

The European Way of Life

by Theodore Dalrymple



Ursula von der Leyen

Whenever anyone speaks of “our way of life” in contradistinction to all others, I begin to feel uneasy. What is it that defines its uniqueness? What is it that we, whoever we may be, all share that others do not? While most of us know what we mean by “our way of life,” as soon as we try to define it, its meaning disappears like the blush of a grape.

If I speak of the French or German way of life, everyone has an idea what I mean: for example, drinking wine in cafés or bierfests. But of course the majority of the French do not drink wine in cafés (French wine consumption per capita has declined by two thirds in the last sixty years), and most Germans do not go to bierfests. Whatever defining feature we alight upon, then, someone will say either that it is not unique to the country, or that most of the people whose way of life is supposedly constituted by it do not in fact share it. Whole ways of life disappear under this kind of intellectual carping.

We should not attempt, however, to use words more precisely than their subject-matter allows. The fact that it is difficult to say where a cloud begins and ends does not mean that there are no such things as clouds or that we do not know one when we see one.

But there is another objection to the use of the term “our way of life.” There is something inherently self-congratulatory about it, for people very seldom use it to criticise themselves or draw attention to unpleasant national or civilizational characteristics. It contains within it an implicit hostility to other ways of life that may, when looked at dispassionately, have aspects superior to our own. It therefore implies a narrow-minded unwillingness to learn from others. And we are attached to our way of life not only because we think it the best, but because it is our own. For some, the latter feeling represents an affront to Man as a rational being, for rationality in the opinion of much of the intelligentsia, in the opinion of means deciding every question by means of infallible deduction from an indubitable Cartesian point.

The new head of the European Commission, [Ursula von der Leyen](#), has come under fire for having titled the European Union’s head official for overseeing migration into the continent the Vice-President for the Protection of Our European Way of Life. The title has an unhappy ring to it, and I can well imagine members of certain minorities (I say *certain* minorities because we are all members of many minorities) feeling uneasy because of it.

[An article](#) in the bellwether of enlightened opinion, *The Guardian*, only too predictably began as follows:

How would you define the “European way of life”? What unique, homogeneous culture is shared by people who live in Bolton, Palermo or Plovdiv—but not those who live outside Europe? And what threatens it so profoundly that the European Union has

this week nominated a minister with responsibility for defending it?

What this in effect means is that there is nothing distinct about the European way of life by comparison with that, say Central Asia or the Aztecs, and since the term cannot be defined, what it allegedly describes cannot exist and therefore cannot be defended or preserved or for that matter destroyed. Italy, said Metternich, is a geographical expression; for the author, Europe is a geographical expression—and nothing more.

The corollary of the *Guardian's* approach is that it does not really matter how many people enter Europe or from where they enter or what they bring with them: there is nothing for them to destroy. According to research, a third of sub-Saharan Africans would like to move to Europe—a number equal to the entire population of Europe. Were they actually to do so, who could doubt the “European way of life,” however defined, would undergo a change? The same goes, of course, for the lesser numbers who might come to Europe from the Middle East were there no effort to restrict them.

There are few people who would want to prohibit all migration whatever into Europe (though there are no doubt some). But what Ursula von der Leyen's sinister-sounding job title—one made all the more suspect because she is German—has done is to divert attention from the real and practical problem of how to ensure a controlled migration, to a kind of ideological battle between those who think that cultural identity is important to preserve and those who think that cultural identity, at least in the mouths of the leaders of nations receiving migrants, is but a smokescreen for the worst of passions, for xenophobia, racism and even proto-fascism. The only cultural identities or ways of life that those who think like this wish to preserve are those of the migrants themselves in the happy kaleidoscope of a multicultural society. For them, all cultures are

sacrosanct but their own.

There is probably no subject on which verbal circumspection is more advisable or necessary than that of migration. Many aspects of it have to be handled with care, for example the evident fact that migrants have both individual and group characteristics. In discussions of the problem there is often the somewhat complacent or arrogant assumption that all that counts is the conduct of the migrants' receiving country, and that what ideas, desires, and cultural preconceptions the migrants bring with them are irrelevant. In other words, a migrant is not just a unit of migration, especially where official policy is to permit and even encourage cultural ghettoization in the name of multicultural diversity.

But in addition, no one can claim to know what the exact consequences of migration will be. Yesterday's burden can become today's asset. When Idi Amin, the then dictator of Uganda, expelled the Indian traders who had been granted British passports by the departing colonial regime (anti-South-Asian feeling being the antisemitism of East Africa), the British took them in with reluctance and ill-grace. No one predicted that they would soon become the richest identifiable group in the country, or that they might integrate into British society with so little difficulty, though in retrospect the reasons for this are evident.

By the use of a simple but foolish and faintly sinister form of words, Ursula von der Leyen has helped to inhibit serious discussion of a very serious, indeed vitally important, question.

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