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“Eurowhiteness:”: Europe’s Civilisational Turn

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From migration to foreign policy, the once outward-looking EU has turned defensive. External influences are framed as civilisational threats not only by far-right politicians but also by pro-European voices. This identitarian shift is reviving the link between Europe and whiteness, which was sidelined in the integration process after World War II but never properly addressed.

Green European Journal: **In your book Eurowhiteness, you discuss Europe’s civilisational turn. What do you mean by that? When did it begin, and when did it become apparent?**

Hans Kundnani: It is not entirely clear when it began. It may not even be apparent now, at least to a lot of people. I started thinking about the civilisational turn around 2020 and 2021. But in retrospect, the critical juncture was the refugee crisis in 2015. In the two decades between the end of the Cold War and 2010, the EU had been in expansive, offensive mode. It was optimistic and outward-looking, and imagined a world that could almost be remade in its own image. The phrase that captures this best is the title of a book by Mark Leonard of the European Council on Foreign Relations, Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century. This hubristic, optimistic period came to an end with the eurozone crisis, the Arab Spring in 2011, and then the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Europe begins to see itself as being on the defensive.

So the change is already there in the first half of the 2010s, but then with the refugee crisis in 2015, this defensiveness takes on a different shape. Not only does the EU see itself as being surrounded by threats but, after 2015, it also perceives these threats in civilisational terms.

That’s the civilisational turn, when threats are no longer seen in an ideological way or in a geopolitical or realist way, but in the context of a Huntingtonian “clash of civilisations”, as threats against a European civilisation that must be protected.

Your book argues that what underlies this turn is “Eurowhiteness”. What is Eurowhiteness and where does the term come from?

I borrow this term from József Böröcz, an American sociologist. He uses the phrase in a very particular way to discuss the internal hierarchy within what he calls the “structure of whiteness”. He differentiates, roughly, Western Europeans from Central and Eastern Europeans and Southern Europeans, who have an aspirational desire to become fully white. I use it in a slightly different way. I distinguish between ethnic/cultural versions of European identity on the one hand, and civic versions on the other. This draws on theories of nationalism, which distinguish between ethnic/cultural nationalism and civic nationalism, and applies it to read what I call “regionalism”, in other words, to Europe.

For me, Eurowhiteness is an ethnic/cultural idea of Europe. My argument is that there are both ethnic/cultural and civic currents of ideas of Europe going back to the Enlightenment at least. In particular, I talk about Eurowhiteness to suggest that Europe and whiteness have something to do with

each other, which is sort of obvious when you think about it, though it's not something people want to talk about. The idea of a post-war European identity, centred on the EU, is one that a lot of pro-Europeans want to believe has nothing to do with whiteness. But I argue that the ethnic/cultural version of European identity persisted after World War II, and influenced and informed European integration itself.

So the EU's civilisational turn might have become more evident in the last few years, but it has not replaced or superseded more civic understandings of Europe. It's been present throughout.

Ethnic/cultural ideas of Europe go back to the medieval period, when Europe was synonymous with Christendom, and what it meant to be European was basically synonymous with being Christian. In the modern period, starting with the Enlightenment, there was the beginning of a civic idea of what Europe is. From then on, both the ethnic/cultural and the civic currents are present and interact in some very complex ways. In the post-World War II period, pro-Europeans like to think that the ethnic/cultural element of European identity went away, and it probably did lose some salience. But what is shocking is that it is now having a resurgence.

In which of today's EU policies do you see the civilizational turn?

It's most visible in migration policy. Since 2015, Europe has in effect been building a wall in the Mediterranean. In other words, it's not that different from the policy that Trump pursued while he was US president, except that, instead of a land border with Mexico, it's a sea border with North Africa. Human Rights Watch says that EU migration policy can be summarised in three words: "Let them die." Since 2014, 28,000 people have died in the Mediterranean. More than 2000 so far in 2023. The Mediterranean is the deadliest border in the world.

Since Ursula von der Leyen became European Commission president in 2019, there's been a European Commissioner for "promoting our European way of life". It was originally for "protecting our European way of life". There was a stupid argument in the European Parliament about that verb, but the real problem is not the verb but the phrase "our European way of life". The job of the Commissioner for Promoting our European Way of Life is, at least in part, to keep migrants out. It makes it very explicit that migration is not just a difficult policy problem to manage but a threat to the European way of life.

This language of civilisation is also creeping into European foreign policy. The far right tends to bang on about the threat to European civilisation from migration, but the centre right increasingly uses the same language to discuss European foreign policy. In all the debates about European sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and a geopolitical Europe, there's this real sense that Europe needs to defend itself from threats perceived in civilisational terms. The key figure here is France's President Emmanuel Macron. Macron is a politician who first started on the centre left in Hollande's government and now is a centre-right or radical-centrist politician who explicitly talks about defending European civilisation. My fear is that the far right and the centrists are increasingly thinking in the same way.

Do you think that the associations between the idea of Europe and the European project and whiteness prevent ethnic minorities from identifying with EU politics?

I'm not sure, and a big part of what the book is trying to do is just to put some of these issues on the table. For the UK, which is the country that I know best, the picture is fairly clear empirically. Anecdotally, but also based on academic research and data, it's clear that non-white Brits identify with Europe even less than white Brits do.

My father was Indian and my mother is Dutch. But, even in my case, I find it more difficult to identify as European than I think a lot of white Brits do. When I was working for a European think tank, some of my colleagues would say, “I’m a proud European,” or, “I’m 100 per cent European.” And that’s fine, but I couldn’t do that. After all, I’m also part Asian, right? Similarly, if you’re black, you’re going to say, “Well, I’m part African, right? I can’t be completely European.”

Now, what does that mean in practice? If you’re a non-white person growing up in France, are you less likely to identify with a European project than with France? Intuitively, I would probably say yes. But I don’t know the answer to that, and one of the reasons that we can’t say for sure is that, as far as continental Europe goes, there’s such a lack of data.

Many European countries do not have any data on race or ethnic minorities. France doesn’t recognise the idea of race officially. Germany even wanted to remove the mention of race from the constitution, even though it was a clause protecting people from racial discrimination. Why are so many European countries so uncomfortable with the idea of race?

Different things are going on here. In simple terms, the reason France opposes it has to do with its Republican tradition of *laïcité*. In the case of Germany, though this is obviously a bit reductive, because it associates those types of ethnic categories with Nazism. But in both cases, the history of their political culture means that they have an in-built resistance to collecting data on race and therefore racial discrimination. That would be the more charitable explanation. The more cynical explanation is that they want to deny that racism is a problem. It’s easier to deny that racism is a problem if no data is pointing to disadvantage.

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Discussions of race inevitably lead back to colonialism. In the immediate decades after World War II, the founding members of the EU were all white European empires who banded together as they were losing their colonies. Why is the post-imperial part of the EU’s origin story often forgotten?

Again, there is an empathetic answer and a more cynical one. Let me start with the cynical answer. The EU has mythologised itself partly as a conscious strategy of what I call “region-building”, which is analogous to nation-building in the 19th century. The myth tends to be a comforting, positive story about your history that ignores some of the realities. After the colonial histories of France or the Netherlands had come to an end, they consigned it to a “memory hole”, as historian Tony Judt puts it.[1] They kind of moved on and tried to forget a painful, difficult history of humiliation. Colonialism was something that they just wanted to move on from.

But I have a slightly different and less cynical interpretation of why it gets forgotten. From the 1960s onwards, the Holocaust started to become a central collective memory within the EU and for pro-Europeans. Tony Judt writes that Holocaust recognition is “our contemporary European entry ticket”. The disconnect between the memory of the Holocaust and the forgetting of colonialism is striking, and I would argue that there’s a structural dimension to that disconnect.

The Holocaust and the Second World War fit very neatly into the existing narrative of the EU as a peace project. This is a story that pro-Europeans tell about what the EU has done, from the Schuman plan to

overcoming the centuries of conflict between France and Germany that culminated in World War II. What that story does is to encourage Europeans to think about their histories almost exclusively in relation to each other. It is the history of Europe as an internal story of how European countries interacted with each other in which the rest of the world is completely forgotten. The external lessons of European history, what Europeans did to the rest of the world, but also conversely the influence that the rest of the world had on Europe, in particular Africa and the Middle East, are erased.

Thinking about European history as a closed system brings Europeans together. It allows them to think of themselves as a "community of fate". But when you start to bring in the history of European colonialism, it has almost the opposite effect. It starts to pull Europeans apart. For example, France has to think about its history in Algeria, West and Central Africa, and Indochina [today's Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam]. If you start to think of your history as being part of a different community of fate, that of your former colonies, you have a responsibility to them. In the same way that pro-Europeans want to think that Germans have a responsibility to France, engaging with the history of colonialism encourages Europeans to think in terms of alternative communities of fate. The risk, from a pro-European point of view, is that these histories are a centrifugal force.

The history is even more complicated if you factor in Central and Eastern Europe or other countries such as Ireland, for that matter.

At a stretch, you could think about a collective Western European project of reparations. You could imagine, in theory at least, a collective European project of reparations between Western European countries such as France, Belgium, Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and others. After all, we tend to think of European colonialism as a competitive project between different European nations, but it was also cooperative in many ways. The problem is that Central and Eastern Europeans look at their history in a completely different way. They see themselves as victims, certainly of imperialism, some would even claim colonialism. So even if you could get Western European countries to agree, and I think we're a long way from that, Central and Eastern European countries look at this in such a different way that I think it's hard to imagine the EU, as a whole, undertaking any kind of project of reparations.

Is there a link between Eurowhiteness and Europe's democratic deficit?

What the EU does, roughly, is depoliticisation. It takes policy, in particular economic policy, out of the space of democratic contestation. At the outset, that was the genius of the European project, because depoliticising coal and steel policy made war between France and Germany materially impossible, as Robert Schuman said. As the project went further, however, depoliticisation started to become a problem from a democratic perspective. Economic policy ought to be the centre of democratic contestation, but it was removed from that space – and if you take economic policy out, what do you have left other than culture?

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In the ebb and flow between a civic idea of Europe and an ethnic/cultural idea, the civic idea dominated in the long period between the loss of European colonies in the 1960s and the beginning of the eurozone crisis in 2010. This civic idea was centred on the social market economy and the depoliticised mode of governance that European integration produced. Since the financial crisis, however, that model

of the social market economy and the welfare state has been hollowed out by neoliberalism. Meanwhile, there has been a backlash against the EU's depoliticised mode of governance, which first became apparent in the referendums over the Maastricht Treaty and later the Constitutional Convention.

The result is that gradually over the last few decades, it's become increasingly difficult to say that Europe stands for the social market economy, the welfare state, and depoliticised governance. That's the moment when pro-Europeans began to reach for a cultural definition of what Europe is. The European way of life no longer refers to the social market economy or its mode of governance; now it is about protecting European citizens from Islam or Islamism.

Do you think that the response to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has also been responded to in civilisational terms?

I think it is fairly clear that the war has been framed in quite a civilisational way. The contrast between how Ukrainian refugees and refugees from other parts of the world are treated is very striking. At the beginning of the war, von der Leyen said, "Ukraine belongs to us." That language would never be used about Algeria, Morocco, or Syria. I also think that Russia is being constructed as a civilisational "other" against which Europe defines itself, and there's a long history to that idea.

There are other ways to look at the war though: in a realist way or even an ideological, neoconservative way – that is, as part of a global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. Purist neoconservatives genuinely believe that every country in the world could become a democracy. It is what led to their recklessness in Iraq. You might disagree with them, but it is still not a civilisational framing.

Is it possible to separate supporting, say, European sovereignty from exclusionary discourses? Can you not support European strategic autonomy and maybe even a European army without slipping into defending racist border policies?

It absolutely is possible, which is why I am making these arguments. I am sceptical of ideas of European sovereignty and a geopolitical Europe, but for other reasons. What I am trying to do is to get those pro-Europeans who do believe in these things to be more careful about how they talk about it.

There are at least two alternative ways of thinking about a geopolitical Europe, and there may be others too. The first is very realist. In a world of great power competition, Europe also needs to be a continental great power alongside China, the United States, Russia, and so on. It might be hard for pro-Europeans to think in that way because it requires them to abandon the high moral ground, the pro-European moral superiority as it were. But there is nothing wrong with that realist framing.

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There is also an ideological framing free of ethnic, religious, or civilisational connotations. This is an argument about the global struggle between authoritarianism and democracy, which hawkish people in the UK and US think about. I don't agree with that reading, but at least the civilisational element is absent. A powerful Europe with a coherent, effective European foreign policy doesn't have to be a great civilisation.

There has been an effort in green politics in recent years to think about place, territory, and even rootedness while avoiding the "blood and soil" dangers of such discourse. You can find it in Latour's writing about a new political spectrum or the efforts of the German Greens to redefine the notion of Heimat. Can you do that without falling into the racist or civilisational way of thinking about the world?

I appreciate that you acknowledge this danger in green politics because a lot of people do not. For example, right-wing ecology in Germany goes back to the Romantic movement in the 19th century and was present in the early phase of the German Greens.

But the question that I've been asking myself in the last few years is: as the climate crisis gets more acute and climate change moves up the political agenda, will it overcome the fault lines in our politics – in other words, will a new consensus emerge – or will it somehow deepen those fault lines? So far at least, climate change seems to be getting sucked into our culture wars.

You are talking about roots in connection to soil, to the climate and the environment. I'm quite sceptical about the idea of roots in general and my thinking here comes from debates about race. [Cultural studies scholars] Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy would say that we need to talk less about "roots" and more about "routes". In other words, it is not about trying to go back to something or somewhere. It is about humanity, and yourself as an individual, being on a journey. I love that idea.

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