

Nice, Munich and Western Democracy



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Attacks similar to those in Nice and Munich could happen in any other Western city in the near future. Discussion about the political culture that grounds liberal democracies should not be delayed.

Nice is a beautiful spot in Europe. Located between Cannes and Monaco at the shore of the Mediterranean over the French Riviera, this picturesque city has a long history going all the way back to its [foundation by the Greeks in the IV century BC](#). It is also the [fifth most populated city in France](#) and hosts the third busiest airport in the country.

On 14 July—Bastille Day—Nice sadly became known worldwide as the stage of a bloody [terrorist attack](#), joining a list that includes the European cities of [Madrid \(2004\)](#), [London\(2005\)](#), [Liège \(2011\)](#), Paris ([January](#) and [November 2015](#)), [Brussels \(2016\)](#) and [Munich](#) and other German cities just a few days ago.

A New Pattern of Fear?

Each of those attacks is in itself shocking and frightening. Shocking, due to the number of victims and the ensuing chaos caused to these cities. And frightening, as Europeans stop wondering if another attack will take place, and instead wonder when and where. France has [extended the state of emergency](#) it had imposed after the November attacks in Paris. But neither France nor other European countries (such as [Germany](#)) can live on permanent alert.

To be sure, this phenomenon of violent attacks [in the name of religion](#) mixed with [geopolitics and depression](#), and resulting in civilians casualties is not exclusive to Europe, or even the West. According to [the Washington Post](#), terrorism has killed 700 people in Europe and the Americas since 2015, compared with over 3,000 each in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and more than 20,000 in the Middle East. But this cannot be the way to solve disagreements in liberal democracies.

Furthermore, the phenomenon is not a challenge to the existence of the countries affected. Like many other Western countries, France—which has suffered several attacks in the past months—has abundant and varied resources to chase the people responsible for these criminal acts, reinforce security, fight possible sites of radicalisation internally and abroad, and improve its capacity to prevent similar attacks in the future. Yet, this is not the point.

The danger is that, in an effort to fight this growing plague, liberal democracies may end up giving up their fundamental values: that they preserve themselves as states at the price of becoming less liberal and democratic.

Back to Basics: Democracy 1.0

Simplistic fixes, such as targeting a human group in society as the cause of the situation: “[Islam](#)” or “[immigrants](#),” or “[Syrians](#)” will only make matters worse. Just in the past two centuries [Jews](#), [Christians](#), [dark-skinned](#) and [Chinese](#) people, among [many others](#), have been blamed, discriminated against and often persecuted for problems affecting the societies where they lived.

The problem with this approach is that real people do not necessarily think or behave according to the label they have been given. [Peace-loving Muslims](#), productive [immigrants](#), and law-abiding [Syrians](#) are not difficult to come across and that fact renders stereotypes not only divisive, but also inaccurate

and useless. Recurring to them cannot solve the profound crisis devastating not only European, but Western democracies in general.

The way forward is likely to be much more complex and difficult than that, but it's feasible and should be tried. First, Western democracies must [reflect on the political culture, the civil values](#) present at their origin, articulate them and acknowledge themselves as “cultured” in that way—possessing a certain culture. This will not be easy, since many Western democracies (especially in Europe) had come to think of themselves as “[culture-free](#),” and therefore with a “neutral” public sphere capable of tolerating and accepting local and immigrant groups with the most varied cultural backgrounds.

The second step is to define clearly which [aspects of that political culture](#) are indispensable for Western democracies to continue existing as such. Human rights, the rule of law, balance of powers, accountability, freedom of expression and peaceful deliberation are some elements that cannot be overlooked in a liberal democracy.

Lastly, those values must be spelt out to new residents, with a clear path to citizenship that passes through their adherence to the principles that hold their polity together. Liberal democracies can tolerate much, but there are limits —precisely in core values— which cannot be compromised.

Each Western democracy has particular features: Australia is not Belgium, Sweden is not the U.S. But they all are facing a similar test as they become more culturally diverse. Radicalisation and violence is a [complex problem](#) which will not disappear any time soon. Attacks similar to those in Nice and Munich could happen in any other Western city in the near future. Discussion about the political culture that grounds liberal democracies should not be delayed.

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