

# Identity and Difference

By Alain de Benoist

Translated from the Spanish by Lucian Tudor

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## Difference

The debate about immigration has raised in a sharp manner the questions of the right to difference, the future of the mode of community life, of the diversity of human cultures and of social and political pluralism. Questions of such importance cannot be treated with brief slogans or prefabricated responses. “Let us, therefore, oppose exclusion and integration,” writes Alain Touraine. “The first is as absurd as it is scandalous, but the second has taken two forms that need to be distinguished and between them there must be searched for, at least, a complementarity. Speaking of integration only to tell the new arrivals that they have to take their position in society as such and what it was before their arrival, that is much closer to exclusion than of a true integration.”[1]

The communitarian tendency began to affirm itself in the early eighties, in liaison with certainly confusing ideological propositions about the notion of “multicultural society.” Later it seemed to be remitted due to critiques directed against it on behalf of liberal individualism and “republican” universalism: the relative abandonment of the theme of difference, considered as “dangerous,” the denunciation of communities, invariably presented as “ghettos” or “prisons,” the over-valuation of individual problems to the detriment of the groups, the return of a form of purely egalitarian anti-racism, etc. The logic of capitalism, which, to extend itself, needs to make organic social structures and traditional mentalities disappear, has also had weight in that sense. The leader of immigrant minorities, Harlem Désir, sometimes accused of having inclined towards “differentialism,”[2] has been able to boast of having “promoted the sharing of common values and not the identitarian tribalism, the republican integration around universal principles and not the construction of community lobbies.”[3]

All the critique of the mode of community life is reduced, in fact, to the belief that difference obstructs inter-human understanding and, therefore, integration. The logical conclusion of that approach is that integration will remain facilitated with the suppression of communities and the erosion of differences. This deduction is based on two assumptions:

- (1) The more “equal” are the individuals who compose a society, the more they will “resemble” each other and the less problematic their integration will be;
- (2) Xenophobia and racism are the result of the fear of the Other. Consequently, to make otherness disappear or to persuade each one that the Other is a small thing if compared with the Same, it will result in its attenuation and even its nullification.

Both assumptions are erroneous. Without doubt, in the past racism has been able to function as an ideology that legitimized a complex — colonial, for example — of domination and of exploitation. But in modern societies, racism appears rather as a pathological product of the egalitarian ideal; that is to say, as a door of obliged departure (“the only way to distinguish oneself”) in the bosom of a society that, adhering to egalitarian ideas, perceives all difference as unbearable or as abnormal: “The anti-racist discourse,” writes Jean-Pierre Dupuy in this respect, “considers as an evidence that the racist depreciation made of the other goes on par with a social organization that prioritizes beings based on the function of a criterion of value. [...] [But] these presuppositions are exactly contrary to what we learn from the comparative study of human societies and of their history. The most favorable medium for mutual recognition is not the one which obeys the principle of equality, but rather that the one which obeys the principle of hierarchy. This thesis, which the works of Louis Dumont have illustrated in multiple ways, can only be comprehended with the precondition of not confusing hierarchy with inequality, but rather, on the contrary, by opposing both concepts. [...] In a true hierarchical society, the hierarchically superior element does not dominate the inferior elements, but is different from them in the same sense in which all the parties are encompassed, or in the sense in which one party takes precedence over another in the constitution and in the internal coherence of the whole.”[4]

Jean-Pierre Dupuy also notes that xenophobia is not defined solely by fear of the Other, but, perhaps even more, by fear of the Same: “What people are afraid of is the indifferenciation, and this because indifferenciation is always the sign and product of social disintegration. Why? Because the unity of the whole presupposes its differentiation, that is to say, its hierarchical conformation. Equality, that principle that denies differences, is the cause of mutual fear. People are afraid of the Same, and there is the source of racism.”[5]

The fear of the Same raises mimetic rivalries without end, and egalitarianism is, in modern societies, the motor of those rivalries in which each seeks to become “more equal” than the others. But, at the same time, the fear of the Other is added to the fear of the Same, producing a game of mirrors which prolongs itself to infinity. Thus, it can be said that the xenophobic ones are just as allergic to the other identity of the immigrants (real or imagined otherness) as, conversely, to how much in these is not different, and that xenophobia is experienced as a potential threat of indifferenciation. In other words, the immigrant is considered a threat at the same time as an assimilable person and as a non-assimilable person. The Other is thus converted into a danger to the extent that it is a carrier of the Same, while the Same is a danger to the extent that it pushes the recognition of the Other. And this game of mirrors works all the more as how much atomized the society is, composed of increasingly isolated individuals and, therefore, increasingly vulnerable to all conditions.

Thus one can better understand the failure of an “anti-racism” that, in the best of cases, does not accept the Other more than to reduce it to the Same. As much as it erodes the differences with

the hope of facilitating integration, the more it in reality makes it impossible. The more it thinks to battle against exclusion by desiring to make immigrants uprooted individuals “like everyone else,” the more it contributes to the advent of a society where mimetic rivalry culminates in exclusion and generalized dehumanization. And finally, the more the “anti-racism” is believed in, the more it appears like a racism classically defined as the negation or radical devaluation of group identity, a racism that has always opposed the preeminence of a single obligatory norm, judged explicitly or implicitly as “superior” (and superior because it is “universal”) over the differentiated modes of life, whose mere existence seems incongruous or detestable.

This anti-racism, universalist and egalitarian (“individuo-universalist”), extends the secular trend that, under the most diverse forms and in the name of the most contradictory imperatives (the propagation of the “true faith,” the “superiority” of the White race, the global exportation of the myths of “progress” and “development”), has not stopped practicing the conversion seeking to reduce diversity everywhere, that is to say, precisely, trying to reduce the Other to the Same. “In the West,” observes the ethno-psychiatrist Tobie Nathan, “the Other no longer exists in our cultural schemas. Now we only consider the relation with the Other from the moral point of view, meaning, not only in an inefficient way, but also without procuring ourselves the means to understand it. The condition of our education system is that we are to think that the whole world is alike [...]. To say ‘I must respect the other’ is something that makes no sense. In the everyday relation, this kind of phrase has no sense if we cannot integrate our schemes to the fact that naturally, the function of the Other is precisely to be Other. [...] France is the most insane country for that. [...] The structure of power in France seems unable to integrate even those small fluctuations which are the regional languages. But it is exactly from this conception of power from which humanistic theory was constructed, up to the universal Declaration of human rights.” And Nathan concludes: “Immigration is the real problem at the foundation of our society, which does not know to think of difference.”[6]

It is time, then, to recognize the Other and to remember that the right to difference is the principle that, as such, is only worth its generality (nobody can defend their difference except to the extent that they recognize, respect, and defend also the difference of the other) and whose place is in the broader context of the right of the peoples and of ethnic groups: The right to identity and to collective existence, the right to language, to culture, to territory and self-determination, the right to live and to work in their own country, the right to natural resources and to the protection of the market, etc.

The positive attitude will be, to reference the terms of Roland Breton, “that which, starting with the recognition of the right to difference, admits pluralism as a fact which is not only ancient, durable, and permanent, but also positive, fertile, and desirable. The attitude that resolutely turns its back to the totalitarian projects of the uniformization of humanity and of society, and which does not see in the different or deviant individual one who must be punished, nor as a sick one who must be cured, nor as an abnormal one who must be helped, but rather another self, simply provided with a set of physical traits or cultural habits, generators of sensibility, of tastes, and of aspirations of their own. On a planetary scale, it is tantamount to admitting, after the consolidation of certain sovereign hegemonies, the multiplication of independencies, but also of interdependencies. On the regional scale, it is tantamount to recognizing, against centralisms, the processes of autonomy, of self-centered organization, of self-management. [...] The right to difference supposes the mutual respect of the groups and of the communities, and the exaltation

of the values of each one. [...]To say 'long live the difference' does not imply any idea of superiority, of domination and of contempt: the affirmation of oneself is not the lowering of the other. The recognition of the identity of an ethnicity can only subtract from others what they have unduly monopolized.”[7]

The affirmation of the right to be different is the only way to escape a double error: that error, very widespread in the Left, that consists of believing that “human brotherhood” will be realized on the ruins of differences, the erosion of cultures, and the homogenization of communities, and that other error, widespread in the Right, which consists of the belief that the “rebirth of the nation” will be achieved by inculcating in its members an attitude of rejection towards others.

## **Identity**

The question of identity (national, cultural, etc.) also plays a central role in the debate about immigration. To begin, two observations must be made. The first is that there is much talk of the identity of the host population, but, in general, there is much less talk of the identity of the immigrants themselves, who nevertheless seem, by far, the most threatened by the fact of immigration itself. Indeed, the immigrants, insofar as they are the minority, directly suffer the pressure of the modes of behavior of the majority. Pulled to disappearance or, inversely, exacerbated in a provocative way, their identity only survives, frequently, in a negative (or reactive) manner by the hostility of the host environment, by capitalist over-exploitation exerted on certain workers uprooted from their natural structures of defense and protection.

The second observation is the following: It is striking to see how, in certain ways, the problem of identity is situated exclusively in relation with immigration. The immigrants would be the principal “threat,” if not the only one, that weighs on French identity. But that is tantamount to overlooking the numerous factors that in the whole world, both in the countries with a strong foreign labor as in those without it, are inducing a rapid disintegration of collective identities: the primacy of consumption, the Westernization of customs, the media homogenization, the generalization of the axiomatic of self-interest, etc.

With such a perception of things, it is too easy to fall into the temptation of scapegoating. But, certainly, it is not the fault of the immigrants that the French are apparently no longer capable of producing a way of life that is their own nor to offer to the world the spectacle of an original form of thought and of being. And nor is it the fault of the immigrants that the social bond is broken wherever liberal individualism is extended, that the dictatorship of the private has extinguished the public spaces that could constitute the crucible in which to renew an active citizenry, nor that individuals, submerged in the ideology of merchandise, turn away more and more from their own nature. It is not the fault of the immigrants that the French form a people increasingly less, that the nation has become a phantasm, that the economy has been globalized nor that individuals renounce being actors of their own existence to accept that there are others who decide in their place from norms and values that they no longer contribute to forming. It is not the immigrants, finally, who colonize the collective imagination and impose on the radio and on the television sounds, images, concerns, and models “which come from outside.” If there is “globalism,” we say too with clarity that, until proven otherwise, where it comes from is the other side of the Atlantic, and not the other side of the Mediterranean. And let us add that the small Arab shopkeeper contributes more to maintain, in a convivial way, the French identity than the Americanomorphic park of attractions or the “shopping center” of a very French capital.

The true causes of the disappearance of French identity are, in fact, the same that explain the erosion of all other identities: The exhaustion of the model of the nation-state, the collapse of all traditional institutions, the rupture of the civil contract, the crisis of representation, the mimetic adoption of the American model, etc. The obsession with consumption, the cult of material and financial “success,” the disappearance of the ideas of common good and of solidarity, the dissociation of the individual future and collective destiny, the development of technology, the momentum of the exportation of capital, the alienation of economic, industrial, and media independence, these have destroyed by themselves the “homogeneity” of our peoples infinitely more than what has been done up to today by some immigrants who, by the way, are not the last to suffer the consequences of this process. “Our ‘identity’,” emphasizes Claude Imbert, “remains much more affected by the collapse of civility, more altered by the international cultural arm of the communication media, more eliminated by the impoverishment of language and of concepts, more damaged overall by the degradation of a previously centralized, potent and normative State which founded among us that famous ‘identity’.”[8] In brief, if the French (and European) identity falls apart, it is before all due to a vast movement of techno-economic homogenization of the world, whose principal vector is the transnational or Americano-centric imperialism, and which generalizes everywhere the loss of sense, that is, a feeling of the absurdity of life which destroys organic ties, dissolves the natural sociality and each day makes people be more as strangers to one another.

From this point of view, immigration plays much more a revelatory role. It is the mirror that should permit us to take the full measure of the state of latent crisis in which we find ourselves, a state of crisis in which immigration is not the cause but rather a consequence among others. An identity feels more threatened when it is known how much more vulnerable, uncertain, and undone it is. That is why such an identity is in its depth no longer able to become capable of receiving a foreign contribution and include it within itself. In this sense, it is not that our identity is threatened because there have been immigrants among us, but rather that we are not capable of facing the problem of immigration because our identity is already largely undone. And that is why, in France, the problem of immigration is only discussed by surrendering to the twin errors of angelism or of exclusion.

Xenophobes and “cosmopolitans,” on the other hand, coincide in believing that there exists an inversely proportional relationship between the affirmation of national identity and the integration of immigrants. The first believe that the greater care or greater conscience of the national identity allows us to spontaneously rid ourselves of the immigrants. The second think that the best way to facilitate the insertion of the immigrants is to favor the dissolution of national identity. The conclusions are opposites, but the premise is identical. Both the one and the other are wrong. What hinders the integration of immigrants is not the affirmation of national identity but rather, on the contrary, its erasure. Immigration becomes a problem because the national identity is uncertain. And conversely, the difficulties linked to the reception and integration of recent arrivals can be resolved thanks to a newfound national identity.

Thus we see to what point it is senseless to believe that it will suffice to invert the migration flow to “get out of the decadence.” The decadence has other causes, and if there would be not one immigrant among us, due to that we would not stop finding ourselves confronted with the same difficulties, although this time without a scapegoat. The obscuration of the problem of immigration, making immigration responsible for everything that does not work, obliterates in

the same strike many other causes and other responsibilities. In other words, it carries out a prodigious diversion of attention. It would be interesting to know for whose benefit.

But there must yet be more questioning of the notion of identity. Raising the question of French identity, for example, does not fundamentally consist of asking who is French (the response is relatively simple), but much more in asking what is French. Before this question, much more essential, the singers of the “national identity” are limited in general to responding with commemorative memories or evocations of “great personalities” they consider more or less founders (Clovis, Hugh Capet, the Crusaders, Charles Martel, or Joan of Arc), ingrained in the national imagination by a conventional historiography and devotion.[9] Now this little catechism of a species of religion of France (where the “eternal France,” always identical to itself, is found in all moments ready to confront the “barbarians,” such that what is French ends up defining itself, in the end, without a further positive characteristic of its non-inclusion in the alien universe) bears no relation to but rather is very far away from the true history of a people whose specific trait, in its depth, is the way it has always known to tackle its contradictions. In fact, the religion of France is today instrumentalized to restore a national continuity stripped of all contradiction in a Manichean view where globalization (the “anti-France”) is purely and simplistically interpreted as a “plot.” The historical references thus remain situated in an ahistorical perspective, an almost essentialist perspective that does not aspire so much to tell the story as to describe a “being” that will always be the Same, which will not be defined as any more than resistance to otherness or the rejection of the Other. The identity is thus inevitably limited to the identical, to the simple replica of the “eternal yesterday,” of a past glorified by idealization, an already built entity which only remains for us to conserve and transmit as a sacred substance. In parallel, the national sentiment itself remains detached from the historical context (the appearance of modernity) which had determined its birth. The history then becomes un-broken, when the truth is that there is no history possible without rupture. It is converted into a simple duration which permits exorcising the separation, when the truth is that the duration is, by definition, dissimilarity, the separation between one and oneself, the perpetual inclusion of new separations. In brief, the national catechism serves itself by the history to proclaim its closure, instead of finding in it a stimulus to let it continue.

But identity is never one-dimensional. It has not always only associated circles of multiple belonging, but combines factors of permanence and factors of change, endogenous mutations and external contributions. The identity of a people and of a nation is also not solely the sum of its history, of its customs and their dominant characteristics. As Philippe Forget wrote, “a country may appear, at first sight, as a set of characteristics determined by customs and habits, ethnic factors, geographical factors, linguistic factors, demographic factors, etc. However, those factors can apparently describe the image or social reality of a people, but not realize what the identity of a people is as an original and perennial presence. Consequently, the foundations of identity need to be thought of in terms of the openness of sense, and here is the sense which is nothing other than the constitutive bond of a man or of a population and its world.”[10]

This presence, which means the opening of a space and time, continues Phillippe Forget, “should not refer to a substantialist conception of identity, but rather a comprehension of being as a game of differentiation. This is not to apprehend identity an immutable and fixed content, liable to be encoded into a canon ... Contrary to a conservative conception of tradition, which conceives it as a sum of immutable and trans-historical factors, tradition, or better, traditionality, should be here

understood as a weft of differences which are renewed and regenerated in the soil of a patrimony consisting of an aggregate of past experiences, and which are put to test in their own surpassing. In that sense, the defense cannot and should not consist of the protection of forms of existence postulated as intangibles; they should better be addressed to protect the forces that permit a society to metamorphose itself proceeding from itself. The repetition of the identical of a place or the action of 'living' in according to the practice of another lead equally to the disappearance and to the extinction of collective identity.”[11]

As it occurs with culture, identity is also not an essence that can be fixed or reified by speech. It is only determinant in a dynamic sense, and is only possible to be apprehended from the interactions (or retro-determinations) both of the personal decisions as from the denials of identification, and of the strategies of identification which underlie them. Even considered from the point of origin, identity is inseparable from the use which was made — or which was not made — of it in a particular cultural and social context, that is, in the context of a relation with others. That is why identity is always reflexive. In a phenomenological perspective, it implies never dissociating its own constitution and the constitution of the others. The subject of collective identity is not an “I” or a “we,” a natural entity constituted once and for all, an opaque mirror where nothing new can come to be reflected, but rather a “self” which continually appeals to new reflections.

We will recuperate the distinction formulated by Paul Ricoeur between *idem* identity and *ipse* identity. The permanence of the collective being through ceaseless change (*ipse* identity) cannot be limited to what pertains to the order of the event or of the repetition (*idem* identity). On the contrary, it is linked on the whole to a hermeneutics of the “self,” to the whole of a narrative work destined to make a “place” appear, a space-time which configures a sense and forms the same condition of the appropriation of the self. Indeed, in a phenomenological perspective, where nothing is given naturally, the object always proceeds from a constituent elaboration, from a hermeneutic relation characterized by the affirmation of a point of view which retrospectively organizes the events to give them a meaning. “The story builds the narrative identity constructing the history by constructing that of the story told,” says Ricoeur. “It is the identity of the history that makes the identity of the personage.”[12] To defend one’s own identity is not, then, to be content with ritually listing historically foundational points of reference, nor to sing of the past to better avoid confronting the present. To defend one’s own identity is to understand the identity as that which remains in the game of differences – not as the same, but rather as the always singular way of changing or not changing.

It is not, then, to choose the *idem* identity against the *ipse* identity, or vice versa, but rather to apprehend both in their reciprocal relations by means of an organizing narrative that takes into account both the understanding of the self as well as the understanding of the other. To recreate the conditions in which it returns to being possible to produce such a story which constitutes the appropriation of the self. But it is an appropriation which never stays fixed, for collective subjectivation always proceeds from an option more than from an act, and from an act more than a “fact.” A people is maintained thanks to its narrativity, appropriating its being in successive interpretations, becoming the subject by narrating itself and thus avoiding losing their identity, that is, avoiding becoming the object of the narrative of another. “An identity,” writes Forget, “is always a relation of self to self, an interpretation of itself and of the others, by itself and by others. Ultimately, it is the story of itself, elaborated in the dialectical relation with the others,

which completes the human history and delivers a collectivity to history. [...] The personal identity endures and reconciles stability and transformation through the act of narration. The personal identity of an individual, of a people, is built and maintained through the movement of the story, through the dynamism of the plot which underpins the narrative operation, as Ricoeur said.”[13]

Finally, what most threatens national identity today possesses a strong endogenous dimension, represented by the tendency to the implosion of the social, that is, the internal deconstruction of all forms of organic solidarity. In this respect, Roland Castro has been able to justly speak of those societies where “nobody any longer supports anyone,” where everyone excludes everyone, where every individual has become potentially foreign for every individual. To liberal individualism one must attribute the major responsibility in this regard. How can one speak of “fraternity” (in the Left) or of “common good” (in the Right) in a society where each have been submerged in the search for the maximization of their own and exclusive interests, in a mimetic rivalry without end which adopts the form of a headlong rush, of a permanent competition devoid of all purpose?

As Christian Thorel had emphasized, “the re-centering on the individual over the collective leads to the disappearance of the look towards the other.”[14] The problem of immigration runs the risk, precisely, of obliterating this evidence. On the one hand, that exclusion of immigrants of which the immigrants are victims can make us forget that today we live increasingly more in a society where exclusion is also the rule between our own “autochthonous people.” How to support the foreigners when we support ourselves increasingly less? On the other hand, certain reproaches crumble by themselves. For example, the young immigrants that “have hatred” have been frequently told that they must respect the “country which hosts them.” But why must the immigrant youths be more patriotic than some French youth who are not? The greatest risk, finally, would be to believe that the criticism of immigration, which is legitimate in itself, will be facilitated by the increase of egoism, when in fact it is that increase which has more deeply undone the social fabric. There is, on the other hand, the whole problem of xenophobia. There are some who believe in strengthening the national sentiment by basing it on the rejection of the Other. After which, having already acquired the habit, it will be their own compatriots who they will end up finding normal to reject.

A society conscious of its identity can only be strong if it achieves placing the common good before the individual interest; if it achieves placing solidarity, conviviality, and generosity towards others before the obsession for the competition of the triumph of the “Me.” A society conscious of its identity can only last if rules of disinterest and of gratuity are imposed, which are the only means to escape the reification of social relations, that is, the advent of a world where man produces himself as an object after having transformed everything surrounding him into an artifact. Because it is evident that it will not be the proclamation of egoism, not even in the name of the “struggle for life” (the simple transposition of the individualist principle of the “war of all against all”), that we can recreate that convivial and organic sociality without which there is no people worthy of the name. We will not find fraternity in a society where each has the sole goal to “win” more than the others. We will not reinstate the desire to live together by appealing to xenophobia, that is, to a hatred of the Other by principle; a hatred which, little by little, ends up extending itself to all.



## Notes

[1] “Vraie et fausse intégration,” *Le Monde*, 29 January 1992.

[2] “La timidité en paie jamais,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 26 March 1992, p.15.

[3] About the critique of “differentialist neo-racism,” based on the idea that “the racist argumentation has shifted from race to culture,” cf. especially Pierre-André Taguieff, *La force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles*, Découverte, Paris, 1988, and Gallimard, Paris, 1990. Taguieff’s critique rests, in our judgement, on a double fallacy. On the one hand, it forgets that the right to difference, when it lays itself down as a principle, it necessarily leads to also defending the difference of others, so that it could never legitimize the unconditional affirmation of an absolute singularity (there is no difference but in relation with that one to which it is deferred). On the other hand, it ignores the fact that cultural differences and racial differences are not of the same order, so that way they cannot be instrumentalized by the same one: that would amount, paradoxically, to the assertion that nature and culture are equivalent. For a discussion on this issue, cf. Alain de Benoist, André Béjin and Pierre-André Taguieff, *Razzismo e antirazzismo*, La Rocca di Erec, Florencia, 1992 (partial translation of André Béjin, Julien Freund, Michael Pollak, Alain Daniélou, Michel Maffesoli *et al.*, *Racismes, antiracismes*, Méridiens-Klincksieck, 1986).

[4] “La science? Un piège pour les antiracistes!,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 26 March 1992, p.20.

[5] *Ibid.*, p.21.

[6] *L’Autre Journal*, October 1992, p.41.

[7] *Les Ethnies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., PUF, Paris, 1992, pp.114-115.

[8] “Historique?,” *Le Point*, 14 December 1991, p.35.

[9] Cf. in this respect the strongly demystified works of Suzanne Citron, *Le Mythe national. L’Histoire de France en question* (éd. Ouvrières-Études et documentation internationales, 2<sup>a</sup> ed., 1991) and *L’Histoire de France autrement* (éd. Ouvrières, 1992), which frequently fall into the opposite excesses of those they denounce. Cf. also, for a different reading of the history of France, Olier Mordrel, *Le Mythe de l’Hexagone*, Jean Picollec, 1981.

[10] “Phénoménologie de la menace, Sujet, narration, stratégie,” *Krisis*, April 1992, p.3.

[11] *Ibid.*, p.5.

[12] *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, Paris, 1990, p.175.

[13] *Art. cit.*, pp.6-7.

[14] *Le Monde*, 17 August 1990.