**The challenges of national individualism**

Dick Pels

As Buruma rightly suggests, it is an illusion to think that nationalism was defeated once and for all after 1945: it has returned with a vengeance. However, nationalism has adopted a new face within the framework of a more individualised and individualistic society and a well-advanced process of European integration. Progressives have long been wrongfooted by this face change, and still have to find convincing answers to it.

This nationalism 2.0 has incorporated (or 'hijacked', as some would say) a number of liberal-democratic values and, other than its political rhetoric often suggest, no longer profiles itself as an anti-system movement which seeks to drastically abolish democratic procedures of political competition and representation. While the old nationalism and its disastrous consequences inspired the creation of the European Union, the new nationalism (embraced by generations who lack direct experience of the war) is instead a reaction against an integration process which has already been developing for more than seventy years.

Buruma is also right to say that the progressive taboo which denounced nationalism as the source of all political evil has long concealed that democratic institutions can only blossom when they are supported by a sense of solidarity which reaches beyond common interests or an abstract constitutional patriotism. In his view, it requires a common political language, common references, a continuous conversation and a shared sense of direction. I agree, as long as we do not put an overly rational interpretation on such conditions for creating a political *demos*. After all, nationalism precisely owed its success (and it still does) to its ability to probe the emotional depth of the sense of community (the underbelly).

However, Buruma rather abruptly assumes that such a European *demos* does not yet exist and that so far democratic institutions do not operate on an international level. He points to the painful lack of European solidarity which transpired during the Greek crisis and especially during the refugee crisis. In his view, none of the cultural arguments in favour of European unity and of shared European ideals, as symbolised by the European anthem, the flag or the euro, have succeeded in creating a European 'nation'. Europe only exists in the minds of an elite group of artists, bankers, academics, architects as well as a few intellectuals and overpaid football players. Their cosmopolitanism may slowly percolate to the masses, but this will take a long time.

Observations such as these may seem 'realistic', but they are hardly politically innocent. They do not merely render reality ‘as it is’, but also produce performative effects: they tend to create the reality they describe. Hence they can be bent both in a sceptical or an optimistic direction. The negative version can be encountered in nationalists such as Pim Fortuyn, who in his book *Zielloos Europa* ('Soulless Europe') similarly argued that Europe only existed on the abstract level of scientists, entrepreneurs and politicians and hardly among ordinary people. The nation state, on the other hand, represented a proven framework of human scale, within which people could feel safe and feel united through their language, culture and mindset: 'Next to being our family residence, the national state also offers us a genuine home' (Fortuyn 1998: 23-24). His mantra has been universally adopted by nationalists and populists: Europe is ‘soulless’ and hence cannot inspire. They maintain that there is no such thing as a European culture, a European identity or a European people, which is why Europe will never be able to develop into a mature democracy or offer a protective home to its citizens. Cultural identity, social security and democracy can only flourish within the boundaries of a nation state, never beyond them.

Each of these allegedly objective observations in fact constitutes a (negative) self-fulfilling prophecy: Europe may not, cannot and shall not materialise. But this performative spell can also be cast in the opposite direction: *yes we can*, w*ir schaffen das*. It is frequently objected, for example, that Europe will never able to develop an effective public sphere due to its lack of a common language. Nonetheless, there are signs of a growing capacity to communicate on the part of European citizens. The crises of 2014-15 already generated unprecedented levels of Europeanization and politicisation of news broadcasts and of public debate (Risse 2014); the crises of 2016 (Brexit, Trump) have only added to it. Currently, almost 40 percent of European citizens speaks a passable variety of Euro-English, a percentage which will increase to nearly 100 percent within one generation from now (Buruma prefers to think that the advance of English rather proves that our shared European culture is predominantly Anglo-American). Or consider the success of political and cultural discussion sites such as *Eurozine* (a network of more than a hundred European cultural journals and institutions), *Social* *Europe*, *Open* *Democracy*, *Eutopia*, *The* *European*, *EUObserver, Notre* *Europe* and *Politico* *Europe*. Is the glass half-empty or half-full?

In my book *A Heart for Europe. The Case for Europatriotism* I make an effort to substantiate a more positive prophecy (Pels 2016). I plead for a form of Europatriotism which, instead of denying the love of country, seeks to raise it to a higher European level. My focus is deliberately trained on political emotions: how can we develop a greater affection for Europe? How can European idealism be revived? How can we develop a closer attachment to Europe and increase our European sense of belonging and home? What we need is a 'politics of the heart' for Europe: a politics which can mediate between the rational mind and the irrational underbelly and clear a third way beyond abstract cosmopolitanism and petty nationalism. A European 'soul', a European sense of identity and a European feeling of home can only develop within a surveyable and bounded (though not closed) cultural and geographic space which is larger than the nations which currently comprise it. Europatriotism is more gentle and inclusive than the exclusive and aggressive national patriotism which is championed by Le Pen, Wilders, Pegida or Trump. It is more casual, open and hospitable and cultivates a 'weakness for Europe' which (in my own case) perfectly agrees with a 'weakness for the Netherlands' (Pels 2005).

The refugee crisis has revealed the sharp edges of both these positive and the negative prophecies. European hospitality as personified by the German Chancellor is challenged by populist reflexes to close the borders, build fences and send back 'fortune seekers' who threaten our identity and prosperity. According to Wilders, we are being overrun by a 'tsunami' of asylum seekers, hence we must save our country: 'The Netherlands must remain the Netherlands', and we must help ‘our own people first'. In the town of Purmerend, which refused to receive any asylum seekers, angry citizens reacted to a leftwing banner 'Welcome to refugees' shouting 'They get everything for free! How do they pay for these iPads? Our children cannot get housing! People are forced to visit the Food Bank! Our elderly don't get their diapers changed!’ (*NRC Handelsblad* 10.7.15).

The question remains: where does the power of attraction of this ethno-nationalism reborn come from? Part of the answer lis in the mindless inertia of collective selfishness: the will to hold on to what you have acquired, both in a cultural ('my own people first') and in a material sense ('my own wallet first'). Walloon prime minister Paul Magnette once described the Flemish nationalism of the N-VA as a 'patriotism of the rich'. But the attraction of nationalism also resides in its offer of a 'gratuitous' identity, similar to those which are provided by ethnic, gender or religious identifications (*white power*, machismo, the idea of being born a muslim). After all, the only form of merit which is required of you is to be born in the right spot in the right family. *Enfants de la patrie* (cf. the first line of the French national anthem) no longer need to worry where they belong. If you feel humiliated, bereft of honour and unworthy, you still count for something as a Dutchman, Frenchman, Hungarian or Greek, because you partake in the pride and honour of your nation.

Such a 'gratuitous' identity and commonality has always constituted nationalism’s most powerful attraction; which is only enhanced in a secular society that no longer seeks solace in Christianity or other religious beliefs. But another seduction lies in its contemporary ideological form, which radically differs from that of its discredited nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors. The core of this new-found legitimacy is found in the successful nationalisation of the most prominent liberal-progressive values: freedom, democracy, solidarity, tolerance, equality. FN leader Marine le Pen, for example, has explicitly joined the Republican-democratic tradition of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, while giving these values a nationalistic twist which is quite reminiscent of the thinking of the revolutionary Jacobins.

The new nationalism is singled out first of all by a stronger individualistic tone, which distances it from Fascist and National Socialist collectivism. This individualisation of nationalism (or nationalisation of individualism) has confounded the liberal left for decades. Populist parties are self-styled freedom parties, often in their very nomenclature ('Party for Freedom', 'Freedom Party of Austria', etcetera), which seamlessly weave the cultural ideals of the sixties and the consumerist Me-Age (personal autonomy, resistance to paternalism, self-fulfillment, consumer sovereignty) together with the defence of national identity and national culture against external threats such as Islamisation, economic globalisation and European integration. This 'national individualism' is primarily an invention of populists from the European Northwest, and conspicuously vanguarded by the Netherlands (Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders).

'Me first' and 'my own people first' are no longer seen as contradictory, as in the Nazi slogan: 'Du bist Nichts, dein Volk ist Alles' ('You are nothing, your people is everything'). Instead, the Big Me and the Big We are seen as mutually complementary and reinforcing. In this manner, the idea of freedom is not only nationalised but also dogmatised. Applying this to the freedom of speech would mean that one must be able to 'speak one’s mind', because one's opinion is sacrosanct; while this sacrosanct 'right' is also boosted by the fact that 'the people are always right'. The key link connecting the individual and collective dimensions is offered by the concept of sovereignty and its time-honoured connotations of omnipotence and absolutism. Demands for popular and national sovereignty are closely joined to those of individual self-determination, also in an economic sense (entrepreneurial freedom, consumer sovereignty). Hence the new nationalism also evidences a strong influence of neoliberal market ideology and its claims of entrepreneurial freedom, tax exemption and minimal government – whereas, according to Fascist and National Socialist dogma, the state was ‘everything’ and the (enterprising) individual ‘nothing’.

With regard to the idea of democracy, national populism likewise reveals the dark underside of the anti-authoritarian, left-progressive ideals of the sixties and seventies: *power to the people*! Populists such as Le Pen, Wilders and Orbán embrace the ideal of popular sovereignty and cheerfully subscribe to Lincoln's famous adagium 'government of the people, for the people, by the people'. Hungarian prime minister Orbán, a professed follower of the idea of an 'illiberal' democracy, recently cited Lincoln in order to justify his policy of closing the Hungarian borders to refugees. In his view, democracy equals 'listening to what the people want'. Hence the European Union cannot decide against the will of its citizens, who demand that our borders be protected (*NRC Handelsblad* 9.3.15). In a joint article in *The Wall Street Journal* (10.15.15), Geert Wilders, Heinz-Christian Strache (the FPÖ leader), Matteo Salvini (the Lega Nord leader) and Marine le Pen appealed to the same ‘primordial’ democratic principle.

Hence populists are not anti-democrats, but should instead be seen as 'hyper-democrats' who take the idea literally (*demo-kratein*): power should be with the people, and the elites have to clear out. The well-known danger lurking in this classical democratic absolutism is that an identity is being assumed between people and nation. The people is supposed to act according to a homogenous cultural and political will, and is regarded as sovereign within its national borders. Democracy can only thrive within the national framework and is unthinkable outside of it for lack of a 'people'. Tellingly, the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen already interpreted popular sovereignty in terms of *national* sovereignty. In a nationalist variation on Lincoln (and on Article 2 of the French Constitution), Marine le Pen has called for a politics 'of the French, for the French and with the French'. Apart from being ‘national-individualists’, populists can therefore also be described as 'national-democrats'.

Next in line, the populists nationalise the ideas of social security and solidarity. The Danish Folkeparti, the Sweden Democrats, the Dutch PVV, the Austrian FPÖ, the French FN and the even the national-conservative Polish government: all rise to the defence of the national welfare state against the compounded threats of neoliberal globalisation, Europe and the influx of migrants and refugees. The same type of social nationalism is increasingly encountered in radical left-wing parties, which converge in this respect with rightwing welfare chauvinist parties. The radical left in Europe is increasingly opposed to the EU and the euro, particularly after the humiliation of the Greek government by the Euro Group and the European ‘Institutions’ (formerly known as the Troïka) in the summer of 2015. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, former leader of the Parti de Gauche and current presidential candidate for La France Insoumise, thinks that France no longer constitutes independent nation, and that the French people need to take their own decisions again: 'If we must choose between the euro and sovereignty, we choose sovereignty' (*Die Zeit* 9.4.15). Sahra Wagenknecht of the Die Linke also fears that European integration is inexorably undermining German national sovereignty. The Dutch Socialist Party likewise warns that democracy, which it identifies with the sovereign will of the people, must be defended against an obtrusive ‘Brussels’.

In brief, what confounds the liberal left is an unprecedented populist nationalisation of universal ideals such as freedom, democracy and solidarity. If we want to recover the path to our own idealism, the polemic with populist adversaries is therefore an essential one. Regarding the ideal of freedom, we must insist that it cannot exist without moral boundaries and self-imposed limitations (in fact a conservative notion), which requires us to put limits both on the Big We and the Big Me. For the European member states, it implies that their freedom and power, particularly when facing the supremacy of financial markets and multinationals, can only be preserved if they are willing to transfer major portions of their sovereignty to the larger European whole. For individual citizens, banks and companies it means that their market freedom, i.e. the freedom to compete, sell and earn (money and respect), is duly restrained.

The principle that freedom can only blossom within boundaries is also relevant in a more literal sense in the context of the refugee crisis, which is in many respects a crisis of limitations: of solidarity (towards the refugees and among the European nations themselves), of the coping strength of liberal and not-so-liberal societies, and of the relation between the porous Schengen boundaries and those of the EU as a whole. Europatriots do not defend borderless cosmopolitan freedom, but accept that European freedom can only flourish within a clearly delimited geographical space and well-protected external borders. This calls for a more thorough understanding of where Europe begins and ends as well as a shared resolve to better guard, regulate and protect access to this coveted European space. Something like a transnational 'Europe of the individuals' (Ulrich Beck) is only possible as soon as these outer boundaries are more or less settled.

What does this imply for our democratic ideals? It demands a more radical farewell to the literal or populist concept of democracy, and a more outspoken embrace of the tradition of liberal or representative democracy, which focuses on the moderation and self-limitation of all powers, including that of the people. In representative democracy, homogeneity cedes before diversity and pluralism, while checks and balances between the various powers and institutions guarantee the emergence of multiple degrees of liberty. Populist democrats tend to embrace the principle of majority rule, which empowers a section of the people (or rather, their spokespersons) to act as if they constitute the whole. The purpose of liberal democracy, by contrast, is not to create (popular) unity, but to organise diversity and productive difference – and to organise the peaceful acceptance of non-productive differences. Hence it can only be a 'democracy of minorities'. 'The people' are nothing but a 'sum of minorities', as French political thinker Rosanvallon suggests (Rosanvallon 2012). And since minorities often do not respect national boundaries, a democracy of minorities is almost inevitably also a border-crossing democracy.

A democratic society is duty-bound to protect its minorities from the threat of tyranny by the majority. But minorities are often no better than the majority in marginalising and oppressing their own minorities (women, homosexuals, children, infidels). That is why liberal democracy must also protect and stimulate minorities within the minorities, which ultimately comes down to protecting the minority of one (of dissenters, whistle-blowers and other deviants). The freedom of belief and religion, for example, is traditionally intended to protect religious minorities. But it must also protect the minorities within these minorities, including those who want to leave their church or choose to live a non-religious life. The individual freedom of religion therefore always prevails over the collective freedom of religion.

Finally, we need to address the matter of social security and social protection. We must appreciate the populist motive of national protection of welfare achievements in resistance to neoliberal dominance, also when the latter is pursued and imposed through the hegemony of 'Brussels'. However, the nationalist right is primarily concerned with defending cultural identity and national integrity and with preserving the national wealth for ‘one’s own people’ (cf. ‘America First’). The nationalist left, for its part, in campaigning for 'socialism in one country', appears to repeat the historic tragedy of pre-war socialism, which sold out to nationalism both in its democratic (the Plan of Labour) and its authoritarian form (Stalinism). Instead of falling back on the national welfare states, we must therefore move forward to a truly European social democracy ('socialisation in one continent'). This will require the gradual construction of a post-national welfare state, starting with a European unemployment insurance and European minimum wages. The feeling of being socially protected by Europe would thereby increase, as would the sense of shared European citizenship and European identity.

A new European idealism can emerge if we succeed in liberating core values such as freedom, democracy and solidarity from their nationalist imprisonment and dedicate them to the larger European space in which the good, safe and peaceful life comes within reach of all citizens. Different from what many contemporaries believe, the old dream of 'no more war' still offers an inspiring ambition, particularly since Europe is once again being threatened by war (in Ukraine and Syria) and terror. The attempt to ban violence and fear as much as possible from society remains a defining civilisatory mission for Europe, and one which is far from being achieved. This dream, which currently attracts so many people who are chased from their homes by violence, poverty and lack of opportunity, is what makes up Europe’s soul, the core of its cultural richness. Notwithstanding a much-needed realism about what currently divides Europe, let us therefore favour the half-full glass of the optimist.

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\*Dick Pels is a sociologist and political writer, and a former chairman of the scientific foundation of GroenLinks, the Dutch green party. Among his many books are *Property and Power in Political Theory* (Routledge, 1998), *Een zwak voor Nederland* (‘A Weak Spot for the Netherlands’)(2005), Het volk bestaat niet (‘The People Does Not Exist’)(2011) and *A Heart for Europe. The Case for Europatriotism* (2016).