

What is European Identity?

By Niels Højlund

The European community was not bred from beautiful values and pure imagination, but as a response to a terrible collapse of all kinds of values between peoples and countries. And this historical knowledge is necessary for an understanding of the situation in Europe today.

The Rome Union – later the EC and now the EU – was not bred from a solemn vision of a European identity, a European community of values regarding democracy, human rights and liberty, equality and fraternity. No, it was created out of a total collapse of all kinds of European values.

It was created because everything broke down during the long process from World War I, 1914-18, over the economical, social and political distress and adversity of the interwar period, to the final disaster of World War II, 1939-45. Our shameful neglect of not just European values, but all kinds of human values made us realise that something had to be done to prevent this kind of horror and atrocity to ever ravage the European countries again. Politicians felt obliged to swear this oath by the millions of graves that had so far been the most impressive achievement of the 20th century. The European community was thus created as a response to a terrible collapse of all kinds of values between peoples and countries. And if young people today are going to argue that this is in the past and no longer valid justification to commit to the European project, then my reply will be: are the catastrophe and the people who did everything to prevent it from happening again really forgotten already?

Identity and Values

I am sceptical to the word identity as used for confirming one's own values in opposition to the values of other cultures and peoples. But, as the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur somewhere notes, the word identity is not only rooted in the latin idem, meaning 'the same'. It is also related to a different latin word, ipse, meaning 'self'. And in the sense of self-examination in relation to history, to me identity is indeed a splendid word to use.

It was self-examination the fathers of EU engaged in standing in the ruins of World War II. It is self-examination we are practising when we by including the former communist countries from Eastern and Central Europe are trying to restore the European diversity that for so many years was held captured by communism's unification of mind and society. Indeed, communism was a legitimate child of European ideology. It was even a system which praised the greatest and noblest values of European self-conscience: liberty, equality and fraternity.

Then why did it go wrong? Why did it end up as a travesty of all values, in violence, lies and repression? And has every political utopia collapsed along with communism so all there is left is the pragmatism and economical cynicism of our competitive society? Is this the self-examination we are going through as we welcome the old Warsaw Pact countries in the EU? And it makes us wonder whether we actually do have a political project for Europe that we can believe in.

Similarly, self-examination is what we are facing when we need to decide whether Turkey is eventually going to be member of the EU. Is Turkey at all a European country? And what does it

really mean to be a European country? Is it to do with religion? Or is it rather to do with the fact that during the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, we finally came to terms with religion and assigned it to the private sphere, from which it had better never escape? Or is this secularised society, which we proudly regard as a unique European phenomenon – a phenomenon that not even the Americans can subscribe to, certainly not the republicans and George W. Bush – in fact itself a child of Christianity? Is Christianity in a Protestant version what makes secularism possible?

Require Historical Knowledge

Questions like these are what make the present European self-examination. If young people cannot see that such questions more than warrant the maintaining and further development of the European project, then it's their problem.

The questions require solid historical knowledge. Not just to be answered, but even to be posed. And this is why young people of our time are sadly neglected, as we have deprived them of the fundamental cultural insight that follows from proper understanding of both Danish and European history. It has been decades since any teacher within the entire Danish school system has had the courage – and educational qualifications – to introduce children and young people to the subtle continuity of Danish and European history. Such conduct would have been regarded as Danish national egocentricity or European egocentricity. Instead, there has been a desire to train children and young people to become little critical scholars supposed to examine sources and discuss their accuracy on the basis of selected historical periods. As a consequence, two things have totally vanished from history teaching: any comprehensiveness and continuity for a person to relate his or her own life to, and any existential question what this continuity means for me as an individual, as part of a people and as part of a European civilisation.

EU has become commonplace. It is no longer a bold experiment arousing the passions, and being a politician or an official within the system is often about questions and conflicts of interests no less tedious than what goes on in Christiansborg. But the great, fundamental questions and conflicts of interests continue to be addressed among the peoples as a consequence of the unpredictable developments of the world, and it is up to us, the citizens of Denmark as well as the EU, to find out what it means to be Danish and to be European in the 21st century. Only familiarity with our history can enable us to see the questions and for each of us to give our suggestion to an answer. This is our task when we inquire for European Identity.