

Grano Series – Europe and its Discontents

The 3rd annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the future of Europe the implications of a fast changing European Community for North America.

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Europe and the culture of scapegoats

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The following is an edited transcript of Bernard-Henri Levy's talk at the second installment of 2006-2007 Grano Speakers Series.

When I was a young man, 30 years ago, I remember it was sort of acknowledged that Europe was a work in process, and that this process would go on to the end.

The sense of history was that Europe would build itself, and that this federation of states, languages, nations, memory, and so on, would make itself.

It was that sense of history that allowed us to go to sleep. God was watching us, working for us, and the invisible hand of providence had taken the shape of the European machination.

We know today that this is not true. We discovered that the old providentialist pattern, this idea of a history that goes at her own pace, is false, is absurd.

We are discovering that today, (what) with France saying "no," for example, to the European constitution; and with the growth of some nationalist, populist, leftist and rightist parties; and with the rise of the anti-liberal movement in Europe. (Liberal, in the European sense and in the American sense.)

We are discovering, finally, that Europe is not necessary, that no providence, no invisible hand promised it to us. And that a few times already in the last 10 centuries, Europe was at the edge of building itself, but it crashed.

And we are discovering that this could happen again: a great dream of a new entity just collapsing like a bubble, like a political bubble.

This is happening to our countries today, and it is part of the explanation for this strange state of depression in which we are. We have in Europe old nations. And as old nations, we have some old patterns of citizenship. And what is happening today is that these patterns of citizenship are falling into crisis at the same time.

What is stranger is that the opposite patterns of citizenship - the English one and the French one - are in crisis at the same moment. They are opposite. In England, as you know, minorities can do whatever they want, they can keep the veil, they can live in bubbles again, no problem. In France, it is exactly the reverse. You are French from the moment you agree to abandon, to forget all that you were, in order to become what you are going to be.

Not the old Catholic model - Catholic, meaning the St. Paul model; the world of St. Paul, the founder of the Catholic Church, which has been secularized by the French republic saying, "There are no longer Jews, no longer Arabs, no longer blacks. We are just French."

These two models - the most "communitarian" and the most abstract, on the opposite edges of the spectrum - are falling into crisis at the same moment.

In France, we have the riots in the suburbs, with the nihilist will, the will of these young guys dressed in a quasi-Ku Klux Klan way, and burning the cars not of the rich, not of their oppressors, but of their neighbours, of their fathers, of themselves.

This is a real nihilist movement. Not burning the symbols of capitalism as they did 40 years ago. That could be understood in a way. There was a rationality to that.

But burning the schools, burning the hospitals, the places that are so necessary to themselves.

So these riots are completely different from all that we knew in French history, because of this nihilism.

And on the English side, which is apparently the reverse model, there is again a very strange crisis. The British people got woken up a year ago, at the moment of the terrorist attack in London, in the tube, where they discovered that the terrorists did not come from outside, did not come from any remote country, that they could not be expelled, that there is no question of deportation or immigration. That this debate was finished.

They were Englishmen. They were born in England. They have been raised in England. They have been educated sometimes in the best schools.

I remember when I wrote my book about Daniel Pearl. The killer of Daniel Pearl - the journalist from the Wall Street Journal - the mastermind of the plot, Omar Sheikh, was the best Englishman possible: well-bred, well-educated, from the London School of Economics.

He was not a fundamentalist. He was not coming from a madressa (Muslim school). He had not come illegally to England. He was a pure Englishman.

I remember two, three years ago now, when the book was released in England, the critics were a little surprised. But what did they say? "Omar Sheikh is an exception. (Levy) cannot draw conclusions from the case of Omar Sheikh."

I wish they were right.

Unfortunately, one year later, you had the 2005 July terrorist event, where all the guys arrested in London were "Omar Sheikhs."

I could also say, in this regard, one of the reasons I involved myself in Bosnia was, of course, human rights, the suffering of civilians. It was my main reason.

But another reason was that I felt the real crisis into which we were entering, the real fight that will dominate the next decade, will be the fight inside the Muslim world. Between Islam and Islam. Between Islamist Islam and moderate Islam.

And for me Bosnia was so important because Bosnia was the capital, the embodiment, the proof of the possibility of an enlightened Islam. An enlightened, democratic, moderate - you can call it what you want - Islam.

Unfortunately, those who were involved in Bosnia, as I was, were right again. That which appeared to us at the beginning of the '90s has become the low of the last 10 years: the fight between Islam and Islam.

The fight inside Islam, the real clash of civilization, is not between Western civilization and the rest. No, the real clash is inside the rest. Inside Islam, the clash between the fascists and the democrats.

And why do I say that? Because England, France, Europe, is one of the front lines, and maybe the main frontline of this clash of civilization,

between Islam and Islam. Because we have some Islamists, some fundamentalists, but also because Europe is the place where a democratic Islam, a moderate Islam, can be built. Can be proved. Can be illustrated. Can prove its rightness.

Europe is the place where the majority of Muslim women can say, and can feel in their flesh, in their body, that Islam is compatible with openness, with democracy, and that it is good.

So, for bad and good reasons, not only the model or the pattern of citizenship is broken, but this important battle inside Islam has its frontline in Europe today.

When you are in such a crisis, when you feel the earth tremble, Europe is the place where you have the biggest earthquake and quagmire in the world. When you have that, you try to find some ray to hold onto. And sometimes, unfortunately, you try to find some guilty party whom you can reproach about everything. Scapegoats.

What happens to Europe? Europe is the place today where the production of scapegoats, the industry of scapegoats is flourishing.

We have so many scapegoats, we have a culture of scapegoats. An example: America is a scapegoat. When we don't know to which saint to appeal, as we say in French, we say it is the fault of America. America is guilty of everything, of our failures, of our depression, of our involvement, non-involvement, whatever. The way out of the nightmare by the bad exit of the end of history, the dream of the new entity that we thought was necessary and which is collapsing before our eyes, our social links and patterns of citizenship compared to Canada, compared to North America, which are showing their failure, and this production of scapegoats - these are all reasons to be rather depressed.

Which I am not but, because of which, my fellow European citizens, alas, often are.

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