

An open society needs borders

by

Paul Scheffer
May 2003

It should be a warning when in a relatively open and relaxed society as the Netherlands an improvised party was on its way to become the largest parliamentary group, until the assassination of its political leader. The program of this party was concentrated on the slogan: 'enough is enough, close the borders'. This is not an isolated case, as in many countries similar parties have gained ground and are participating in government. The rise of populist parties throughout Europe asks for explanations.

One might argue that, in effect, the lament on democracy is a permanent background music to any open society, which proves its viability exactly through this continuous self-criticism. From time to time the tones will swell, provoking a correction, after which pessimism fades again. In 1975, for instance, an international cry of distress was given on the governmentability of the Western nations. The report *The Crisis of Democracy*, by the so-called Trilateral Commission (a collection of prominent politicians and businessmen from Western Europe, the United States and Japan), caused a lot of controversy. After all, the conclusions were pretty harsh, even the fearful prospect of 'Finlandization' of Western Europe was stirred up.

In a number of respects current criticism on the institutions may be likened to '1968', though the present situation is different from the one more than a quarter of a century ago. If at that time aversion manifested itself under a left-liberal sign - with pleas for comprehensive democratization and freedom of the citizen, now discontent at democracy is expressed under a conservative-populist sign, whereby reaffirmation of national identity and the protection of the citizen are key issues. Resistance against Europe, against immigration and against the established political parties comes together in an aversion to the left-liberal elite. It is those who came to power on the previous wave of protest that are the subjects of criticism themselves. It is their language, attitude and programme that evoke discontent.

It cannot be ruled out that something has become unstuck in the European democracies that goes further than the routine corrections common in any democratic system. Criticism on liberal attainments and institutions has raked up again almost forgotten issues of ethnicity and identity. The historic tension between nationalism and democracy is the far wider background against which we should place the rise of nationalist and populist movements, such as FPÖ, Front National, the movement of Fortuyn and the Flemish Nationalists.

In Western Europe we have an exceptional period behind us in which the illusion of invulnerability was strong and it seemed as if freedom and tolerance would almost automatically become more deeply rooted. Those years are past. These days citizens derive less legal security, social protection and cultural identity from the nation-state. There is widening problem of sovereignty: many questions that touch everyday life seem beyond the grasp of national governments. Now that the cornerstones of our contented societies have started to wobble, many are turning away from the liberal government and an open society.

European integration should be seen as a means to prevent the crisis in our democracies from deepening. It can only succeed if it is perceived as a protection or a means of 'survival' (Milward) for the nation states that compose this Union. In the present circumstances the Union is too often seen as a limitation of sovereignty and not as the only possibility of defending it. The integration of Europe is a civilization ideal, which does not mean, however, that as a means to an end the Union is beyond all criticism. There has always been the hope that the creation of supranational institutions and binding procedures would not only serve general interests, but would also lead to bonds between citizens across borders. Jean Monnet is known to have spoken out firmly on these issues: 'Only institutions grow wiser; they store up the collective experience'. And: 'Institutions govern relation

In this form of integration both the strength and the weakness of the tradition of Enlightenment reveal themselves. The institutional unification is a calculated exchange of interests which, however, does not live on communal symbols or a shared language. To the average citizen the cold integration has thus far not really come to life, which will therefore make it permanently vulnerable to a populist undercurrent knowing how to play on the warmth of national or regional identifications.

The indirect method to bring about a Union, i.e. the form of cooperation whereby citizens are involved only to a highly limited degree, was perhaps the only one possible indeed. However, the question is: how far does the old method of integration extend? The price of this collaboration based on accomplished facts may be high. The picture of an irreversible development - 'the train is running, your criticism is too late'- is at odds with the 'trial and error' typical of any democracy. The former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, is right: this institutional approach is running up against its limits. At least that is how he might be understood when he writes: 'I maintain that the method that may have been useful in the past is now no longer suited to make progress'.

Only stable democracies, i.e. political communities having some self-confidence, are prepared to open themselves to integration. At the same time, a transfer of powers not subject to democratic control at a higher level will provoke an attitude of isolation and resentment. In this way the European Union has contradictory effects, which may include stirring up populism. Support for the Union is dependent on the protection it offers member states in an interdependent environment. So the finality of the Union lies in the perpetuation of the member states as democratic constitutional states. The Union will fail when the democratic life in its constituent states will become more petrified.

The laborious debate on migration and integration illustrates this. The fast demographic changes in many West European societies have stirred up a feeling of alienation and insecurity. In many countries the substantial number of new immigrants combined with still limited integration has increased social inequality and cultural segregation. If a controlled reception and active integration of refugees, labour migrants and their family members does not succeed, we will soon reach the critical margin of what is socially and culturally acceptable. In that sense one can say that an open society needs borders.

People have a growing feeling that we live in a world disorder and migration has become a symbol of that loss of sovereignty. The discourse of cosmopolitanism has become obsolete because it does not reflect enough on the meaning of borders and the political and moral problem of crossing borders. The perceived lack of

responsibility of elites has produced the populist momentum in Europa and beyond. The ill reflected slogan of a global village or a world without borders has provoked a populist reaction that is rooted in the feeling of a beleaguered city and asks for a closing of the borders. The idea that we live in a postnational era has led to movements like Pauline Hanson's 'One Nation' in Australia. We must escape this polarization of cosmopolitanism and populism: the question who is a citizen and who is residing legally on a territory and who is not, remain essential questions for ev

When all the demographic predictions have sunk in, it can hardly be denied that immigration will be necessary in the future. We have to acknowledge that until now we have had little experience with classic immigration, for the guestworkers who came here had a different motive and the same goes for the refugees arriving here. The degree and the form that such immigration will assume are debatable, but there is a very real risk that poor integration will result in an increasing resistance to immigration. There is a growing gap between what is economically necessary and what is culturally desirable. This lends urgency to the European debate about immigration and integration.

In this debate we can observe three major misunderstandings. First of all it was said that immigration and integration are two different problems. Now it is clear that in a city like Amsterdam, where almost half of the population is first and second generation migrants, that the numbers of migrants is hampering the possibilities of integration and also the other way around that poor integration is an obstacle to a stable policy of immigration. Secondly, the idea was that integration is purely a question of time, one generation succeeding the other. This has proven not to be true. The second generation hardly identifies with Dutch or German society. The problem of Islam and democracy will not solve itself with an attitude of wait and see. Much more engagement is needed on all sides to foster a feeling among migrant 'that this country is theirs'. Last but not least: it was thought that

The defence of an open society in a world increasingly without borders forces us to rethink the cultural foundations of democracy: not to exclude but to include migrants. The multicultural paradigm has given no answers and has only deepened segregation. My conclusion is that shared citizenship has to do with cultural integration, a sense of community and mutual trust. Stimulating citizenship constitutes an invitation to everyone to take responsibility for our society. Without a new engagement - also from the migrants and their communities themselves - the level of trust in our societies will continue to decline.

The defenders of an open society need to ask themselves how that society came into being and what conditions do we need to retain this relatively relaxed attitude. Step by step, we move toward an answer to the question of how knowledge of history can be far more than an exercise in self-confirmation. Insight into our own past tells us how vulnerable an open society is and how recently some of the individual rights that we hold up as examples to others were won. Consciousness in this area is where the invitation lies.

We can also look at the same issue from a different perspective: what is the significance of our history and culture in a world that is rapidly becoming more and more global? In the magazine *Nexus*, the Polish-Canadian writer Eva Hoffman lucidly explains that the conditions for world citizenship have changed: 'While in the past cosmopolitanism was a remedy for the pettiness of provincialism and nationalism, today we use it as a remedy for the shallowness of globalism and life as social nomads'. Hoffman rejects the ideas of intellectuals who refuse to recognise 'the desire for meaningful bonds'.

The French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut has a similar attitude. Although he does not reject cosmopolitanism, he would like to see this virtue reassessed. In his eyes, the issue is how respect for our social and cultural history can be rhymed with tolerance for others and how the tendency towards individualism can be rhymed with responsibility for a society. Europe can play an essential role in keeping together these attitudes of open mindedness and loyalty. The present polarization of cosmopolitan and populist attitudes can only be overcome when Europe is seen as a protection for the national democracies.

Much is to be said for the attempts that have been made in our times to expand the boundaries of the society with which we allow ourselves to identify, provided the attempts involve expansion of responsibility rather than a flight from any form of social contract. The new freedom by no means strengthens civilisation in all respects however. No one can deny that attempts to eliminate borders focus more on money and goods at this point than on creating social and cultural cohesion.

In the final instance, the notion of citizenship is crucial. Here again, immigration holds a mirror up to us. The Moroccan writer Fouad Laroui recently spoke of the disappointment he felt when obtaining his Dutch nationality. The citizenship test was a deep disappointment to Laroui. Not a single question, not a single sign of interest, nothing that required any analysis or depth: 'The entire test took about five minutes'. Why is asking so little of immigrants who wish to obtain Dutch nationality a negative rather than a positive gesture? Because it ignores obligation. The government knows that posing requirements implies obligations on its part. If we really want to encourage integration, we have to clarify the basis of our society. If we want to quake respect for law and order, we have to know what lies behind our legislation and rules. The requirements that we pose for newcomers to our country also have an inexorable effect on us. In fact, we need to stimulate both newcomers and current inhabitants to participate in society, which is why the ability to speak Dutch, having a sense of our legal culture and a certain degree of historical consciousness must receive greater emphasis than they have thus far.

In terms of legal culture, we could make more effort to cultivate our civil code, and the democratic legal state in a broader context, also in our educational system. Why do we offer religious education in our classrooms, but no structured education in the basis for our laws? We should pay attention to the words of Afshin Ellian, a solicitor who fled Iran: 'I think that a sort of cowardice has existed in Europe, and most definitely in the Netherlands, for many years and this cowardice makes it impossible for Europeans to take their national constitutions and citizenship seriously'. The seriousness with which we approach our own legal culture, as expressed in the civil code for instance, increases as we begin to understand the backdrop against which that culture developed. Once we understand that backdrop, we see that the norms and values that we want to share with others are the result of years of struggle.

This is why historic consciousness is absolutely essential. We could also say that a culture lives from the 'dialogue with our predecessors': we must transfer the social and cultural capital of generations gone by to new generations, which means that we must constantly refine our perception of what binds and divides us. The act of stimulating citizenship constitutes an invitation to everyone to take responsibility for our society, but acceptance of that responsibility must be paired with critical analysis. Indeed, an open society sustains itself based on the ability of its citizens to think and develop opinions independently. However, differences of opinion must be based on mutual involvement to have any real significance. That involvement does not come

into being spontaneously, which is why the defense of an open society in times of immigration and integration asks for much more engagement.