Do I Belong?

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Reflections from Europe

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Introduction

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No single reason can explain why, in June 2016, British voters decided in favour of leaving the European Union, just as there was no sole motive driving Americans to elect Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States in November. But one factor looms very large in both cases: the appeal of promises (or rather threats) made to exclude millions of 'undesirables' from belonging to the national community.

First in line would be those characterized as 'intruders': immigrants, migrants, asylum seekers, refugees – call them what you will – who allegedly take the jobs that should be preserved for 'native' workers and 'dilute' national identity and culture. Feared, hated, demonized and dehumanized, these seekers after home can no longer be allowed entry in such 'destabilizing' numbers; some insist that there simply should be no more 'foreign' additions to the population. Next come Muslims and possibly other 'suspect' religious, ethnic or cultural groups who must be placed under radically increased surveillance, and therefore ever more decisively alienated from society, out of fears that they support terrorism and are disloyal to the state. Then diverse groups would be turned into internal enemies or outsiders by severe limitations placed on some fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, a woman's right to choose, speaking truth to power and choice of personal sexual orientation. Even if such measures were not always fully articulated by the principal figures in the Trump and Brexit campaigns, the subtext was always clear: You are not welcome. You do not belong here.

The impulse to reject inclusivity may well begin with the natural propensity of human beings to see society/human relations in terms of 'us' and 'them'. But while the exclusivist urge was once held

in check in liberal democratic societies embracing multicultural-
ism, times have changed, radically. Trump's victory and the Brexit
vote were decisively influenced by the politics of exclusion, even if
it was not necessarily the formal leaderships who spelled out the
full implications of the exclusionary rhetoric. But in Europe, there
is no shortage of other leaders of today's far right, anti-Muslim,
anti-immigrant and extreme nationalist parties who are on the
same page as Trump and his agitators and the hardline Brexiters,
and are not shy about spelling out what exclusion means, what
rigidly defined belonging, or the denial of belonging altogether,
actually entails. It's frightening to have to admit it, but we are surely
now living in an age when the demand to satiate the appetite of
nation-first politicians and electorates for excluding 'them' is not
only something practically no major political leader can ignore, but
is also enthusiastically espoused by some of the most powerful of
their ilk.

Those who have become used to multiple, complex belongings,
to successfully melding cultural difference with a strong sense of
national citizenship, must be feeling pressure to conform to the
narrower, one-dimensional sense of belonging being increasingly
favoured by the authoritarian nationalists of the populist right
and more centrist politicians who feel the need to appease such
forces. And for those for whom a cosmopolitan Europeanness
has become central to their sense of belonging, the Eurosceptic
climate increasingly places them under suspicion. As the then
newly appointed British prime minister, Theresa May, charged
with overseeing Britain's exit from the EU, so chillingly put it on 5
October 2016: 'If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are
a citizen of nowhere.'

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Europe's mainstream leaders are undoubtedly struggling to
cope with formidable financial, economic, environmental and
geopolitical challenges. And the difficulty of their task is aggravated
by increasing support for right-wing populist demagogues and

parties whose nativist and racist discourse has led to a spike in racist crimes almost everywhere. But at the same time as they condemn such trends, they too seek to dictate belonging and do very little to counter the trend of so many governments which are not pursuing ways of encouraging Europe's diverse populations and groups to live together in harmony. As Pope Francis warned, in his 'thank you' speech on the occasion of receiving the European Charlemagne prize in May 2016, the opposite is happening: 'new walls are rising in Europe'.

Belonging is certainly not a new concept. Fostering a sense of belonging was a core aspiration of the European project from the very beginning. Freedom of movement for workers was enshrined in Article 39 of the 1957 Treaty of Rome and it was understood as aimed at achieving the 'integration of people', their having a sense of belonging to the same 'community'. Since then, Europe has become far more diverse, especially so within what is now the EU, making achievement of this aspiration even more challenging. But the extent of Euroscepticism and the increasing undermining of the principle of open borders by some European leaders is a clear sign of their explicit disaffection with a closer union that implies any kind of deliberate policy to promote multiculturalism. They, and large swathes of their populations, believe that European societies are simply becoming too diverse and must take action to prevent further dilution of national identity. The pace of social and economic change, on both the national and local levels, fails to respect traditional bonds of belonging and is one of the factors driving some to support groups advocating a more defensive, even aggressive, national identity and to regard Brussels – the shorthand for the EU – as remote, dictatorial, anti-democratic and elitist. Others say that Europe must redefine itself according to the reality of its diversity and that it is uniquely placed to develop ways of living with the 'other'. Either way, there is no doubt that the question, formulated by the late Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who lived and worked in the UK from 1951 – 'How can people live together in difference?' – is at the heart of the problem facing the continent. And what is key to difference is a sense of belonging.

While there is growing acknowledgement of the significance of belonging, there is an urgent need to rescue the concept from politicians' glib references to it as if it were motherhood and apple pie and from some academics whose understanding of it as something so inchoate makes it difficult to grasp. After all, we are talking about both a fundamental human emotion of many dimensions and a political project that affects millions. There is nothing intrinsically progressive about someone's sense of belonging, whether to Europe or anything else, or about how it is politically determined, managed and policed. One of the strong left-wing arguments about unacceptable aspects of the EU is that there are systemized policies of exclusion and bordering aimed at the disadvantaged, refugees and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups seeking entry to the EU; that there is a prejudicial and discriminatory, institutionally supported political consensus to turn people away who are deemed not to belong in Europe. It's easy to forget this in the flow of warm words about the joys of belonging.

Feelings of belonging or non-belonging can be very complex. For example, individuals may experience different and sometimes contradictory senses of belonging within themselves. EU bureaucrats may see national belonging as antithetical to a sense of European identity, but this may well be a myth. A sense of belonging in Europe may be engendered in many indirect ways, such as feeling safe within one's faith or ethnic community whose participation in public life is encouraged and promoted by local leaders and national authorities, but not necessarily through grand cultural or educational projects initiated by the European Commission aimed at persuading people to feel 'European' or to lay claim to a European identity.

Moreover, there are multiple ways in which people express their sense of belonging, whether that is to the continent, their country of residence, former country, cultural group, political party, environmental cause, gender, family, gang or secret society, or to a combination of two or more of these. And some choose not to belong – to anything. Is there good reason to think that the former are somehow 'better' for society than the latter? That is usually the

assumption. But the path of belonging is not necessarily linear. Belonging is fluid, imagined, created and recreated. So the idea that there is one sense of 'good' belonging in Europe that should apply to all is unreasonable and rather dangerous since it is so easy to abuse it in order to make nefarious judgements about who to exclude.

So what might be a good way of exploring this significant, very real, but somewhat elusive state of being that politicians tend to envisage as formally defined and rooted in tradition, and want more of and more control over, and yet actual experience suggests is always a dynamic process and never immutable?

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This is the question that faced the participants in the Vienna Conversations, a series of seminars organized by the Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue, after three years (2012–15) of wide-ranging, and at times somewhat diffuse bi-annual discussions on the barriers preventing people in Europe living together in difference and how to overcome them. Out of those discussions had come an understanding that the issue of belonging was a key, insufficiently explored and acknowledged factor influencing the patterns of behaviour that have given rise to some of the most acute tensions within Europe today. The unanimous answer was a decision to ask a diverse group of contributors – some members of the discussion group and some additional thoughtful writers – to reflect, in the form of an essay, on their own personal sense or senses of belonging, set against the background of the crises and challenges facing Europe we had already spent so much time discussing.

We asked contributors to avoid writing academic articles or policy papers, although they could draw on their academic expertise, experience and knowledge of policy ideas to inform their essays. The only premises all were asked to share were that: belonging is irreducibly complex; broadly speaking, the institutions of the EU should not be prescribing precise, homogenous parameters of belonging for individuals within its member states; there are many

ways of being European; and multiple belongings and the choice not to belong are all acceptable.

There are 51 countries in Europe by its broadest definition, and 27 currently in the EU, so ensuring any fully satisfying mathematical national diversity – or any other kind – of contributors was impossible. Nevertheless, among the 18 writers, bearing in mind that each one has a range of competences, there are novelists, philosophers, social scientists, a former judge, journalists, serving and former policy think tank heads, diversity experts, a theologian, arts professionals, political scientists, a museum director, historians and two academic experts on belonging (and this is not an exhaustive survey).

You might expect that the Introduction to a collection of essays of this kind would provide brief summaries of their contents, explain how they relate to each other, cluster and categorize the various kinds of conclusions and generally give a broad outline of the contents. I decided not to do this because we want readers to come to the essays with the minimum of prior knowledge or preconceptions of what they are about to read; to discover, enjoy, be surprised by, fume about, learn from what our writers have to say and tell with as little mediation as is necessary. And then, if they wish, draw their own conclusions about the messages that each essayist conveys. There seemed little point in commissioning original essays, most of which rely on timing or at least the steady absorption of a prior narrative before reaching conclusions or uncovering personal details, only for the editor of the book then to reveal all the best bits in the Introduction.

However, I don't think I'll be giving anything away by highlighting a few broad points about the volume as a whole.

While there are significant differences in the contributors' personal experience of belonging and their views on just how diverse societies can be, and no one was invited to write an essay on the basis of any interrogation of their politics, the overall thrust of the essays is towards a very radical critique of the top-down imposition of what the EU and national governments regard as acceptable forms of belonging for citizens and residents of European

countries. Some of those for whom the terrorist attacks in France loom large in their narratives and analyses strongly emphasize the need to defend those values of free speech and personal liberty that the attackers deliberately set out to undermine, but any temptation to suggest more extreme administration of borders or measures of exclusion directed at Muslims are strenuously resisted. Sharpening distinctions between those who are 'allowed' to belong and those who should be 'denied' belonging do not figure in any of the essays. The fortress Europe reality is roundly condemned. The thrust is to single out methods of exclusion, restrictions on the expression of Muslim identity and so on as some of the very things that contribute to the alienation that is one of the causes of radicalization and the turn to violence. When politicians are lamenting the lack of belonging in Europe it is often a way of saying that they would prefer everyone to be more alike for immigration control purposes, social cohesion (for which read 'control') and economic and social management, making a mockery of claims to value and welcome diversity.

Judging by the biographies of the contributors and the status they have in society by virtue of their professions it would be tempting to assume that problematic belonging is not something they have to face in their lives. Even that the irreducible complexity of belonging that all acknowledge is not something that applies particularly to them. But such an assumption would be entirely wrong. One of the standout features of almost all the essays is not only complex personal belonging narratives about the essayists' pasts, almost always originating in childhood and arising out of sometimes voluntary and sometimes forced movement from place to place, country to country, but also present feelings of dysfunctional belonging due to discrimination, racial prejudice, assumed religious affiliation or unresolved ethnic conflict. 'The unfinished business of our own belongings' could easily have been the subtitle of this book, not only for those whose diasporic status remains central and still dynamic with respect to their identity, but also for those whose sense of Europeanness is very strong and who are therefore more affected by the instability confronting the EU.

This leads me to conclude that if people for whom European belonging should come easily and naturally have such complex belongings, with which many are still grappling, how much more prepared we should be to understand the problems facing refugees who probably hail from places where settled belonging is strong and commonplace, but who are wrenched, or who are forced to wrench themselves, from those moorings and find themselves confronting situations in which they and their assumed senses of belonging are seen as a threat. Some might say they are at an advantage because their sense of belonging to their former homes, regions and countries is more straightforward, more one-dimensional – something which anyway may be far from the truth – and therefore they have less to worry about. But the opposite is of course the case. While the cosmopolitan European who can write an essay for this book has other resources to draw on, with which they can manage the complexity of their belonging, this is a luxury the refugee does not have.

Writers stress that it is equally important to understand the belonging concerns of the very large numbers of people across Europe who are drawn to the politics of exclusion and restriction. These disaffected, disadvantaged, mostly working and lower middle class sectors of our societies feel globalization has left them impoverished and uprooted, immigration has changed the face of their formerly stable communities and the consensus across Europe that there is no alternative to the austerity agenda for returning to financial stability has fatally damaged the employment and career prospects for their children. Politicians who have notoriously failed to listen to the belonging fears and complaints of the population are pushing such people, who are not by any means necessarily racist, into the arms of the populists and the far right. Listening to the refugee's story does not preclude listening to the story of the underclass youth living in social housing in any major European city.

Finally, the element of racism in the politics of belonging, discriminating between 'us' and 'them' on the basis of colour, ethnicity, religious identity and so on, remains strong, although the existence

of the EU and its role in promoting and maintaining human rights standards and anti-discrimination measures have had a positive impact on reducing this. But what emerges from a number of the essays that focus on the rise of populist parties peddling extreme nationalism, the parties devoted to combating the 'takeover of Europe by Islam', to restoring sovereignty to national parliaments, to defending Western civilization, is the existence of a rationale, a discourse that seeks to present the far right's politics of belonging in terms of the defence of human rights and freedom of speech. It aims to portray indigenous populations as the real victims of racism because of the influx of 'others', these days largely people like the Poles in the UK, who look no different and are allegedly favoured with already hard-pressed and scarce local resources and services, while local people suffer and end up being discriminated against. Communities cannot cope with this change, parties like UKIP say; their sense of belonging is under attack. But of course in the UK, since the Brexit vote, it is precisely the Poles and other East Europeans, who are increasingly subject to vilification and demonization, legitimized by this 'reverse' racism argument. This way of determining belonging is equally a form of racism and needs to be called out as such.

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These rich and diverse essays are not without ideas for ways to enable us all to live together in difference. But there are no dogmatic policy diktats, no magic bullets. While some of the essays lean more to the analytical, the philosophical and the interpretive, and others tend to be more narrative-based, telling stories and exposing myths, the personal is a thread running through all of them. And the personal perspective humanizes and individualizes the belonging experience. I hope it also helps to stimulate discussion of an issue too often confined to the seminar room or left to politicians to manipulate to suit their own agendas. If these essays succeed in helping to open up a subject that is central to the future of Europe and, through further exploration, can pave the way to new thinking

about difference, social cohesion, the social consequences of neo-liberalism and a new basis for European solidarity that is far removed from imposed homogeneity or a damaging European nationalism dressed up as a progressive objective, then a valuable enough aim will have been achieved.

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