
Disunion

The Last Days of Europe: Epitaph for an Old Continent

by Walter Laqueur
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Reviewed by
Mark Falcoff

IT SEEMS like only yesterday—in fact, it *was* only yesterday—that we were being instructed by observers of Europe like Jeremy Rifkin, Tony Judt, T.R. Reid, and Charles Kupchan that the new, unified continent represented not merely an innovation in world politics but the emergence of a new model of society, quite possibly one far better than our own.

The ink was hardly dry, however, on books like Rifkin's *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Éclipsing the American Dream* or Reid's *The United States of Europe: The New Superpower and the End of Ameri-*

MARK FALCOFF is a resident scholar emeritus at the American Enterprise Institute.

can Supremacy before the conventional wisdom began to unravel. France and the Netherlands rejected the new European constitution, and both countries, as well as the United Kingdom and Spain, became the scene of extended ethnic disorders and terrorist plots.

In his new book, Walter Laqueur, originally of Germany and a sometime resident of Mandate Palestine, Great Britain, and now the United States, and the author of a dozen significant, sometimes path-breaking, works on European history and politics, analyzes what ails the Old World.

THE MAIN themes of *The Last Days of Europe* will be familiar to any reader of the serious press, including COMMENTARY, but perhaps never before have they been laid out in such a detailed (and lugubrious) fashion. The first is a demographic crisis. Due to low birthrates, many European nationalities are shrinking and some are on the path to virtual extinction; 2.1 children per 1 woman is roughly the break-even point for a population to avoid decline, but the continental average is a mere 1.37. In 2050, assuming current trends hold, tiny Yemen will have a larger population than the vast Russian Federation, and Nigeria and Pakistan will each have more inhabitants than all fifteen European Union countries combined.

This shrinkage sets the stage for a number of major sources of trouble to come. One such explored by Laqueur is the inability of the countries of Western Europe to sustain the expensive welfare states that are universally in place. The tax rate in many of these countries is nearly 50 percent (in some it is even higher). To raise it yet further would drag down economies that are already mired in stagnation.

But the alternative—trimming benefits—is politically unpalatable and perhaps politically impossible. There is for the most part a great reluctance to reform—in other

words, to cut back—the entrenched system of entitlements, some of which, as Laqueur shows, are truly mind-boggling. In 2001, social expenditures were 27 to 29 percent of gross domestic product in five major countries (Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, and Belgium) and more than 20 percent in Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal. (The figure for the United States during the same year was 14.7.) Given the demographic pyramid that has formed in Europe, with a population over age sixty-five that for the first time in history is larger than that under age twenty, the resistance to entitlement reform is understandable. But if Europe is somehow to pay for the health and welfare benefits of its aging populace, it faces the necessity of either increasing its population-growth rate—not a simple thing to do—or falling back on the further importation of foreign labor.

THIS BRINGS us to Laqueur's second theme, which is uncontrolled migration: an ongoing movement of peoples into Europe almost unprecedented in history. Before long, if Europeans continue on their present demographic track, the younger population will be made up of people of non-European extraction. In and of itself, Laqueur argues, this need not be a problem, but given the resistance to European values and the festering (and often nihilistic) counteridentities that are being forged by the immigrants, it gives cause for the most serious concern.

Not all the future newcomers to Europe will be Muslims, and even many of those who are Muslim may not align ideologically with proponents of radical Islam. The real problem resides in a marked failure by the second and third generations of those Muslims already resident in Europe to integrate or even wish to integrate into European society. Quite the contrary. In many cases, as Laqueur illustrates, they have revolted against the countries their parents (or grandparents) chose to settle in.

In Germany and Britain, for example, many Muslim children are actively discouraged by their peers from using the local language; young boys are often sent to *madrassas* where they study few subjects other than the Qur'an. Inevitably, many become unemployable. With unemployment comes further alienation and disaffection. It is no small wonder, then, that Eu-

ropean crime rates have converged with those of the United States, and in some areas even started to overtake them. The homicide rate may be still higher here in the U.S., but it is beginning to decline; in gun-free Europe, it is on the rise.

In sketching the failure of integration, Laqueur focuses on Bradford, a city in the United Kingdom, as a kind of case study. Great Britain

is the European country that has made by far the greatest effort to accommodate newcomers from the Muslim world, and that in Bradford, a city of a half-million, strove to offer "a liberal accommodation of Muslim rights" to its roughly 80,000 Pakistanis, including through the establishment of single-sex schools.

But this demonstration of openness and goodwill, which began in the 1980's, was of no avail. Muslim leaders resolutely rejected "the idea of an integrated multiethnic society." Instead, Bradford became "self-segregated, a city fragmented along cultural, ethnic, religious, and social lines." Though some Pakistani residents did become engaged in local politics—and one even came to serve as mayor—it was credibly reported that their elected officials "almost invariably depended [on] instructions given by phone from Pakistan, apparently by religious or political dignitaries." Following the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1989, and the *fatwa* issued against him by the Ayatollah Khomeini, writes Laqueur,

churches and pubs were attacked. Non-Muslim women could not venture out after dark, and even in the daytime there was a danger of being molested. . . . The inner city had become a war zone.

ALL THAT WAS more than a decade and a half ago. Subsequently, despite bending every effort to accommodate Islamic sensibilities, and even to carve out special rights, high tension persists in Bradford as elsewhere in Great Britain. Indeed, a nationwide poll of Muslims in the United Kingdom reveals that 26 percent feel no loyalty whatsoever to their adopted country, and 40 percent favor introducing *shari'a* law on a regional basis. A full 13 percent support al-Qaeda-inspired terror attacks. In some precincts, there is even talk of establishing an Islamic parliament that would be the prelude to the formation of a

separate Muslim state within the British state.

NOR IS Great Britain alone. If the British have emphasized accommodation, France—home to the largest Muslim population in Europe, comprising primarily Arabs from North Africa—has taken a different route, with no better results. There the government responded to the influx by promoting integration and assimilation—banning, for example, distinctive religious garb (of all faiths) in public schools. But in the years since September 11, the more radical elements of France’s Muslim population have only grown in strength, with consequences visible in signs of increasing lawlessness and even violence. Now the French are considering adopting some forms of “positive discrimination” (i.e., affirmative action) in the areas of education and employment for the Muslims in their midst.

In Germany, yet a different pattern prevails, but again the situation is no less somber. The Muslim population there, largely of Turkish origin, clings closely to its external identity. In this community, to consider oneself German is a form of immorality. The net result is the emergence of a parallel society in which Turkish Germans identify themselves with their homeland even if they have never lived or even traveled there. The greatest irony of all is that Turkey itself harbors many more liberal and enlightened elements than does Germany.

LAQUEUR IS reluctant to write Europe’s obituary, but write one he does. For him, the cherished project of European unity is a fiction. There is no evidence of a willingness to cooperate on issues like energy policy, much less on matters of foreign and defense policy (and in any case Europe has no credible capacity for military intervention). Even if the continent were somehow to come together and try to address its urgent domestic travails, Laqueur believes

that the hour is too late: “its predominant place in the world . . . and predominant role in world affairs is a thing of the past,” and recent, wistful predictions “of the emergence of Europe as a *moral* superpower are bound to remain an engaging fantasy” (emphasis added). His best-case scenario is that in the emerging world order, “Europe will find a place for itself . . . more modest than in the past but still respectable”; his worst case is that it will become a kind of museum-cum-theme park, driven by ethnic and interreligious tension.

Either way, the continent’s descent, detailed here in a filigreed and quiet way, is replete with consequences for all of us that cannot yet be fully discerned, let alone absorbed. As David Pryce-Jones has warned, the possibility of mass violence is emphatically among them.
