

# Is history repeating itself? Nationalism in Europe and the breakdown of the old order

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As part of the LSE's *Night of Ideas* event, **Christophe Charle** spoke about the uncanny parallels between current political developments and the cultural history of Europe in the 19th and early 20th century. A breakdown of the old cultural order led to the exchange of ideas and trade, then a nationalist backlash. In this essay, he argues that although direct comparisons are unwarranted, there are lessons to be learned.



To try to find answers to the questions preoccupying contemporary thinkers about Europe, I will draw an analogy with the cultural history of Europe during the 19th century. In a book published in 2015, *La dérégulation culturelle*<sup>[1]</sup>, I have tried to analyse the transformation of cultures in Europe. In the dominant view, that century is defined by the emergence of the nation, of nationalism and of national cultures, which led to the conflagration of 1914. My thesis does not contest this dynamic, but shows that nations and national cultures were built by constant exchanges, interconnections, and rivalries with neighbouring countries.



Vienna, 1848

These interactions, in spite of the nationalisation process, were growing and changed the old rules of what I call the cultural *Ancien Régime* – where cultural interactions between classes were far more limited, and where hierarchies and definitions of what was good or bad taste, high or lowbrow were clearly defined. This breakdown of the old order put the *Ancien Régime* into question, both through internal transgression and the imports and export of literature, arts and ideas. Growing mobility, economic stakes, migrations, social mobility and so on encouraged it.

In 1914, in spite of this breakdown of the old order – which had been going on for a century – the European cultural space was far from unified, socially and politically. Nevertheless, it was far more unified and coherent than it had ever been before, thanks to multiple new cultural exchanges which involved not only the old western Europe (dominant during the Enlightenment) but now also southern, eastern and central Europe. These exchanges simultaneously reinforced Europeanisation and, without contradiction, nationalisation in the continent.

To benefit from this new free trade in European culture, it was necessary to build national cultures rather than inward-looking local ones, and this happened independently of the challenging of the old order. This explains why all European countries during the 19th century engaged in building the same kinds of cultural institutions (museums, archives, a unified language, national and international exhibitions, art schools, school syllabuses transmitting

national and European culture).

But different social groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities, did not benefit equally from them because of the liberal economic paradigm that underpinned their production. At the end of the century, organised workers opposed this laissez-faire framework, and tried to fight against cultural and social inequalities – but they remained a minority in societies that were still largely rural. This Europeanisation implied competition between nations, with the less advanced keen to catch up with the rest. It reinforced national identities, or created them, in some of the new nations of Central, Southern and Nordic Europe.

This scenario, I think, is very similar to what occurred in Europe after the end of the Cold War: the fall of the Iron Curtain, the marketisation and mass production of cultural industries, the growing mobility of Europeans, on a greater scale than in the 19th century, are *mutatis mutandis* at work. The big difference is that this breakdown of the old order (and globalisation) has been happening hand in hand with the unification process of the European continent, which was justified not only by political or ideological aims (as for the nations) but by economic reciprocal advantages (free trade, people's mobility). By comparison, free trade started to develop by the middle of the 19th century, but only the stronger states initiated and took part in the process. Small nations only really started engaging in European free trade after 1992. Today, we are confronted with a growing challenge to these trends, which is very similar to the rising nationalism linked to the cultural deregulation at the end of the 19th century.

What is the origin of the exclusive nationalisms that led to the first world war? Why did Condorcet's optimistic view that progress in education and culture would pacify internal and external tensions among nations not come to pass? Why didn't the undeniable progress of education and exchanges between nations halt the conflicts and the final conflagration?

Two social developments ruined this optimistic evolutionary vision.

Firstly, deregulation did not abolish class divisions, even if it facilitated exchanges and crossover between different types of culture (elite/middle class/working classes) or different geographical situations (town/country, centres, outskirts).

Secondly, the diffusion of an open idea of culture was reserved for privileged groups. Traditional anxieties and misunderstandings towards foreigners were simply upgraded from the local to the regional, or from a rural to the urban setting (hence the fear of "dangerous classes") and then extended to other nations. This process began in the West with French Revolution and continued in 1848 with the opposition of Slavic and Germanic peoples in Central Europe, in Eastern Europe with the "Russian" or "yellow peril" or the more ancient fears of "Turks" "or Muslims". Cultural European traffic went hand in hand with the emergence and reinforcement of nation states, and not with the building of a supra-national state (as the United States was doing) which would have been more in harmony with the heightened cultural exchanges linked to the *dérégulation*.

In Europe, even the small proportion of the working class that subscribed to internationalist or Marxist ideology at the end of the 19th century did not manage to overcome national antagonisms within the [Second International](#), because it was hampered by linguistic differences and because social democratic parties and trade unions were obsessed with the nation state as the "natural" home of the struggle for emancipation. Its leaders opted to renounce their global aims and to use the national idiom as their primary reference. A simultaneous revolution all over Europe to achieve the programme launched in the euphoric climate of spring 1848 was abandoned. It culminated in a *union sacrée* in each of the belligerent countries, with the exception of Russia. Even after 1917 and with the turmoil of the end of first world war, no new calls for a common European revolution were made.

If my parallels are correct, then what we are witnessing today (the challenging of the idea of Europe, the Brexit vote, the rise of nationalist parties all over Europe) is consistent with the trends observed in most countries just before the First World War, but also just after it. This does not mean that a new European war is in the making, since it is clear that Europeans who are inclined to embrace xenophobia or racism are far from taking up arms. On the contrary,

wars outside Europe increasingly reveal the absurdity of this “solution”, which leads to genocides and massacres of the kind we have seen in Syria and Ukraine. Even if Europeans who do not feel European (as many Britons and Hungarians do not) and don't want the EU to integrate further are not willing to die for their country, as the failure to build large European armies shows. The limits of the analogy with pre-1914 Europe seem to be clear.

The same can be said about a great power like Britain, which will soon be negotiating Brexit; almost half of Britons still feel European, and in some regions like Scotland the majority wanted to remain European, as did London. How can we manage this contradiction? It is the contradiction of Europe itself. It launched a breakdown of the old rules, but it did not trigger a similar process of cultural unification or built a political space to create a new collective identity. Intellectuals bear a responsibility, too. Very few intellectuals think on a supranational level. Some have tried to do so, like Jürgen Habermas or Pierre Bourdieu. But the problem was structural and not merely ideological or intellectual. How do you change collective mentalities, if you don't reform the way schools are organised, historical programmes, collective memories, the media? What is European in our TV broadcasts? Only the World Wars, the Holocaust and genocides, or gloomy technocratic discussions in Brussels. These are not enticing invitations to feel European or to want to become so.

Many say that today's rejection of Europe is primarily social and economic. The losers of globalisation have fallen prey to the anti-European forces. That is true, but this answer is not enough. The nations of the 19th century gave far less to ordinary people than the welfare states do today. This did not prevent the majority of their citizens (or subjects) from accepting an unequal social order and to be willing take up arms when necessary. This shows that a shared culture and common representations also play an important role in the rebuttal of the European vision. So far the most effective ways to boost a shared sense of European unity have been destructive wars. Perhaps this tragic decade could serve a similar function?

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[1] Paris : PUF, 2015.

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