

What French philosophy can tell us about the EU, nationhood, and the decline of social democracy

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08/02/2017

French philosophers have written widely on contemporary European problems, but their work has often had limited impact in the English-speaking world. [Tom Angier](#) highlights the contribution of Pierre Manent in capturing the challenges at the heart of the integration process, as well as the need for social democrats to rehabilitate and reinvigorate the idea of nationhood if they are to see off competition from the far left and far right.



French Philosophy has a bad reputation among Anglophone 'analytic' philosophers. The mere mention of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser or Alain Badiou is enough to elicit scorn and derision. They have become a by-word for imprecise, sloppy argument, combined with fanciful, showman-like rhetoric. The fairness of this judgement is uncertain, especially since it is made often on the basis of mere hearsay.

What is certain, however, is that other, indisputably sober and rigorous French philosophers remain almost completely unknown by *les philosophes anglo-saxons*. Names like Chantal Delsol, Pierre Manent, Pierre Rosanvallon, Rémi Brague and Nicolas Grimaldi are still wholly peripheral, even in political philosophy, where they have made seminal contributions. And this is lamentable particularly at present, since several of them have been far more clear-eyed about the deep instabilities of the EU project than their (generically more 'Eurosceptic') Anglophone counterparts. I shall concentrate on the case of Pierre Manent.

Ten years ago, Manent published [Democracy Without Nations: The Fate of Self-Government in Europe](#). This short yet profound book recapitulates an essay he wrote back in 1996 (the same year that Tony Judt – himself a scholar of French intellectual history – published [A Grand Illusion?](#), which strongly questioned the viability of the post-expansion EU). Manent's argument is relatively straightforward: the EU has become a mode of rule (*kratos*) that has become detached from, and increasingly disdainful of, its component peoples (*demoi*). This can be seen primarily in the heedless imposition of various European Treaties, despite democratic opposition, and more generally in a project of integration that has not captured the political and cultural imaginations of those it is meant to integrate.

This development has deep roots in the devastation of post-war Europe, where – in face of the Fascist idolatry of the nation, and the Communist idolatry of class – significant numbers of the *bien pensant* came to view both nations and classes as social forms to be steadily overcome. But as Manent contends, even if this project managed to gain the consent of the majority – or at least their grudging acquiescence, especially during the years of widespread prosperity and growth – its fundamental impatience with the mediating form of nationhood contained perils of its own.



Pierre Manent in Warsaw. Image credits: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The perils in question lay centrally in hoping for the democratic consent of the governed, while simultaneously eroding the main historical source of what Manent calls social 'communion'. For it is principally the nation that, since the nineteenth century, has been the political focal point of identity, loyalty and accountability in Europe. Insofar as the EU has sought to shift these foci to other, supranational institutions and

imperatives, it has embarked on an unprecedented project, one that is unparalleled, indeed, anywhere else in the world.

In short, below each nation lies 'civil society', which remains politically and economically an insufficient object of aspiration; above each nation lies a putative 'great, enormous European nation', of indeterminate boundaries and without historical or cultural ballast. Between these sub- and supranational poles the EU finds itself without real moorings, refusing, as Manent puts it, to 'define itself politically', and hence taking on the character of 'an imperious, indefinite, and opaque movement'.

He does not mince his words: the post-Maastricht EU is effectively 'de-politicised' or politically 'vacuous'. Granted, it has retained the democratic principle of consent – which up till now has 'used the nation as an instrument or vehicle' – but has progressively sidelined the latter as an 'antiquated political form'. In its place we have rhetorically impressive ends – peace, human rights, no borders, a universal humanity – but no politically tangible, culturally convincing or economically fair means of achieving them.

Most contemporary social democrats will respond to this critique with indignation. Is the EU really in tension with its constituent nations to the degree Manent maintains? What is wrong with 'pooling national sovereignty' to some extent? Surely the ends proposed by the EU are so transparently just that we should tolerate some ambiguities in its developing mode of governance?

But none of these responses faces up to Manent's fundamental challenge. That is: the EU has been (at best) lukewarm to the traditional conception of nationhood, while simultaneously failing to create any locus of political interest and loyalty that is (even vaguely) comparable to it. The notion that pooling sovereignty is essentially an administrative matter is mere ideological pretence so long as the EU is made up of nations, rather than provinces – nations, moreover, which privilege their own interests at every major turn.

The notion, furthermore, that the EU's ends are the epitome of justice remains a mere bureaucratic piety in face of nations (like Poland and Hungary) that repudiate many of them as anathema, or nations like Greece, which are at risk of economic collapse. In other words, whatever the exaggerations or lacunae in Manent's account, on the core issue he appears highly prescient: the EU's dream of 'ever closer union' between the nations of Europe has been gradually confounded by political, cultural and economic realities.

Manent does consider an alternative to this dream, one that is far more modest in its terms, and even enjoys some popularity (especially among 'post-modern' theorists). That is, the EU as benevolent host to a 'multiplicity of identities', 'communicating' with one another as equals yet remaining basically distinct. But this consummately abstract vision falls short just where the maximalist dream is guilty of dramatic overreach. For it offers in principle no territorial limits to the expansion of the EU, and avoids the pressing question of just what identities the bloc can realistically accommodate.

As Manent adjures, "Communication", in itself, does not create a true bond among people', and the 'popular term *identity* is a terribly impoverished substitute for the older term *community*'. Once again, we come up against the stubborn need for, yet inability to create, a supra-national locus of political deliberation and belonging which can inspire genuine loyalty and solidarity.

Not that the nation is without flaws of its own: it struggles to contain divergent interests, and has lost much of its imaginative resonance over the last five decades or so. But in a Europe where almost all previous sources of (*pace* Manent) 'identity' have been radically hollowed out – religion, class, region, sex role, trade union membership, political affiliation, etc. – the nation is, in effect, the last man standing. Only it combines efficient (and approximately just) administrative and economic functioning with the cultural capital needed to inspire long-term dedication and even sacrifice.

The upshot of all this is that social democrats must rehabilitate and reinvigorate the idea of nationhood. Whereas the

EU has manifestly failed to construct a sense of belonging to and participating in a shared project, one with the requisite practical and cultural depth, European nations still – despite manifold weaknesses – command such a sense. As Manent puts matters, they combine democracy with the vital feeling of having a ‘body’.

More to the point, if social democrats do not rise to this challenge, they will be completely ousted by the likes of Wilders, Le Pen, Salvini and Åkesson. The latter’s conception of the nation as centred on ethnicity, and on traditions that are largely impenetrable to newcomers, already hold immediate appeal for those who feel disaffected and bewildered by the disembodied political and economic rationalism of the EU.

But pride in and dedication to the nation need not exclude social and economic justice – indeed, they can be their vehicle. While this fact was obscured by the aberration of Fascism, Fascism was precisely that: an aberration. Deeper and far longer-standing European traditions – Judaeo-Christian, Greek and Roman – have always understood the nation as mediating the particular and the universal, rather than simply hallowing different forms of particularity. In sum, we should both affirm and act on Manent’s resounding conclusion: ‘The nation remains the indispensable form that gives concrete expression to our common human nature and aspirations’.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: French philosopher Pierre Manent, via Zaman France.

About the author

Tom Angier – *University of Cape Town*

[Tom Angier](#) is a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town.

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