

## The future of “diversity” in Europe by Dr. George Simons (www.diversophy.com)

Europe has enjoyed a rich diversity, beginning with its tribal prehistory, through romanization and christi-anization of the migrating nations, leading up to our age of nation states. The 21st Century challenges us to generate synergy from this diversity. Initiatives need not only be built into the education and training systems of EU member states, but be on the agenda of every corporate citizen if the continent is to reach the EU goal of common prosperity.

While Europe as a whole is multicultural, its member states and regions are far more monocultural. Each country has assimilated highly diverse ethnicities over the centuries. Wars, treaties and intermarriage make Europeans a very mixed bag in terms of bloodlines, but not in their sense of national or ethnic identity. It sheds little light on the subject to learn, for example, that Greeks and Turks are identical at the ge-netic level. Assimilation continues. Even the liberal Dutch put more pressure on today's immigrants to learn Dutch language and culture than would be politically possible in the USA or Canada. In countries that are not monocultural, conflict and open hostility are always possible. Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia stand as examples, but resentments smolder in Belgium, Italy, Spain, and wherever ethnicity is still at odds with national unity.

### Defense of boundaries and frontiers

In the best of times, Europeans believe "good fences make good neighbors." In the worst of times, those boundaries are "written in blood."<sup>1</sup> According to Michael Berry, of the Turku School of Economics, when a European speaks of the "frontier," it means *borders that need to be defended*. Boundaries encourage a tight sense of national identity. In contrast, when a North American says "frontier" it generally means a boundary that *is meant to be crossed or surpassed*, e.g., "the frontiers of cyberspace."<sup>2</sup>

Europe cultural areas, almost without exception, stick together and speak their own languages and dia-lects, though their economies are increasingly interdependent. Language reinforces boundaries.

Despite this variety, accentuating differences within and among European nations is fraught with danger. Within living memory, it has created pogroms, mass dislocations and the Holocaust. Hatreds fester for a thousand years and erupt in bloodbaths. Political shifts to the right, as recently in France, and now in Aus-tria set off alarms wired to the past. Unemployment sends skinheads to the streets to target people of dif-ference, perceived as milking the social net and displacing natives in their jobs. "Diversity," North Ameri-can style, accentuating differences, is threatening ("politically correct" speech) or incongruous nostalgia (*Oktoberfest* in October).

At the millennium, what diversity challenges beg attention?

- 1. Creating value added from the diversity of EU member cultures** by managing intercultural com-munication, cooperation and synergy, i.e., getting beyond crises to making things work better be-cause of diversity is the primary challenge. It is not surprising to find Britain and France, for example, at loggerheads on so many EU policy issues. The French love of centralization extends to its view of the EU, in direct contrast to the British need for political independence and valuing safety in insularity.

Diversity efforts rightly eschew stereotypical approaches to ethnicity. Yet stereotypes are often dis-torted interpretations of behavioral and thinking patterns that are somehow grounded in reality. Inter-culturalist Richard D. Lewis tells about the value added of national and regional strengths,

"Every national culture possesses a central distinguishing trait which will be seen as positive by others by virtue of its shining validity. If one abandons this trait in the interests of adaptation, it will

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<sup>1</sup> One US writer, Stuart Miller, used this phrase to title the first edition of a book on European diversity. Apparently the issue was so touchy that subsequent editions came out with the very uncontroversial title, *Understanding Europeans*.

<sup>2</sup> SIETAR International Congress Presentation, Phoenix, AZ, USA 1995

cause confusion and disorientation for the other side. The world expects German conscientiousness, Swiss exactitude, and Irish folksiness. American enthusiasm, Spanish spontaneity, Vietnamese dignity, Japanese ultra-politeness, Italian flexibility, British calm and Australian mateyness! One should not disappoint. When Finland and Sweden were about to enter the EU, their nationals asked themselves how they should adapt to other Europeans. In fact what the other 13 expected of them was Finnishness and Swedishness--qualities at odds with communicating skills, but oozing transparency and reliability."<sup>3</sup>

We share national characteristics in different measures. It is in the unexamined imputation of traits to individuals that stereotyping damages us, as does imposing our own standards on people with conflicting, non-negotiable cultural positions. To arrive at high level synergy means successfully continuing to meet the remaining challenges below.

2. **Managing subtle historical biases**, likely to add heat, consciously or unconsciously to debates over the policies and practices of EU states. The Anglo-French tiff over British beef and Upper Austria's attempt to block Czech entry into the EU as long as the Temelin nuclear power plant is on line are examples where more smoke than light seems to be generated.
3. **Responding to the ambitions of regional cultures** within individual EU states. Where separatist feelings run high, such ambitions can be of high political significance. Yet, as the protection of national borders lessens, ethnic pride is emerging. This is frequently the activity of young people who use the old languages and ways as a springboard for creativity in literature, music and art--a valuing of diversity. Michael Le Bris, a Breton novelist has expressed this well, "We now accept that our identity can have several layers. We can feel European and French and Breton all at once. But the answer is to remain open. If not, you become a bastion, a Serbia."<sup>4</sup>
4. **Managing in-country diversity** in societies and in workforces that include native residents, expatriates, traditional enclaves, immigrants, asylum seekers, ex-colonials and economic migrants. We separate traditional enclaves from regional cultures mentioned above because their history and dynamics are different. The future of such enclaves as the Roma perplexes European states, which have, all too recently, though it is easy to forget outside Germany, managed the case of the Jewish people very badly. Reflecting on this experience still yields insight into policy formation.<sup>5</sup>

Civil unrest rises as numbers of laborers (and their families) originating outside the EU can no longer be ignored or quickly assimilated. High unemployment tills fertile ground for sowing disharmony, and invites demagogues to harvest it as a path to power. Chastened by the tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, enlightened as we believe ourselves to be, the right combination of economic failures and ethnic stereotyping could plunge Western societies into murderous chaos in short order.

Included here is the challenge of managing the flow of illegal immigration at borders in accordance with the Schengen Treaty and in response to political pressures. There is a legal and policy dimension to this, as well as a humanitarian one. The freedom of movement of peoples is a value that comes into conflict with the need to integrate newcomers without major social disruption.

5. **Adjusting to new roles for women.** This is an issue for both native-born women and those in recent waves of immigration and asylum seekers. The French Employment Ministry has pointed to the evolution of several models along which women's professional and familial roles have developed in the

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, Richard D., "Achieving empathy: who adapts to whom?" in *A cross cultural letter to international managers*, a publication of The Institute of Cross Cultural Communication, Riversdown House, Warnford, Hampshire SO32 3LH, UK

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Simons, Marlise, "In New Europe, a Lingual Hodgepodge," *The New York Times*, Oct. 17, 1999

<sup>5</sup> See: Vital, David, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe 1789-1939*, 1999, NY, Oxford U. Press.

various EU countries and how they are supported (or not) by public policy. How the status of women will progress as the EU integrates over time will continue as a critical cultural issue<sup>6</sup>

6. **Addressing the aging of Western Europe and the precarious state of older people in Eastern Europe.** Cultural shifts are accelerating on two age fronts. The indigenous populations of western nations with their low birth rates are aging rapidly. Newcomer minorities within their borders are replacing them. In the East the over-50's tend to be ill equipped for the new economies and their once satisfactory social security system has evaporated. There, life spans are decreasing, and age drives a wedge between workers over 35 and those under who enjoy mobility and career flexibility.
7. **Managing cultural strains in the expansion of the EU** as complexity increases through new membership and the shifting center of gravity that this implies. Eastward expansion means negotiating Slavic cultural values and historical hurts that are alive in the minds of both West and East.<sup>7</sup> As Alain Finkelkraut astutely observes, the fall of the Wall was accompanied not by the unification of Europe, but by its balkanization. *Mittleuropa*, the "kidnapped portion" of Europe may have been released from its captors, but it has not been set free in the Western minds.<sup>8</sup> Sorting out potential candidates for EU membership may occur, at least unconsciously, on the basis of "who seems most like us."

Will a common view of what it means to be European develop? Perhaps over time, depending on the good functioning of the Union itself and how it abides with its new members. If current applicants were to join, it would increase the population of the EU by over 25%, with farming populations of 20% compared to the 4% of the current members.<sup>9</sup>

Most committed to the Union, France now fears its "difference" and its influence being slowly but surely eroded by a united Germany and the choice of English as the language of global business. Whatever we see, we see through the eyes of our own culture. This includes the nature of the EU and its people. The French see as essential to the EU a "European" individual and a way of life needing nurture and protection. The British, least attached to Europe as a concept, take a more pragmatic view of the Union, and the Dutch, equally individualistic, support the EU as an act of enlightened self-interest.<sup>10</sup>

8. **Coming to terms with globalization**, seen as embodied in the US economy and media and in the English language. France is Europe's bellwether for the invasiveness of the global mentality into the culture of peoples. No less active than others in the field of mergers and acquisitions, and, as of this writing, leading Europe in productivity, the French resist the US juggernaut more staunchly than most.

English as the *lingua "franca"* of world commerce offers a cultural challenge of extraordinary proportions. Media saturation and the flexibility of English contribute to its popularity. But other Europeans are drawn to learn and work in English as well by the economic success enjoyed in Britain under its last three prime ministers and almost steadily in the US.<sup>11</sup>

A bumper sticker seen on a recent visit to the US carried the legend: "We are Microsoft. Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated." There seems to be a Catch-22 here. One suspects that it would take a Europe far more convinced of the value of its diversity than it is today to gain the field in this regard. A good understanding of these current challenges in the ongoing conversation about what it means to be European is at least a starting point.

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<sup>6</sup> "Re-designing Management Development in the New Europe," report of the Torino Group--European Training Foundation,

<sup>7</sup> "Setting the Slavs free," *The Economist*, Jul 24, 1999

<sup>8</sup> *L'Ingratitude: conversation sur notre temps*, 1999, Gallimard, pp. 9-11.

<sup>9</sup> "Wider still, and why," *The Economist*, Oct 23, 1999

<sup>10</sup> "Once and future leaders," and "City of Hippocrites," in *The Economist*, Oct. 23, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, Andrew, "There will always be an England," in *The New York Times Magazine*, Feb 21, 1999