

“We Are at the End of Something”

The *American Renaissance* Interview with Alain de Benoist

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American Renaissance: You have said that modernity is the enemy of identity. Could you explain this idea further?

Alain de Benoist: When one considers modernity, one must consider two meanings of the word. The first is known to everyone: It is the changes of life that come with more material wealth. But modernity is also the product of an ideology that appeared in the 17th and 18th century with the Enlightenment. It is an ideology of progress, of which the basic idea is that mankind will always be better. The future will be better than the present and the present is better than the past. For this ideology, the past has nothing to teach us. The past is a graveyard of archaic customs and irrational constraints. Instead, man must use his reason to decide by himself what he wants.

Modernity also takes a unitary view of history. History is not cyclical, as it was for the Greeks, but is a straight line. This idea comes from Christianity and Judaism, which posit that there is an absolute beginning and an absolute end to history. Mankind is likewise unitary. All peoples must go through the same stages, and reach the same level of development. This is the myth of development, of technological progress.

Thus, everything that is new has value because it is new. There is a fetishism of the novel. So when you speak of modernity you must consider not only the material dimension but also the ideological dimension. Modernity is intrinsically antagonistic to collective identities because such identities are an obstacle to the march of progress towards a unitary mankind.

Of course, modernity has a strong economic component. In Europe it was linked to the rise of the bourgeois class and its commercial and merchant values. This is the problem of capitalism. It wants to organize more markets—a world market, a planetary market—and collective identities fragment this market.

Europeans have frequently criticized the United States as a materialist society, but is not every society materialist? Is it not part of human nature to always to want more?

You are right. In that sense I would say that today we are all Americans. And it is true that the desire to have more is part of human nature. The difference is that much of European religion and philosophy are based on values that are more important, on the belief that for moral or religious or philosophical reasons, we must not submit to greed and to the appetite for wealth. This was different in America because of the protestant Calvinist idea of the elect—God shows his approval by giving wealth. You know Max Weber’s theory of the link between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. I think these things make a big difference.

In Catholic countries money is always suspect—even though everyone wants more of it rather than less. You can see that in the fact that in France it would be impossible for a wealthy man to be elected head of state. No one would vote for a millionaire. The idea would be repulsive. But

in America if a candidate is a millionaire it shows he is a success and has ability.

So in Europe people hide what they have. They don't say how much they earn. In America there is a passion for numbers, and everything is a calculable quantity. Americans know how much they paid for everything. When American tourists go to the Eiffel Tower they ask, "How many steps to the top?" They do not understand the difference between quantity and quality.

Is there anything besides Catholicism that has protected Europe from the same levels of materialism?

No longer. Today, everyone looks at the same films, listens to the same music, lives in the same kind of houses. This is something that greatly concerns me. I have traveled a great deal, and every year I see the world becoming more similar. I call this the ideology of sameness. This ideology can take religious and not-at-all religious forms, but the central idea is that we are all part of mankind, that we are brothers of the same family. There may be differences but they are unimportant and should be either eradicated or transformed into mere folklore. American Indians do their dances for the tourists but this is not traditional life.

What is the solution to this problem of sameness?

To see solutions we must conceive of globalization as a dialectic. The more the world is homogenized, the more there is rebellion. Thus, the impulse that homogenizes the planet creates new kinds of fragmentation, new kinds of divisions. Sometimes this resistance can be excessive—it can take the form of terrorism, for example.

The solution is to work locally. I strongly believe in localism. Localism means more direct democracy, it means working to create liberated spaces. That's why I don't believe so much in politics. I believe that the time of political parties is over. Parties take each others' places, but they are not real alternatives. In France it is the Right or the Left, or the Left or the Right, and everything remains the same.

That is the reason why so many people are fed up with what we call the "new class" of politicians, financiers, media. There is a widespread feeling that this class does not understand the daily life of the citizens, that it is remote, not committed to a particular nation, that it has common interests instead with an international new class. This is one of the reasons for the rise of the so-called populists parties, which is the most interesting political phenomenon in the last 10 or 20 years.

What are some other examples of this resistance to globalization?

Some countries resist very well. China, for example. I was in China not long ago. Of course you can see young people fixated on their video games, their iPods, iPads, and BlackBerries, but I think the Chinese leaders have a very clear view of the state of the world. Few countries really try to think about the future. The United States, yes, certainly. Russia and China as well, but in Europe, there is nothing.

You think Americans are thinking seriously about the future?

Not the American people, but the think tanks and government agencies think very seriously

about the future.

More so than in Europe?

Yes, certainly. We have politicians but nothing like your think tanks. Maybe some political clubs, but nothing else. The politicians just want to be reelected, so the future for them is next year. They don't think globally about the world.

If global capitalism is the enemy of identity, can you describe a type of economic organization that would be a friend of identity?

Economic life must not be reduced to free exchange and to commercial and market values. An economy must take social realities into consideration, and must not be free from political authority. It is perfectly possible to have an economy of social solidarity that includes a private sector, a public sector, as well as a sector for voluntary associations, such as workers' cooperatives. The dictatorship of the financial markets must be destroyed. An economy must be based on real production and not on financial speculation. We must fight against the de-localization caused by globalization, which results in labor-market dumping, and harms the working classes by putting downward pressure on salaries. Free exchange between nations is good for everyone only if those nations are at approximately identical levels of economic development.

In Europe there must be reasonable protectionism that guarantees salaries and revenue. We must also promote, to the extent possible, consumption of goods where they are produced, with an emphasis on local transport and economies of proximity. The re-localization of economies is a way to maintain collective identities and also to restore social ties and local democracy in a public space in which citizenship is expressed.

Would you hope for a Europe that is more locally autonomous?

I am personally in support of a politically unified Europe, but this would be a Europe in which as many decisions as possible are made locally. We speak of the principle of "subsidiarity" according to which, as much as possible, and at the lowest possible level, people decide the matters that concern themselves.

That was the original idea of the United States. Every state was to have great autonomy.

But in the history of the United States the meaning of the word "federalism" has changed. Now when we say "federal" it means the central government, even though things were different in the beginning. The history of states' rights is complex.

But that is my point. The European Union shows the same tendency. A central government always wants more power. Switzerland seems to be one of the few exceptions to this rule.

I like Switzerland very much. I would like the Swiss model extended to the whole of Europe. Do not forget that the difference between the central power in Europe (the so-called European Commission) and in the United States is that in Europe it is not even elected by anybody. There is no democratic legitimacy to it. I don't have any illocutions about the value of the kinds of elections you have in the United States, but at least there is an election. Not in France. We elect a

European parliament that has almost no power, and the only reason people take an interest in that election is because it is an indication of which parties are most popular within your own nation.

Do you think it is possible to have a politically united Europe that really does leave local decision-making to local people?

Yes. You see that in Switzerland. Of course, it is a small country.

But in the history of Europe you have two competing models. One is the nation-state, of which France is the perfect example, but of which England and Spain are also examples. The other model is empire: Italy, Germany and so on. I think the model of empire is much better because it does not concentrate power. It leaves rights and political autonomy to the different countries and regions. A recent model would be the Austro-Hungarian empire. It contained 35 different nationalities, but it worked pretty well. Of course, it was implicated in all the troubles in the Balkans.

For many countries, the United States is an unpleasant presence, but is this simply a reflection of its power? Is this just our version of the French *mission civilisatrice* or British empire-building, or is there something different about the way America imposes its ideas on the world?

Certainly England, France, and Spain had great influence on the world, but the difference is that they are old countries. They have behind them 2,000 or 3,000 years, and in such a long period of time you have many different conceptions of politics. Not so in the United States. From the beginning, you have the myth of the City on a Hill, that you were the new chosen people, that you fled corrupt Europe with its monarchies and that you would build a new society that would be the best in history.

This goes hand in hand with American optimism. There may be many problems but in the end technology will solve them. Technology creates problems and yet more technology will solve them. This feeling, which is shared by so many Americans, can lead to isolationism or Wilsonianism, in which you want to colonize, though not in the old way. You want all people to be Americanized.

I notice that when I am in America I always hear music—music or television—even in restaurants. But it is always American music. I never hear any singer or music that is not American. In a few restricted circles you may see a French film, and people may know of Edith Piaf or Maurice Chevalier. But if you go to Europe or anywhere else you will hear the same music! Not only, but mostly. When it is not French, it is American music. Why don't the French listen to Chinese music or African music or German music or Spanish music or Danish music? And it is the same for films. We see all the American films. We do not see all the German or Italian films, even though those countries are very close to France.

Globalization is the vehicle for all this. English becomes the universal language; if you don't understand English, you can't really use the Internet. So here are two reasons for the impact of America. One is the ideological reason but the other is the effect of pure power. This is normal.

From the European point of the view, surely someone like George W. Bush must have been impossible to understand because he was not Machiavellian or even sophisticated.

To us he looks like a moron. In Europe a good politician or statesman is someone who is cultivated in matters of political philosophy and literature, who has a deep knowledge of the world, who sees history as tragedy. He is someone who is a realist in politics, who doesn't try to hide his interests behind the smokescreen of moral discourse. Americans are completely different. They put their hands on their hearts and speak of freedom and democracy.

Yesterday I was at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, where I saw a quotation from President Reagan that went something like this: "There are no limits to growth or human happiness if people can freely choose their dreams." What does that mean? Nothing. But you can see that sort of thing everywhere.

I was recently in New York and visited Rockefeller Center. There you have tablets with quotations from Nelson Rockefeller. "I believe in humanity. I believe in love. I believe in the pursuit of happiness but nothing is more important than love." This man's life was making money, but he says there is nothing more important than love. He was not a lover, he was a financier. This sort of thing is very strange for Europeans.

And there are so many things that have come from America to Europe and settled there, such as gender studies—people like Judy Butler, who are completely mad. The crazy kind of feminism. I am not against feminism. There is a good kind of feminism, which I call identitarian feminism, which tries to promote feminine values and show that they are not inferior to masculine values. But this American version of universalist egalitarianism says there is no difference between men and women. It concedes there is a small difference: you are born with one sex or the other, but it's not very important. What is important is that gender is a social construct, and you can make the parallel with race. Race and sex, they don't exist because they are social constructs; they are only what your mind says they are.

You may know that last May the French government decided—it is the law now—that the French Republic "does not recognize the existence of any race." Race does not exist, but racism exists. We must fight racism, which is presumably a hatred of something that does not exist. Curiously, these people claim to value diversity, but how can there be diversity if races do not exist? Many of these ideological fashions came from America.

Many Americans and Europeans who are frustrated with the direction in which their country is going speak of the possibility of systemic collapse. Do you foresee such a collapse?

I don't foresee that because it is impossible to foresee anything. The main characteristic of history is that it is always open, therefore unpredictable. All the important events of the last decades were not foreseen, beginning with the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Soviet system. Some people with a catastrophic and pessimistic view do not realize that history is open. They think nothing can change, yet change is always possible because human history is open. I don't *foresee* any collapse but I believe that there is a strong *possibility* of a general collapse.

At least in Europe we have the impression that the political system has exhausted all its possibilities. There is also the financial crisis, which is, for me, a structural rather than contingent crisis of capitalism. You cannot live forever on credit. Look at the public debt of the United States—my God. We always add a bit more, a bit more, a bit more. But "more" and "better" are

very different things. No tree can reach the sky, so it will certainly collapse.

At the same time, there are ecological, demographic, and immigration problems. We are clearly at the end of something. Probably at the end of modernity. Never in my life can I remember a time in which all possibilities were as open as they are today. We are in a world of transition. During the cold war, things were simple—two blocs—but not anymore. What will become of Russia? What will become of China? In Africa we will have demographic growth—like the public debt in the US!

So I think collapse is possible and it may be necessary, but you cannot rely on it. You cannot sit in your chair and say, “Well, dear friends, I am waiting for the apocalypse.” That would be like the Jehovah’s Witnesses: “The end of the world is nigh.” One world may be ending, but not the world.

Collapse may be necessary for what?

For change. Americans have lived ever since the beginning of their country under more or less the same system, so it is very easy for them to believe that theirs is a natural system. In Europe we have known so many systems, so many revolutions, so many conflicting opinions. I refuse to be constrained by inevitability.

Under the current system only marginal reforms are possible. In France, the National Front is rising in a very interesting way. It is becoming the leading political party, which is very strange when you remember that because of the electoral system it has only two members in the Chamber of Deputies. But even if Marine Le Pen were elected president—I do not think it will happen but I cannot exclude it—there would be no great changes. We would live in the same kind of society, looking at the same films, playing with the same electronic games, and so on.

You have spoken about how complex and multiple identity is. It is composed of language, history, profession, ethnicity, sex, etc. but why can race can never be part of a collective identity—at least for white people?

You mean in Europe?

I mean anywhere.

It is even more forbidden in Europe. In the United States, it is accepted by most people that races exist—and in my mind to accept race is very different from racism—but in Europe that is not so. In the United States you have racial statistics. You can go to the government and find race statistics on everything, including crime and social patterns. The collection of these kinds of statistics is forbidden in Europe—certainly in France.

In France you may categorize people as foreigners or French citizens but many immigrants have French citizenship. Sometimes they receive it automatically when they are born there. So sociologists who want to study a racial question must look indirectly at such things as medical statistics. No one knows how many blacks there are in France. We have an idea, of course, but officially race statistics are forbidden because race does not exist. Such race statistics might be used by racist people. They could use findings about crime, for example.

But to return to the question of identity, I am concerned that the people in France who want to defend identity seem to be the first not to know what identity means. They give only a negative definition of it: "I'm not an immigrant." Alright, you are not an immigrant, but what are you? "I am French." But of course you are so many other things as well. You are a man or a woman, you are a journalist or a producer, you are gay or straight, born in a particular region, etc. Identity is complex.

How do you see yourself as different from Identitarians?

If I compare you and me, the first difference is that I am aware of race and of the importance of race, but I do not give to it the excessive importance that you do. For me it is a factor, but only one among others.

The second is that I am not fighting for the white race. I am not fighting for France. I am fighting for a world view. I am a philosopher, a theoretician, and I fight to explain my world view. And in this world view, Europe, race, culture, and identity all have roles. They are not excluded. But mainly I am working in defense of a world view. Of course, I am very interested in the future and destiny of my own nation, race, and culture, but I am also interested in the future of every other group.

Immigration is clearly a problem. It gives rise to much social pathologies. But our identity, the identity of the immigrants, all the identities in the world have a common enemy, and this common enemy is the system that destroys identities and differences everywhere. This system is the enemy, not the Other. That is my basic credo.

Is there anything in particular you would you like to say to an American audience?

What I would say to America is to try to be a bit more open to the rest of the world. Try to know other countries and not just to visit them as tourists. As tourists you don't see much. You need to understand that throughout the world people can think differently. I don't say they are better or worse, but accept these differences, because a world of difference is a richer world. The wealth of the world is diversity — its genuine diversity.