

Inventing European Identity

by Theodore Dalrymple



I doubt whether there is anyone who has never resorted to the ancient rhetorical tricks of *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*. Some do it knowingly, others unknowingly. The omission of relevant facts and the insinuation of falsehoods are dual and often inseparable techniques that are the stock-in-trade of most practising politicians. Arguments have often to be schematic and if in theory it is possible to tell no falsehoods, it is virtually impossible not to suppress, or at least omit, some truths if a discussion of complex matters is not to be interminable.

Nevertheless, universal resort to error, whether honest or not, is no defence for those who utilise it. This is particularly so of intellectuals, whose metier above all is, or ought to be, honest argumentation. I was therefore intrigued to read [an open letter](#) published in the *Guardian* newspaper by what were described as “30 top intellectuals.”

The letter began with a ringing *suggestio falsi*: “The idea of Europe is in peril.” What the authors meant was that the idea of the European Union is in danger. They implied, in effect, that Europe and the European Union were synonyms, which is clearly false. If a country ceases to be a member of the European Union, or has never been a part of it, it does not cease to be European, neither geographically nor culturally.

The opening salvo sets the tone for the rest. Any opposition to the ever-closer union that is the aim of the European Union is characterized as purely irrational, nostalgic and even fascistic. It cannot by definition be founded on any rational considerations whatever. Its success would be, as the authors put it, the triumph of “a politics of disdain for intelligence and culture”—which is in effect to say that anybody who opposes the proposed ever-closer union is either a demagogue or uncouth and stupid. Thus the top intellectuals, including five winners of the Nobel Prize and many world-famous writers, appear to have learned nothing from the single most disastrous phrase used in any recent election, Mrs. Clinton’s infamous “basket of deplorables.” Who is more stupid than whom?

The top intellectuals say of opponents of the drive towards a large federal state something like, “Let’s reconnect with our ‘national soul!’ Let’s rediscover our ‘lost identity!’” They go on to say, “Never mind that abstractions such as ‘soul’ and ‘identity’ often exist only in the imagination of demagogues.”

I overlook the fact that any British politician, however fervent a supporter of Brexit would never use a term such as “the British soul” for justified fear of being laughed out of court, but notice only that a few lines further on the top intellectuals say “We count ourselves among the European patriots.”

One can, of course, be a patriot only of a country that has an identity. But identities, we have just been told, are often abstractions that exist only in the imagination of demagogues.

Common sense surely tells us that a person in Portugal or in Estonia feels more Portuguese or Estonian than he feels European, if for no other reason than that a feeling of identity usually requires an ability to communicate. It is true that identities can change and even sometimes be built: in Massimo d'Azeglio put it, "We have made Italy, now we must make Italians." The deliberate forging of identities, however, is difficult, far from always successful and often necessitates policies that are far from liberal or democratic, two qualities on which the top intellectuals pride themselves. As I write this, Greece has just demanded reparations of 377 billion Euros from Germany and Poland 700 billion. Not much sign there, then, of pan-European identity and solidarity taking precedence over national identity, at least not yet. Be it remembered, furthermore, that Greece has a government of the left, Poland of the right.

A European identity, moreover, can exist only if there are non-European identities. This means one of two things. Either—to be consistent—the European identity, once achieved, will have to dissolve itself in a pan-United Nations identity or be accused of a nationalist nostalgia of its own; or it must admit that the forging of a European identity is actually not in the service of peace, democracy or human rights, but in that of the search for power in a world in which there are states many times larger than any individual European state. Pan-Europeanism is at heart no more liberal or democratic than was pan-Germanism or pan-Slavism.

The top intellectuals are themselves by no means free of the demagoguery of which they accuse those with whom they disagree. "Urgently," they write, "we need to sound the alarm against these arsonists of soul and spirit . . . want to make a bonfire of our freedoms." This is scarcely temperate language to describe *all* opposition to the ever-closer union, even if it is true that there are some very nasty people about. In mentioning a reviving antisemitism, however, the top

intellectuals might have mentioned that, in Britain at least, the main source or threat of antisemitism (in what was traditionally the least antisemitic large country of western Europe) comes first from Moslems and second from socialists who believe that economic success in a capitalist society must derive from exploitation and that, because the Jews are the most successful economic group as broken down by religion, they must be exploiters. No Jew in England lives in mortal fear of being attacked by Nigel Farage. Talk about *suppressio veri*!

The top intellectuals end with a rhetorical flourish. They say that those who oppose Europe (in *le tout Paris* sense of the word) promise “to tear down everything that made our societies great, honourable and prosperous . . . a challenge to liberal democracy and its values.” Gosh, without the European Union, no greatness, honour, or prosperity! This is remarkable historiography, to put it mildly. It rather overlooks the fact that the founders of Europe (in the top intellectuals’ sense of the word) wanted to by-pass all politics—let alone democracy—altogether, as being beyond the ken of the hoi-polloi. And indeed, this is what we now have, more or less: administration. The nearest we come to politics as formerly understood is bureaucratic in-fighting.

Of course, there is demagoguery on the other side of the question too. Living in the European Union is not some kind of living hell in which every freedom is extinguished. It is not true that all or most of the problems of a country like Britain derive from its membership of the European Union, or that its own bureaucracy is not as much to be feared as—or is less to be feared—than that of Brussels. Inscribed over the portals of every national parliament or assembly should be inscribed the words *One must not exaggerate*.

However, having read the open letter in the *Guardian*, with all its resort to *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*, my main thought was that if these were top intellectuals, what must

the rest be like?

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