



National Identity: *E Pluribus Unum* or *E Pluribus “Pluribus”*?

Globalization not only increases contacts between people but also changes their values, ideas, and ways of life. People travel more frequently and farther. All forms of the media, especially television, now reach families living in the deepest rural areas of the world. As many experts have warned, globalization presents an unusual challenge to national identities. Today’s society appears to be experiencing an accelerating deterioration of such identities through cultural and economic globalization. Pessimists maintain that even if these identities have not yet completely disappeared, they tend to regress and give way to dominant cultural models such as the Western model. Thus, globalization is redefining identities from national to continental dimensions; therefore, maintaining the old national identities is very difficult. This trend will continue since our economic well-being depends indirectly upon the free movement of goods and commodities. In this case, is the nation-state still the most suitable political form? For some individuals, this new diversity is stimulating—even enriching; for them, the nationalism of the past produced bellicose patriotism, xenophobia, and isolationism. For others, the nation would find itself in jeopardy—and with it, the structure of social life, collective solidarity, and even democracy. They fear that their country will fragment, that they will gradually lose their values as the rising number of immigrants brings new customs, and that international trade and modern means of communication will supplant local cultures.

The issue of national identity is eminently present for at least two reasons. First, it is related to wider problems posed by immigration. Second, reactions to dominant identities can sometimes lead to terrorism. In reality, however, the fundamental question in regard to these two very different problems is the same: what is national identity? According to Erik H. Erikson, “The term ‘identity’ expresses . . . a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others.”¹ Immigration is one of the major reasons for the weakening of national identity, but immigration alone is not sufficient to explain that phenomenon. We identify the United States as a country of immigrants—one built on their efforts. What makes a person an American is commitment to the national “creed” of democracy and individualism. Belonging to the nation is equated not with shared blood but with common beliefs and customs. Anyone, regardless of ancestry, can become an American through adherence to the dominant set of ide-

als and the “American’s Creed.”² But the debate on national identity has resurfaced due to the growth of international migration in the last decades. Because this movement takes place almost entirely from poor to rich countries, immigration policies become an element of social division in many nation-states. The debate is about not only competition for jobs and resources for social assistance but also culture. National identity involves being part of the same group of people—a nation—and giving sovereignty to the general will. In short, it is about social cohesion. Consequently, problems with such cohesion arise as a result of unemployment, inequality, immigration, and so forth, all of which create a crisis of national identity. Remedies are usually expressed by rejection, such as a repudiation of immigration.

The alternative to an *e pluribus unum* or an *e pluribus “pluribus”* national identity could take the form of a larger “continental identity,” as predicted by the French historian Ernest Renan for Europe more than a century ago: “Nations are not eternal. They had a beginning and they will have an end. And they will probably be replaced by a European confederation.”³ Otherwise, national identity remains a balance to be won consistently—a balance between “persistent sameness within oneself” and the “persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others,” as defined by Erikson. If its two components are balanced, then the country lives in harmony, a healthy patriotism exists, and the nation is open to the world. If, instead, discord reigns, then national identity can create a phenomenon of withdrawal and xenophobia that will ultimately prove detrimental to the country. According to this perspective, national identity is constantly changing.

Rémy M. Mauduit, Editor
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Notes

1. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 109.
2. William Tyler Page, “The American’s Creed,” 1917, [ushistory.org](http://www.ushistory.org/documents/creed.htm), accessed 2 December 2013, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/creed.htm>. The US House of Representatives adopted this creed on 3 April 1918.
3. Ernest Renan, “*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*” [What is a nation?] (lecture given at the Sorbonne, Paris, 11 March 1882). See Anne-Marie Thiesse, “Inventing National Identity,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 1999, <http://mondediplo.com/1999/06/05thiesse>.