

A Question of Integration

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For more than a week, France has been torn by riots that have been, for the most part, concentrated in the poorer suburbs of Paris. The rioters essentially have been immigrants -- or the children or grandchildren of immigrants -- most of whom had come to France from its former colonies. They are, in many cases, French citizens by right of empire. But what is not clear is whether they ever became, in the fullest sense of the word, French.

And in that question rests an issue that could define European -- and world -- history in the 21st century.

Every country has, from time to time, social unrest. This unrest frequently becomes violent, but that is not necessarily defining. The student uprisings around the world in the 1960s had, in retrospect, little lasting significance, whereas the riots by black Americans during the same period were of enormous importance -- symptomatic of a profound tension within American society. The issue with the French riots is to identify the degree to which they are, or will become, historically significant.

For the most part, the rioters have been citizens of France. But to a great extent, they are not regarded as French. This is not rooted necessarily in racism, although that is not an incidental phenomenon. Rather, it is rooted in the nature of the French nation and, indeed, in that of the European nation-state and European democracy -- an experience that distinguishes Europe from many other regions of the world.

The notion of the European nation stands in opposition to the multinational empires that dominated Europe between the 17th and 20th centuries. These were not only anti-democratic, dynastic entities, but they were also transnational. The idea of national self-determination as the root of modern democracy depended first on the recognition of the nation as a morally significant category. Why should a nation be permitted to determine its own fate unless the nation was of fundamental importance? Thus, in Europe, the concept of democracy and the concept of the nation developed together.

The guiding principle was that every nation had a right to determine its own fate. All of the nations whose identities had been submerged within the great European empires were encouraged to reassert their historical identities through democratic institutions. As the empires collapsed, the submerged nations re-emerged -- from Ireland to Slovakia, from Macedonia to Estonia. This process of devolution was, in a certain sense, endless: It has encompassed, for instance, not only the restoration or establishment of sovereignty to the European powers' colonial holdings in places like Africa or Latin America, but pressure from groups within the territorial borders of those recognized powers -- such as the Basques in Spain -- that their national identity be recognized and their right to democratic self-determination be accepted.

Europe's definition of a nation was less than crisply clear. In general, it assumed a geographic and cultural base. It was a group of people living in a fairly defined area, sharing a language, a history, a set of values and, in the end, a self-concept: A Frenchman knew himself to be a Frenchman and was known by other Frenchmen to be French. If this appears to be a little circular, it is -- and it demonstrates the limits of logic, for this definition of nationhood worked well in practice. It also

could wander off into the near-mysticism of romantic nationalism and, at times, into vicious xenophobia.

The European definition of the nation poses an obvious challenge. Europe has celebrated national self-determination among all principles, and adhered to a theory of the nation that was forged in the battle with dynastic empires. At the heart of its theory of nationalism is the concept that the nation -- national identity -- is something to which one is born. Ideally, every person should be a part of one nation, and his citizenship should coincide with that.

But this is, of course, not always the case. What does one do with the foreigner who comes to your country and wants to be a citizen, for example? Take it a step further: What happens when a foreigner comes to your country and wants not only to be a citizen, but to become part of your nation? It is, of course, difficult to change identity. Citizenship can be granted. National identity is another matter.

Contrast this with the United States, Canada or Australia -- three examples where alternative theories of nationhood have been pursued. If being French or German is rooted in birth, being an American, Canadian or Australian is rooted in choice. The nation can choose who it wants as a citizen, and the immigrant can choose to become a citizen. Citizenship connotes nationality. More important, all of these countries, which were founded on immigration, have created powerful engines designed to assimilate the immigrants over generations. It would not be unreasonable to say that these countries created their theory of nationhood around the practice of migration and assimilation. It is not that the process is not painful on all sides, but there is no theoretical bar to the idea of anyone becoming, for example, an American -- whereas there is a theoretical hurdle to the idea of elective nationalism in Europe.

This obstacle has been compounded by the European imperial experience. France was born of a nationalist impulse, but the nationalism was made compatible with imperialism. France created a massive empire in the 19th century. And as imperialism collided with the French revolutionary tradition, the French had to figure out how to reconcile national self-determination with imperialism. One solution was to make a country like Algeria part of France. In effect, the definition of the French nation was expanded to incorporate wildly different nationalities. It left French-speaking enclaves throughout the world, as well as millions of citizens who were not French by either culture or history. And it led to waves of immigrants from the former francophone colonies becoming citizens of France without being French.

Adding to this difficulty, the Europeans erected a new multinational entity, the European Union, that was supposed to resurrect the benefits of the old dynastic empires without undermining nationalism. The EU is an experiment in economic cooperation and the suppression of nationalist conflicts, yet one that does not suppress the nations that created it. The Union both recognizes the nation and is indifferent to it. Its immigration policy and the European concept of the nation are deeply at odds.

The results of all of this can be seen in the current riots in France. As evident from this analysis, the riots are far from a trivial event. These have involved, by and large, French citizens expressing dissatisfaction with their condition in life. Their condition stems, to some degree, from the fact that it is one thing to become a French citizen and quite another to become a Frenchman. Nor is this uniquely a French problem: The issue of immigrant assimilation in Europe is a fault line that, under sufficient stress and circumstances, can rip Europe apart. Europe's right-wing parties, and opposition to the EU in Europe, are both driven to a large extent by the immigrant issue.

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All societies have problems with immigration. In the United States, there currently is deep concern about the illegal movement of Mexican immigrants across the border. There is concern about the illegality and about the changing demographic characteristics of the United States. But there is no serious movement in the United States interested in halting all immigration. There is a management issue, but in the end, the United States is perpetually changed by immigrants and the immigrants, even more, are changed by the United States. Consider what once was said about the Irish, Italians or Japanese to get a sense of this.

The United States, and a few other nations, are configured to manage and profit from immigration. Their definition of nationhood not only is compatible with immigration, but depends on it. The European states are not configured to deal with immigration and have a definition of nationhood that is, in fundamental ways, incompatible with immigration. Put simply, the Europeans could never quite figure out how to reconcile their empires with their principles, and now can't quite figure out how to reconcile the migrations that resulted from the collapse of their empires with their theory of nationalism. Assimilation is not impossible, but it is enormously more difficult than in countries that subscribe to the American model.

This poses a tremendous economic problem for the Europeans -- and another economic problem is the last thing they need. Europe, like the rest of the advanced industrial world, has an aging population. Over the past generation, there has been a profound shift in reproductive patterns in the developed world. The number of births is declining. People are also living to an older age. Therefore, the question is, how do you sustain economic growth when your population is stable or contracting?

The American answer is relatively straightforward: immigration. Shortages of engineers or scientists? No problem. Import them from India or China, give them advanced education in the United States, keep them there. Their children will be assimilated. Is more menial labor needed? Also not a problem. Workers from Mexico and Central American states are readily available, on a number of terms, legal and illegal. Their children too can be assimilated.

Of course, there have been frictions over immigrants in the United States from the beginning. But there is also a roadmap to assimilation and utilization of immigrants -- it is well-known territory that does not collide with any major cultural taboos. In short, the United States, Australia and Canada have excellent systems for managing and reversing population contractions, which is an underpinning of economic strength. The Europeans -- like the Japanese and others -- do not.

The problem of assimilating immigrants in these countries is quite difficult. It is not simply an institutional problem: A new white paper from Brussels will not solve the issue. It is a problem deeply rooted in European history and liberalism. The European theory of democracy rests on a theory of nationalism that makes integration and assimilation difficult. It can be done, but only with great pain.

It is not coincidental, therefore, that the rates of immigration to European states are rather low in comparison to those of the more dynamic settler-based states. This also places the Europeans at a serious economic disadvantage to the immigrant-based societies. The United States or Canada can mitigate the effects of population shortages with relative ease. The influx of new workers relieves labor market pressures -- encouraging sustained low-inflation economic growth -- and the relative youth of immigrants not only allows for steady population growth but also helps to keep pension outlays manageable. In contrast, the European ideal of nationality almost eliminates this failsafe -- so that while, as a whole, Europe's population is both aging and shrinking, the dearth of young immigrant workers spins its pension commitments out of control.

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These are the issues that, over the next few generations, may begin to define the real global divide -- which will be not only between rich and poor nations, but between the rich nations that cannot cope with declining populations and the rich nations that can.

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