluricultural society. Tibi was pilloried for the suggestion that Beethoven and Thomas Mann deserve a larger role in shaping the national consciousness than foreign voices.

The values that were supposed to liberate Europeans had left them paralysed, until Europeans' ability to demand that immigrants adapt to European ways was put in question. "We no longer consider any human action legitimate, or even intelligible," wrote the philosopher Pierre Manent, "unless it can be shown to be subject to some universal rule of law, or to some universal ethical principle."

Gordon Brown has suggested that his countrymen be more explicit about the values and customs that everyone in society ought to respect, no matter what their background. But it is late in the day to make such a suggestion. The old religion-based cultures of Europe performed just the function Brown describes until challenged in the 1960s and 1970s, in the name of personal liberation and autonomy, and then repudiated in the 1980s and 1990s, in the name of making Europe more friendly to minorities. How can Brown now expect immigrants and their children to help revive a culture that natives and their children have done little but snicker at?

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