

Europeans, cherish what you have

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Europeans think it so self-evident that they don't see it anymore: there definitely is a European demos. There are values shared by all Europeans: values that bind them together, Susan Neiman states. But there also is a great lack of historical awareness.

Scholars debate about the meaning of the concept of Demos, but what we really want to know is: does anything hold Europeans together? My answer is: yes, definitely, but there is also an important element lacking.

Let me begin with a few words about the perspective from which I write. Although I have spent more of my adult life within Europe than outside it, it was only three years ago that I became a German, and thereby a European citizen. I spent the first 27 years of my life in the U.S., and though I've often been strongly opposed to U.S. policies, it was only the election of Donald Trump that moved me to change my legal status. Still, I was socialized in America, which means that even after decades in Europe many of my fundamental assumptions about how the social world works are not European.

This complicates my own life, but it also gives me insight into what fundamental European assumptions are. Like the proverbial fish who doesn't really know what water is, Europeans swim in frameworks that seem so self-evident they forget to appreciate them.

Here is one that isn't the most important, but it's the basis of many others: for centuries, Europeans have shared many cultures within a small space. "Shared", I know, was often a euphemism. But even when tribes were brutally battling each other over questions of territory, language, religion or tradition, they could not overlook the very existence of the frameworks they were battling. The idea of a cultural framework as something that isn't fixed by G-d or nature is common to Europeans.

Americans do not quite get this concept. Of course, they are aware that in different countries there will be differences on a practical level, just as there are regional differences between, for example, Maine and Mississippi. But the idea that people in different countries do things differently because they live in different cultural frameworks, is very hard for many Americans to grasp. This is partly for a very practical reason: since the American social world views vacations to be luxuries, very few Americans are able to take them – there is no guaranteed paid vacation in America, and those who are lucky enough to work for employers who offer them rarely get more than two weeks per year. So when they travel, their trips are usually too short to give them more than an impression of a different culture's food. Even educated Americans therefore assume that their social and cultural framework is the norm; the way things are done elsewhere is just an interesting deviation.

Europeans live too close to each other to forget that social frameworks are not fixed absolutely, which makes them at least potentially open to others. They are likely to learn more languages or may

have friends in other countries with whom they can discuss the differences between them. Many Europeans take living in an area with many different cultures for granted, without realizing that this is an enriching concept. It is the basis of the idea that things can change, that the world is not as fixed as Americans tend to think it is.

Here's another deep assumption that Europeans share: if you fall sick you should not be forced to work – either by law or economic necessity. There are differences between European countries, but the right not to be forced to work during an illness will strike Europeans as fundamental.

The absence of labor rights only received wide U.S. attention since the coronavirus pandemic. 40% of U.S. workers – generally the worst paid – have no right to be sick at all. Some 60% of American workers have some form of sick leave, a fixed number of days during which they may succumb to an illness, and still get paid. Most of that 60% receive only five days.

It became clear to Americans that essential workers – those who stock the supermarkets, deliver the packages, collect the trash – usually belong to the 40% who have no sick leave at all.

After meat supplies were threatened by a wave of covid-19 among meat packers, President Trump declared meat to be an essential national commodity and decreed that those who refused to work for fear of infection would be ineligible for unemployment insurance.

Even worse: the Republican-held Senate refused to pass a large stimulus package without a law guaranteeing that no business can be held liable for cases of coronavirus incurred at their site. As a consequence, if an employee forced to work under dangerous conditions, without protective equipment, becomes ill with the virus, she cannot even sue her employer. In short: capital is completely protected, workers not at all.

In the American social framework, liberal rights are guaranteed by the Bill of Rights written in 1789. (Subsequent amendments were added, but the most important concerned extending those liberal rights to African-Americans and women.) The rights seen as fundamental in 1789 were bourgeois rights like freedom of expression, movement, religion and political engagement – as well as, curiously and fatally, the right to own an infinite number of guns. They did not include what the next century would come to see as social rights.

Europeans, by contrast, believe that liberal rights are worth little without the conditions for realizing them. Your mind cannot be free if your body is flailing from hunger, homelessness or disease. They have thus internalized the Rawlsian assumption that a just society does what it can to protect its citizens from the what Shakespeare called the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Few of those who take this idea for granted ever read the philosopher John Rawls; it has simply come to seem like common sense. This is why every Christian Democratic government in Europe stands, in practical if not rhetorical terms, far to the left of Bernie Sanders. The changes he demands for the American social framework – primarily, the right to health care and a smattering of improvements in labor regulations – are far less than any European citizen would find acceptable.

Yet Sanders calls himself a socialist. It isn't accurate, but it is loyalty. I'm touched that Sanders reminded us that the "social" in "social rights", "soziale Marktwirtschaft", and similar expressions originally derived from socialism, the burgeoning labor movements that forced Bismarck, and later Roosevelt, to go beyond liberal conceptions of right to include (some) social rights guaranteed by law. (In 1932, outgoing U.S. president Herbert Hoover called Roosevelt's New Deal a "march to Moscow".)

Since Roosevelt's death in 1945, the U.S. has rolled back much of the spirit of the New Deal, so that even the limited healthcare reforms promoted by President Obama were decried as socialist or communist. Meanwhile, in Europe, despite the very different postwar histories of East and West, social rights have come to seem inevitable even for those who forget, or repress, their socialist origins.

Calls for Europeans to show more appreciation for the European Union usually turn on the fact that it has prevented war – if you forget about the Balkans – on territories that were blood-soaked for centuries. And many who make those calls have rightly said that Europeans have become so used to peace that they take it for granted.

I believe that in addition to valuing the absence of war it's important to stress the presence of social rights as a European achievement. It is, after all, easier to support an institution, like the EU, because it provides something valuable than because it prevents something awful.

I suspect that Europeans fail to appreciate their social framework because it has come to seem so natural they take it for granted. When it is noticed at all, it is to complain (rightly enough) that social rights are not constant: they are unequal within European countries as well as between north and south, east and west. But another reason is rather darker, and I can only mention it briefly in closing.

Social rights are the product of socialist movements that demanded them, and since 1989 socialism has become a dirty word – not only in America.

Indeed, the greatest gap between Europeans may be the shared gap in memory. For many eastern Europeans, socialism is too close to communism, which itself is equated with Stalinism. In a rush to accommodate Eastern European countries newly admitted to the European Union, in one of the resolutions of the 2009 Vilnius Declaration the rest of Europe accepted the demand to commemorate August 23 as a memorial to the victims of totalitarianism – both communism and fascism – thus sealing into law an equation which most historians consider false.

Even Hannah Arendt, whose *Origins of Totalitarianism* allegedly united the two systems, stringently denied their equivalence. But few who use the concept of totalitarianism bother to read the book, and a question which should have been the subject of complex reflection was decided by fiat.

Strangely, the considerable reflection on the subject that constituted the German Historians' Debate in 1986 and 1987 was entirely forgotten after 1989. The consensus that emerged from that debate was that it was morally and politically wrong to equate those two systems. Both, to be sure, denied their citizens liberal rights to freedom of expression, travel, and sometimes worship. But one committed genocide and the other did not.

In his resume of the debate, the distinguished German historian Hans Ulrich Wehner even spent pages arguing that one of Stalin's worst crimes, the murder of the Kulaks, did not rise to the level of genocide: what happened to them was evil, but the Kulaks had a choice. The Jews did not.

With the end of the Soviet Union, where the vast majority of Stalinist crimes took place, such arguments were forgotten, and the Vilnius Declaration and others simply erased the distinctions.

Reliable memory is one casualty of the communism=fascism equivalence. The memory of Nazism has been reduced to the memory of antisemitism, while the anticommunism that was at least as important a pillar of Nazi ideology remains unbroken.

Forgetting the sacrifices of the Red Army has allowed Western Europeans to imagine that the war was won at Normandy, and Eastern Europeans to forget how many Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Hungarians and others joined in Nazi crimes.

Two impulses are at work in this repression of memory. One is the bizarre and historically novel competition for victim status, which is a very complicated psychological process.

For a long time after World War II, the West Germans saw themselves as the worst victims of the war, not as its perpetrators. In a way, that is normal. We like to see our fathers, mothers, our nation, as heroes. If we can't see them as heroes, the next best thing is to see them as victims.

Psychologically, it is a very difficult transition to admit that one has been both victim and perpetrator of a crime. In Germany, this has been a long and arduous process, rejecting criminal elements of the past, but re-embracing its cultural values – like the works of Goethe, because for a time all of German culture was seen as contaminated because it issued in Nazism – and passing them on to the next generation.

This is a process that each country needs to go through, and which will contribute to a shared European memory.

Perhaps even more important in the repression of memory is the desire for exculpation. If communism and fascism are considered equally evil, then those who fought for fascism were fighting against evil too.

The desire for exculpation is perfectly clear in the case of former German president Joachim Gauck, one of the initiators of the Vilnius resolution, who has written indignantly about the fact that his father, a high-ranking Nazi, spent years in a Soviet prison.

But whether or not there is a direct relation to Soviet crimes, the knowledge of Eastern European complicity has fueled the desire to make the genuine crimes of the Soviet states look even worse than they were.

I don't traffic in predictions; I don't know if there will ever be a serious, open process of what Germans call *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* that could lead to a shared European memory. I urge Europeans to appreciate what they have and have built, like their frameworks of social rights, however these may differ between countries.

It is important to realize that Europe was built on a set of ideals which were more than just not killing each other. There is another set of values that need to be appreciated if we're going to fight for them.

It is much to be wished for; even if it fails to create a shared demos it could create appreciation for the values Europeans share.