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The Abduction of Europa

–Britta Petersen*

The refugee crisis and the ascent of right-wing populism remind Europe of its hybrid origin and the search for a solution must start from there.

Europe – you might know it – is a woman. According to Greek mythology, she was the beautiful daughter of a Phoenician king who was abducted by the mighty God Zeus. The story goes like this: Godfather Zeus falls in love with Europa. In order to deceive his jealous wife Hera, Zeus takes on the form of a white bull to approach Europa as she plays at a beach in Sidon, a city in what is today known as Lebanon.

The girl fascinated by the tame bull, feeds him and adorns his small horns with garlands. When she mounts him, the bull takes her into the water and swims with her through the open sea to the Greek island of Crete, where he metamorphoses back into his original form. It is unclear what happened exactly after that...but the couple had three sons. And a whole continent was named after the princess.

The first known reference to the story is Homer’s “Illiad” (dated Eighth Century BC) but there are many different versions of the myth, for example, in the “Metamorphoses” by the Roman poet Ovid (15 BC to 17 AC). While artists over a period of more than two millennia have been inspired by the story, politically the “abduction of Europa” had very little resonance.

While the numerous crises that Europe has been facing in the last few years call for a new vision and a debate on how the continent wants to position itself and live together in the future, this particular myth seems unsuitable as a foundation for various reasons. And that is exactly why it needs to be looked into a bit closer.

* **The author** is a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi.

Displacement as a Foundation Myth

Although sculptures and paintings of a woman riding a bull can be seen here and there in Brussels and a portrait of the princess Europa adorns some Euro coins and banknotes, the story itself is seldom told in the European Union (EU). Some scholars even prefer to derive the name “Europe” from the Greek word for dark (*erebos*) instead of giving Europa her seemingly obvious due.

The allusion to darkness brings in the dichotomy of Occident (the place of sunset) and Orient (the place on sunrise) which is problematic in itself. But let's come to that later.

There is something disquieting about the myth of Europa and it surely does not fit the continent's self-perception. A girl from the Middle-East, kidnapped over the Mediterranean Sea and forced into an unwanted marriage, as a patron saint? That surely rang all the possible alarm bells; or so it seemed. As feminists rightly observed, the story of Europa is about a criminal act, a rape even and that makes it rather complicated to use in today's politics.

But what is relevant for us and what makes it worth considering here are two facets of the story: One is that Europa was abducted and the other is: displacement is among the first memories of Europe.

This brings us very close to the topic that occupies the continent at the moment, the refugee crisis of indeed epic proportions. It is also worth looking at Europa, both as a political idea and a creator of political ideas, through the 'lens' of hijacking.

Let's start with displacement and refugees. Before we get deeper into the subject, one important distinction in terminology is necessary here. That is, between refugees and migrants, although this is not always a clear cut distinction. In the media these terms are often used synonymously, but that is rather misleading. It is important to make a distinction to understand some of the political aspects of the crisis.

The word migrant describes a person who leaves willingly, his or her country of origin to take a new job, attend a university, get married or rejoin family members in another country. The word refugee describes someone fleeing war, persecution, or natural disasters out of necessity or by force. Under international law, no one can be sent to a place where they face a real risk of being persecuted or seriously harmed by others. People facing such a situation can ask for political asylum—the legal permission to stay as a refugee. Not every asylum seeker will be recognised as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker.

Europa, the princess was not a refugee, because she did not want to leave her home country and also had no reason to flee. She was kidnapped in the first place but stayed on and so became a migrant of sorts.

Europa is a Women from Syria

Important is that Europa was a women from Phoenicia, an area that is located in today's Syria, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine – an area that is also known as the Levant. The word *Levant* (like *Orient*) derives from Latin and means – again and more literary – sunrise. The geographic area covered by the expression has been changing over the centuries and in different European languages. But basically it is used for countries east of Italy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Phoenicia, whose trade relations with Crete were mentioned in texts as early as 1500 to 1200 BC, became part of the Roman province of Syria under Pompey in 63 BC. Today the Arab Republic of Syria, as a result of the ongoing war, is home to 28 per cent of the refugees that have reached Europe through the Mediterranean in 2016.

If we reflect on these details for a while, it seems surprising that Europe and this area around the Mediterranean Sea that can be termed as the cradle of European civilisation is no longer seen as a political, economic and cultural continuum. There are reasons for this. But in the light of the latest developments, it is clear that it has to change.

In June 2016, the news agency Reuters reported, that a group of 113 Afghan migrants landed in Crete, Greece's biggest island on a boat that set off from the city of Antalya at Turkey's South Western coast.

According to figures of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 316,940 people arrived in Europe by sea in 2016. Many of them take the relatively short route from Turkey to the Greek islands of Kos, Chios, Lesvos and Samos. Unlike mythical Europa, who was safe on the back of a God, it is a dangerous journey; 3800 having died on their way, this year alone and the pictures of drowning people and dead children have been haunting the world.

Most of them (28 per cent) came from war-torn Syria, as the princess Europa. The second largest group, (14 per cent) came from Afghanistan. It seems remote today, but had been invaded by the Greek king Alexander the Great in 330 BC and was renamed Bactria. After Alexander's death, the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom lasted three centuries in Afghanistan and what is

today called Pakistan. Pakistanis make for the sixth largest group of migrants (3 per cent) in 2016.

Identity Shift to the North and West

In the early Middle Ages and during the Byzantine Empire (ca 330–1453 AC), the Levant was an important trading hub. But it lost its relevance over time due to a variety of reasons such as the ascent of the Ottoman Empire, the discovery of new sea routes, etc. We cannot deal with the historical details here but it would be good to highlight that this process slowly shifted Europe's identity and focus, both to the North and the West thus disengaging the continent from its immediate neighbourhood in the South East.

In the turn of events, the Levant, Northern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula became internationally known as the Middle East. Unfortunately for Europe, the term that has been borrowed from American English obfuscates what the much less used European expressions, nowadays, such as *Near East* (German: *Naher Osten*, French: *Proche Orient*, etc.) still reveal: the proximity of the region. (In India, of course the area is called West Asia, which probably gives policy makers in the subcontinent a less tainted view of the geographical realities.)

From an American geographical point of view, *Middle East* is a perfectly justified expression. Seen from the USA, *Near East* would be Africa and Europe. For Europe, on the contrary it indicates a forgetfulness of history that is proving more and more problematic. The refugee crisis can be seen as a culmination of this long development. And it will hopefully become a turning point.

It is a point of argument here, that Europe, in order to resolve this crisis needs to connect again with its South Eastern neighbourhood on a deeper level; to acknowledge the shared history and the overlapping of religion, philosophy and culture between the people of both these regions including a different dialogue between the controversial three monotheistic religions and cultures that originate in the area of the Levant, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The “Otherisation” of Islam

Emphasising here, that, a lot of important work has been done in this regard, on an academic level and it is still going on. However, the public perception of Islam in Europe, today, is simply as an alien and different culture that is inane reduced to honour killings, head-scarves and terrorism. This negative discourse has further been strongly exacerbated by the ascent of right wing populist parties.

These, in turn have successfully managed to replace Anti-Semitism as a rallying ideology, with what is euphemistically called “Critique of Islam.”

In this garb, it managed to make inroads in respectable circles in Europe (ones that would not be caught dead anywhere in the vicinity of this kind of a Nazi-ideology) an otherwise impossible task, of course, for any form of Anti-Semitism. In actual fact, the so-called “Critique of Islam” is neither a critique nor has much to do with Islam. If we take the definition of critique as “method of disciplined systematic analysis of a discourse”, the “Critique of Islam” lacks all: method, discipline, system and analysis, not to mention the complete lack of knowledge of Islam.

It seems surprising that despite Edward Said’s well established theory of “Orientalism”, these self-appointed “critics” of Islam managed to produce yet another discourse on “otherisation” by creating an identity for Muslims that functions along the same known lines of the spirit of resentment as cited by Friedrich Nietzsche: ‘There must be an “other” that is bad if “I” want to be good.’

The categories of “Orient” and “Occident”, as much as “East” and “West” as political and cultural ascriptions offer an all too easy tool to organise an ever more complex world order. The invocation of a new “Cold War”, implying a return to the never-so-good old Manichaeian world order of the 20th century, is an expression of this longing for a clarity that never existed.

Islamic terrorism, in this context is just a vehicle on which this illiberal ideology is riding, but it is not its cause. Needless to say that the “otherisation” of Islam is not helpful in a continent with a large Muslim population that might already be or go up to as much as 10 per cent of the population in the near future. Besides, this minority group wants to live up to its founding idea of the universality of human rights.

While Europe has done a lot to translate the ideas of enlightenment into political practice, some unfinished business still exists in the form of discrimination against women and minorities. Anti-Islamic ideology is further detrimental to these enlightenment efforts. In fact, it is a negation of the very idea of enlightenment akin to Anti-Semitism.

Almost all religions are complex constructs that have developed over billions of centuries and are deeply embedded with historical, social, philosophical, psychological and theological developments. Singling out any one as a “misfit” in Europe makes no sense and in fact, it denies a relevant part of our population the freedom of religion.

Besides, it is based on a rather stupid and impractical assumption that Europe could simply close its borders to Muslims and the Islamic world. The contrary is proving true, as the refugee crisis worsens. New figures from UNHCR show that despite closer border controls, 3800 refugees have already died on their way to Europe in 2016, making this year the deadliest year since the beginning of the crisis.

The construction of a “Christian-Jewish” civilisation or culture for Europe that has been attempted by some intellectuals also has to fail, because psychologically it is an all too obvious effort to overcome the bloody history of Anti-Semitism in Europe that culminated in the *shoah*, or the annihilation of European Jews by the Nazi regime in Germany.

It also leaves out the other greater and more relevant influence on European thought and culture which is Islam. Large parts of Greek philosophy came upon us through Arab authors and Europe was deeply influenced by Muslim thinkers in the 12th and 13th Century. Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina and Al Ghazali are just a few names to be mentioned here. This cannot be just ignored at whim.

Ambiguity of the Origin

The 19th and 20th century saw an enormous amount of research by European “Orientalists” in and about what is known as the Islamic World and not all of it was about proving the superiority of Europe’s own culture, as Edward Said suggests. It is important to understand that all these encounters took place while there was ongoing conflict and violence. There were the crusades and colonialism, the *shoah* and numerous wars. However, there was always a thread of dialogue and mutual influence in both directions. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s modernisation project of Turkey is just one example of how European thinking was constructively used in a Muslim country.

Taking the “abduction of Europa” as a founding myth to highlight this ambiguity of our origin is hence the best suggestion for all concerned.

A “Jewish-Christian-Islamic” dialogue realising a common origin and interlacing as a part of the whole in a larger project could be the answer and it could be named as the “new European Renaissance.” Of course, it would have to be modelled on the first Renaissance, the period between the fourteenth and seventeenth century in Europe that rediscovered the Greek origins of European culture.

A “new European Renaissance” sounds as if it would be the most certain to go beyond finding solutions to the immediate refugee crisis. But, it still goes

without saying that even if from today onwards, no refugee enters the EU anymore (a delusion, surely, but one can hypothesize), the larger question of how to successfully integrate large Muslim minorities into European societies will continue to remain a challenge. The past toxic discourses that unfortunately have and will continue to develop over the years after 9/11 cannot and will not be ignored by the European society as a whole. The subject of integration of the muslim minority is a question that had not been appropriately addressed before the crisis but it has now become unavoidable if Europe wants to maintain internal peace and stability.

Toxic Discourses

It is however, not the only question. The ascent of right-wing populist parties as a result of various policy failures is already jeopardising the very core of the European project that was originally formed on the basis of human rights and liberal democracy. The alternative could be a slide-back into xenophobia and newer forms of fascism, the outlines of which are already visible in the ascent of right-wing populist parties all over Europe.

Combating them back will require action on several different levels, one being the creation of an attractive narrative for Europe that is broader than the existing model. This means a lot of work not only for our intellectuals but even the policy makers and politicians. What is important is that politicians will have to stop “abducting” Europa for their own electoral gains. It has been a complaint for a very long time that almost every politician, who needs to be elected in his or her home country has at some time, made use of the simple trick to blame the bureaucrats in Europe for all kinds of failures and unpopular measures.

This has to stop! The unpopularity of the EU has reached a point where public resentment jeopardises the project as a whole. The Brexit campaign in the UK and its outcome is just one such very poignant example of a self-inflicted crisis. Obviously, any number of appeals to politicians is not going to suffice. Institutional reforms of the EU will be necessary that consider the refugee crisis as a part of the larger crisis of governance in liberal democracies.

The “ever deeper Union” that was always brought into play whenever there was a crisis, (and there have been many since the inception of the EU in 1951) now has so many enemies that it is hard to argue for it and even harder to sell it to the voters. The European Union was set up as an elite project that tried to create facts of integration without the general permission or knowledge of large

chunks of the population. This too can be interpreted as a form of “abduction.” The anti-elitism of populist parties therefore, has much to feast on due to this apparent failure.

A more inclusive Narrative for Europe

Developing a more integrative narrative for Europe can only be one of the measures to deal with the larger governance problem. A more attractive narrative has to be more inclusive and shared by a larger number of stakeholders. This is easier said than done because the toxic right-wing discourse has already taken roots in almost all European countries, although it remains to be seen if right-wing populist parties manage to stabilise their share of votes in consecutive elections

The crux of the matter is that while the politics of exclusion still works as a political strategy for some parts of the European electorate, the world has moved. “Otherisation” has essentially become untenable because of the changing global order, where Europe is now no longer in the centre. The share of the EU’s 28 member states in the global economy has come down from 30 per cent in 1980 to 17 per cent today based on the share of the GDP as per figures of the IMF. With a shrinking population and a much smaller share of the global economy, Europe needs to redefine itself based on a new set of realities.

Exclusion does not work any longer because the number of people who probably still prefer to see themselves as “more equal” than others, has gone down to the extent that their claim has become economically unviable. The irony is that philosophically, exclusion has been dead since the French Revolution came up with the demand for *egalite*. In spite of this, in actuality, the practice of “otherisation” and holding on to privileges has continued despite the fact that Europe was supposedly cherishing the universality of human rights for such a long time.

The EU as an institution has made human rights an integral part of all their foreign policies, to the extent that policy makers in other parts of the world start rolling their eyeballs whenever the word is mentioned. But pictures of dying refugees in the Mediterranean and murky deals to keep refugees out of the boundaries of the EU have given this stance of the institution a deadly blow.

It is important to understand that this is just the most visible and unravelled part of a problem that has been there in Europe for a long time. Even for those Muslims who were born and raised in European countries, discrimination on

the basis of their (Muslim) name continues at the workplace and new forms of discriminations for example the ban on *hijab* are being added even as we speak.

Not to mention the discrimination that lies in the very discussion of whether Islam can be a part of Europe or not. While converting to Buddhism or leaving one of the Christian churches has always been – and rightly so – treated as a matter of personal choice (that does not make anybody a lesser citizen) Muslims have become suspicious *per se* as part of the ongoing Anti-Islamic discourse. While this clearly violates the freedom of religion in a substantial manner, it also does not help making new immigrants feel at home, either.

We all know that economically, the ageing societies of Europe need immigration and they knew it long before the immediate refugee crisis. As a matter of fact immigration has been happening in Europe for decades – but without a vision of how to make the newcomers Europeans. The different concepts of integration in different countries (the U.K., France and German may serve as examples) have mainly focussed on either tolerating the Muslim culture as the other minority culture within theirs or demanding from Muslims to assimilate to an ill-defined “lead-culture” that would be no more a constructive integration than any other.

Neither of these paths could be designated as a progressive success as earmarked by the existence of Muslim ghettos, unrest in Muslim youth, unemployment and of course home-grown Islamic terrorists. If Europe wants to maintain its global relevance it has to take an alternative stand and project a different outlook. There is simply no more room for the false sense of superiority that still exists as a post-colonial hang-over. In the media, this problem is often addressed as a question of how to keep a certain lifestyle that is deemed “European” as opposed to that which is termed “Islamic.”

There are very few signs, almost negligent, to indicate that Muslims will become the dominant community in Europe. Clashes between the various different world-views and inherent social values of citizens of different origin will continue to occur. No reason exists to assume that this cannot be managed with necessary political awareness. Fear of change is all too human but it is the task of politics ultimately to deal with it in a constructive manner.

Beyond Constitutional Patriotism

For an European identity, the European narrative has to explore beyond the ingredients that have been in the soup so far: Ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, Christianity, the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Liberalism,

Socialism, Secularism and, if we want to add the hovering shadows: the Crusades, Colonialism, the two World Wars and the Holocaust.

Europe would have looked and been a very different place if it had not arrogantly made the mistake of cutting itself off from the rest of the Mediterranean, the home of the Phoenician princess, Europa.

In a Deutsche (German language) speaking environment, the “constitutional patriotism” that was developed by the philosopher Juergen Habermas, has often been suggested as a basis/foundation for the future European identity. Constitutional patriotism was founded in the throes of the German experience of a hyper-nationalism that had turned rogue into fascism and which had as a result, discredited all forms of nationalism in the country for a long time. It worked quite well in Germany, as is observed today. In many ways, the EU’s focus on a rule-based world order is a form of “constitutional patriotism” and should therefore work towards the ultimate European identity. However, it tends to be dry and consists basically in an intellectual act that a citizen/ an individual has to vow to perform. It does not contribute (and it was not meant to by its inventor) to develop an identity for a new kind of political formation that needs to integrate a large variety of nations and cultures under a common roof.

But what if Europeans could see themselves as beyond Europeans; as much descendents and students of Ibn-Arabi, Ibn-Rushd and Maimonides as of Plato and Aristotle, of Augustinus and Thomas Aquinas? A whole world or rather, very big chunks of it became a part of Europe. Excluding that inherent part after so many centuries as foreign cannot work anymore. The price for such exclusion is too high a price to pay for far too long! There seems to be no other alternative solution for world peace at large and the refugee crisis at a “glocal” level.