

# The New Racialisation of Europe

by *Éric Fassin*

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Author: Eric Fassin

In the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall, Ralph Dahrendorf wrote: 'The countries of East Central Europe (Ö) have shed a closed system in order to create an open society'. But today, Europe is not an open society any longer. Migrants and Muslims know it all too well, along with Roma, Blacks, etc.: Europe is obsessed with racialised 'Others'.

At the same time, repeated proclamations about the failure of multiculturalism only serve to shift the rhetoric, not the issue – as if the 'problem' were truly Europe's excessive tolerance, rather than its rising intolerance; or as if it were the recognition of cultural difference, rather than the legitimization of racism.

1989 is a first turning point in this history, as the denial of class conflict in a neoliberal world made it possible increasingly to address social issues in racial terms. But how could the European Union, which was first erected in reaction against the racism and xenophobia that had paved the way to World War Two, be thus redefined?

Originally, the European project was about transcending nations. But after 2005, and the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty, leaders who wanted to preserve the Union while soothing popular resentment against its policies redefined it as the best protection of national identity against those who threatened its integrity by refusing integration.

Is Europe going backwards, returning to a dark past? There is an important difference. In the 1930s, racism and xenophobia were associated with anti-democratic forces. On the contrary, today, they are justified in the name of democracy. For example, Islamophobia appears as a defense of democratic values.

Sexual democracy has become a litmus test in the new politics of national identities. A new sexual nationalism appears in all the controversies about the Islamic veil and the integral veil, forced marriage and polygamy, sexual violence and virginity. Gender and sexuality supposedly define 'us' by contrast to 'them' (Muslims, immigrants and their children).

Is this instrumentalization of sexual democracy in the service of the new sexual nationalisms reason enough to forsake it? Are we bound to oppose sexual and racial democracy? In fact, both could be reconciled if we redefined these values in terms of ideals, rather than identities.



Eric Fassin, *École normale supérieure, Paris*

Eric Fassin is a sociologist, a Professeur agrégé in the Social Sciences Department at École normale supérieure in Paris, affiliated with the research center IRIS (CNRS / EHESS). His work focuses on contemporary sexual and racial politics in France and the United States, and their intersections (in particular concerning immigration issues in Europe), in a comparative perspective. He has frequently been involved in the French public debates related to the issues his work addresses – from gay marriage and gender parity to the politics of immigration and race. He is currently at work on *The Empire of Sexual Democracy* (Zone Books).

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