



## James Traub on Immigrants and Refugees

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Katarina Church and Stockholm Mosque, Stockholm, Sweden. CREDIT: [Poxnar/Wikimedia](#)

James Traub, Stephanie Sy

**STEPHANIE SY:** Welcome to Ethics Matter. I'm Stephanie Sy.

I'm so pleased to be joined today by a friend of the Carnegie Council and a face you might recognize if you've been watching Ethics Matter because he is a former host of this program, James Traub. James, it's so nice to have you here.

Obviously, I'm not going to go through your entire résumé because it is exceedingly rich with writings on foreign policy, on history, on the major moral dilemmas facing us today, including the refugee crisis and the rise of far-right movements around the globe. You can read James' provocative [reports](#), by the way, in Foreign Policy magazine and on [foreignpolicy.com](#).

James, I want to focus on the [refugee crisis](#) because starting in the summer of 2015 I remember almost blanket coverage on cable networks of the migrant crisis, people drowning, chaos on the borders of European countries.

What is your sense of where we are today in 2017?

**JAMES TRAUB:** First of all, Stephanie, thank you. I'm delighted to be here at Carnegie.

It is true; this is a subject I've spent a lot of time writing about and thinking about. Let me try to describe what I think is not so much a crisis, as a sequences of crises, because we're not in the same one now that we were in, as you say, in the summer of 2015.

The first crisis, chronologically but also in terms of moral importance, was the terrible humanitarian crisis of a million people desperately fleeing warfare—from [Syria](#), from [Iraq](#), and later from [Afghanistan](#) and elsewhere. But because they all fled at once, or at least very quickly, in a way that was unprecedented, and therefore essentially surpassed all of the legal and physical barriers that normally are meant to control immigration refugees, they presented themselves almost at once on the borders of Europe and at the borders of European countries.

That created a second crisis, which I think of as a crisis of sovereignty. People throughout Europe—yes, chiefly people whose orientation maybe was more nationalistic, but not only—had a deep fear of their countries' borders, their sovereignty, being violated. That led to a real reaction, and ultimately led Europe to act collectively to stanch the flow of immigrants in March of 2016 when the European Union reached a [deal](#) with Turkey, which essentially turned Turkey into a kind of giant sink—to use a not-very-nice metaphor—for the refugees, who have remained there since then.

**STEPHANIE SY:** I just want to pause here to remind the viewer that Turkey is not a signatory to the [1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#). So a refugee in Turkey may be treated differently than a refugee in Europe.

**JAMES TRAUB:** That is absolutely true and is one of the reasons why many people thought it was a cynical deal. I think it was a very painful deal to have to make, but it's not easy to see what the alternatives were at the time. Okay. So that solved, in a way, the second thing, the sovereignty crisis.

Now we are in an assimilation crisis. That is to say, Europe is now seeking to integrate—it will be less than a million probably in the end; let's say it's three-quarters of a million—an enormous number of people who are, by and large, Muslim in a place that is, of course, chiefly Christian; who are pious in a place that is chiefly secular; and who, on average, are poorly educated in a place where the economy depends increasingly on high education and high skills. So this is an intrinsic problem of colossal proportions.

If I could just add one thing before we move on, it seems to me there is a fourth crisis, which we are in the middle of, and which will continue, and that is an illegal immigration crisis, which is not distinguished very sharply from the refugee crisis. The question is, how do you view people? At the same time as this was happening, very large numbers of people began coming from different directions, through Libya chiefly because it's ungoverned space and very close to Europe, from North Africa, West Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, from all sorts of places. These are people who do not have a classic claim as a refugee. They just come from a horrible place, their life is terrible, they see no future for themselves, and in Europe they see this glittering possibility.

So even though the sovereignty crisis has been temporarily solved in regard to the refugees from Syria—and that may not grow; we don't know—there will be this ongoing problem of people from Africa trying to get into Europe, and that is going to continue to inflame the political crisis this caused and continue to raise these integration problems that I talked about.

**STEPHANIE SY:** You lay out really well, I think, all of the broad topics that I want to delve into further. Let's just take them apart a little bit, starting with assimilation, which you wrote about in a 2015 article about Sweden. First of all, it was titled, "[The Death of the Most Generous Nation on Earth](#)."

**JAMES TRAUB:** I didn't write the title, although I have to say—

**STEPHANIE SY:** I assumed you did not write the headline.

**JAMES TRAUB:** —it did make people read it, that's for sure.

**STEPHANIE SY:** It's a dramatic headline. But you wrote: "This is a story of the exorbitant and ultimately intolerable cost that Sweden has paid for its unshared idealism." Just to bring the viewer up to speed, this was an article that really broke a lot of the stereotypes we had of Sweden as being this blindly welcoming country where everybody was assimilating, and in fact what you did was highlight some of the difficulties in assimilation.

What did you see there that convinced you that this could really be a major problem for Sweden going forward?

**JAMES TRAUB:** Well, Stephanie, by a coincidence, which for a journalist was a wonderful coincidence, I happened to be in Sweden in November of 2015 at the moment when the interior ministry announced: "We've run out of space. We've literally run out of space."

What was happening was refugees were reaching Sweden, of course, from the south, chiefly from Denmark. And Sweden, being a very wealthy, very generous, and very well-organized country, had a system in place for registering refugees and then sending them all over the country. But there was not a lot of spare housing, so local entrepreneurs would lease an unused stadium, or anything, and say, "Okay, I've got a hundred beds," and they would send them there.

I was there the day they ran out of beds. The [minister](#) went on television. Two things happened: One is they said: "We can't take any more people. We're going to turn them back to Denmark," which was shocking, but they physically couldn't take any more people. Then, several days later, when the government had a chance to think about this, the [prime minister](#) and basically the [minister in charge of refugees](#), who was a member of the [Green Party](#), went on television—they did a televised press conference—to say that Sweden was going to have to change its "open arms" refugee policy, although it wasn't quite clear how that would be. The Green minister broke down in tears. That moment exemplified this irresolvable tension between a profound moral commitment, which really is just deeply admirable, and an intransigent reality, which had just overcome that barrier.

**STEPHANIE SY:** The reality you are talking about now is the literal capacity for Sweden, but that article touched on much more than the literal capacity of a society to absorb these immigrants, either with infrastructure and housing, with education, with public health, with all of those issues, which is an issue and a reality.

The other reality you delve into in your writing in Sweden, and also later in Germany and in Dresden, is that there are ideological differences. Is that what you would call them, "cultural differences," between some of the migrants and refugees who were accepted into Sweden, that some of them had an easier time versus others in integrating? Can you talk about that aspect of your reporting?

**JAMES TRAUB:** This is one of those sensitive topics that people aren't comfortable talking about. Sweden has had in general a very good experience with refugees. Sweden opened itself up to political refugees from all sorts of totalitarian societies, whether they were from Chile; whether they were from Iran; in the 1990s they accepted lots of Bosnians, lots of Kurds. Some of these people were Muslims; some were not. In general, they integrated very well into Swedish society. These were largely middle class, well-educated people. People who are fleeing political repression are very often people who are political activists and therefore well-educated, professional people. Sweden felt justly proud of the fact that "my pediatrician is a Bosnian; my neighbor is a Kurd." And so, "We can do this."

Then they began taking refugees from places which were just more impoverished and people were less educated

—Eritreans and Somalis. Now it becomes more complicated.

While in Sweden I met a number of economists who said to me: "Look, if you compare the labor force penetration rate and the time it takes to get into the labor force of the former immigrants, who were more or less at the level of ordinary Swedes, and these guys, it's radically different. Maybe half of them aren't in the labor force. It takes them seven years. It's harder for them to learn Swedish."

If you talk to people, you will hear, "We now have inner-city slums." Anyone who lives in the United States and sees the inner-city slums of Malmö will say, "That's not a slum. It's just kind of substandard housing." But for them, it's different. There are pockets of high unemployment, relatively high crime, and so on. So already there was this anxiety.

Then you have this new flood of people, and this is far larger numbers than in the past. Sweden has taken annually 70,000 or 80,000 people, which is incredible for a country of 9.5 million.

**STEPHANIE SY:** More per capita than any other European country.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So when the refugee crisis happened, they took 160,000 people.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Wow.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Again, for a country of 9.5 million, that is significantly more than Germany took per capita, Germany being a country almost 10 times bigger.

Then the question was: If we already are beginning to experience these problems, how is this going to be good for us? We know it's the right thing to do, but will it be good for us?

What about the Afghans? There are very large numbers of unaccompanied Afghan minors—almost all boys, virtually 100 percent boys—and these are kids who have a fourth- or fifth-grade education. How are they going to fit in? What is their attitude toward women going to be? Are they going to engage in sexual mistreatment? Do they have any clue about Swedish morals, about how the sexes behave to each other? These are real profound worries which will be working themselves out for well or ill over the coming years in Sweden.

**STEPHANIE SY:** This is something that you found in your reporting recently in Germany, these were also challenges that migrants and local citizens were facing, these potential tensions?

**JAMES TRAUB:** I went to Dresden, which I will be returning to, because obviously Germany is the big story here. The Germans, like the Swedes, have had an even more—how shall I say, "German"—a very coherent system for distributing refugees according to an algorithm that has to do with the population of the place they're going to, its level of wealth, and I don't know what else. Some of the major cities of Western Germany—Munich, Frankfurt, and so on—will receive large numbers of refugees; the major cities in the East, slightly smaller numbers.

I decided to go to Dresden because a place like Munich, where I did spend time, is one of the wealthiest places in the world, and certainly in Europe. They have an extraordinary capacity to not only spend the kind of money, but have the kind of institutions, including voluntary ones, that can really help absorb people. I thought, Better to do the experiment in the East where also people are more conservative, and the sense of German nationalism is stronger, and the sense of having a universal, as opposed to national, obligation is weaker. So, Dresden.

Dresden also happens to be the birthplace of a xenophobic, skinhead-oriented movement called [Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West \(PEGIDA\)](#), which has now spread elsewhere in Europe, an explicitly anti-refugee movement. So I thought, Good place to see how this assimilation thing works, plus the political consequences.

My sense in going to Dresden was, first, it's very hard to easily characterize the average level of readiness to integrate of this vast population of people, because I met remarkable people, who the moment they landed thought, How am I going to do work? How am I going to change myself? How am I going to fit into this world? But you meet a lot of people who have been deeply scarred by the experience of getting there. These are not people who just picked up and got on a bus and came to Germany. As we all know, this was an epic and terrifying journey, and people were really scarred by it.

In addition to that, a lot of them are not well-educated. I would guess that among the Syrians I met, the average level of education was about ninth grade or so. In Germany, everybody graduates from high school, and those who don't go on to university have had a very extensive vocational education. Again, all Muslim, often very conservative, the wives tend not to work, so, very problematic.

I met a fair number of Afghan youth who were being cared for admirably with a lot of attention, but these were kids, again, who had about a fourth- or fifth-grade education. Germany is making a big effort to integrate them in terms of education, job training, and so forth. But it's going to be very hard. And my sense is, when I meet a family of, let's say, parents and teenagers, I think the parents probably are a lost cause. They are going to be a charge to the state; Germany has to accept that.

The big question will be: What about the teenagers? Which way are they going to go? Are they going to become a new alienated underclass such as the French and the Belgians have to deal with? Will they integrate? What will be the balance between them? We don't know the answers, but of course the right in Germany feels like: "We know the answer. This is going to be bad for us."

**STEPHANIE SY:** I want to delve a little bit into the controversial part that you noted was controversial, which is the ideological differences, and particularly with women's rights. There are many migrants who come from cultures where women's rights may not exist at all. Is it too optimistic to believe that once they find themselves in Munich or in Malmö that they will learn to fit into society? This is a philosophical question. Like you said, there are those who will come and will embrace the ideals of a pluralistic, progressive society in which women have the choice to work, and there are those who won't. Why does it matter that there are those who won't?

**JAMES TRAUB:** Let me take those in reverse order, then.

Why it matters, obviously, is that that is a profound issue. It matters because a society is not just a collection of people, it's a collection of values, a collection of sets of behavior. For it to be a coherent society there has to be a fundamental agreement on what it is to be a German, an American, whatever it is. The historical experience is that immigrants seek to assimilate in regard to those values. They may want to keep their folkways, but they seek to become part of those societies. Obviously that differs enormously from country to country, the United States being at the very far end of "everybody becomes American."

Here, though, we encounter the real question of religion because if integration means I am going to surrender my most deeply held values, then no, then integration means annihilating who I am. The foremost people who are coming here now as refugees, who are not highly educated, prosperous people who tend to have already been secularized, tend to be already more pious.

Then there is this new phenomenon that the next generation, the younger generation, often becomes more conservative, not less so. The way they rebel against their parents is by becoming highly theological, by adopting [Salafism](#), which is a very fundamentalist form of Islam. Whereas the pattern in the past has been each generation becomes more like the nation you've assimilated into than the previous one, now you have young people in Holland, France, Belgium, and elsewhere who are perfectly French-speaking, Dutch-speaking and so on, but in their values actually turn back to a form of conservative Islam that their parents themselves don't practice. That is a real source



of worry.

If you look at polls of the Islamic community in Europe, which includes people of whatever generation, their views on questions of law, value, and religion are radically different from those of the surrounding people. For example, you ask people, "Is homosexuality acceptable?" The difference between the numbers you would get from non-immigrant Europeans and Islamic immigrant Europeans is radical. The fraction of people who profess Islam in England who say homosexuality is acceptable is zero. That is worrisome.

**STEPHANIE SY:** That reminds me of a conversation that I had with [Newt Gingrich](#) in the lead-up to the [2016 election](#), in which he said pre-1969 immigrants to the United States—which, by the way, would include my parents—they are okay because they were educated, because they assimilated.

My point being, James, does highlighting these differences and these problems with ideological assimilation and integration lead to a place of [travel bans](#) and keeping people from certain countries that are more fundamentalist—Somalia versus Iran? Does that lead to that kind of public policy?

**JAMES TRAUB:** First of all, I want to say that Newt Gingrich is wrong, because the United States has had an overwhelmingly positive experience with immigration post-1965, probably, which is the cutoff point because that is when we [changed our immigration laws](#). The United States hasn't had these problems. The United States is an enormous beneficiary of immigration. So as Americans it's not that easy to understand what's going on in Europe, where you have both the benefits and real problems that we don't have.

Then you have to ask: If you are worried that recognizing painful truths will make it impossible to make hard decisions because it will so prejudice people, then you have a problem in democracy. It's a little bit like talking about global warming, which is to say—this is from a different point of view—"If we tell the truth about global warming, it's going to make people really upset because it's hard and they don't want to do it, and so they will turn against it," which indeed seems to be what has happened. If that is true, then we have a real problem with democracy in itself.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Which I think we do. And I should mention that James is actually working on a book right now about, shall I describe it as "the fall of liberalism"?

**JAMES TRAUB:** The rise and fall of liberalism.

Clip of the Month: Refugees and Political Correctness in Sweden ...



**STEPHANIE SY:** This is the conversation that we have been having a lot here on this stage, which is the polarization

of issues that is not just a result of the far right but also the far left.

You describe this as the "opinion corridor," which I understand is actually a Swedish word. Can you explain to the viewer what the opinion corridor is?

**JAMES TRAUB:** It's a word for political correctness, [Donald Trump](#)'s favorite term. I guess I would say just because Donald Trump uses it doesn't mean it's completely specious.

In Sweden, far more than in the United States, there is a deep sense of "One does not talk about unpleasant things because they might lead you to do unpleasant things," exactly as the premise of your question was. I learned this expression from someone who is a relatively rare centrist in the Swedish debate, who says: "We have an obligation to take all these people. I am proud as a Swede that we took all these people. But we have to be honest about the enormous difficulty that will come in integrating these people, and we can't just say, 'Isn't it great that Sweden is a cosmopolitan society? Isn't it great that Sweden is an open society and that we honor our moral commitments?' No. If that's all we say, we are not going to prepare ourselves for this difficulty."

For example, she said: "So long as Sweden offers social benefits to newcomers much greater than those of the surrounding country, it will be a magnet. We want to be welcoming, but we don't want to be a magnet. Therefore, we have to find a way of adjusting the benefits we offer so that everybody doesn't say, 'Let's go to Sweden.' People should be distributed among different European countries."

She said to me, "These questions are things nobody wants to talk about." She then told me: "We have this word in Swedish, *åsiktskorridor*," which she said translates as "opinion corridor," which is that narrow place that it is okay to go down, and if you step outside of it then you are being un-Swedish, you're being un-generous, un-idealistic.

**STEPHANIE SY:** You're being un-politically correct.

**JAMES TRAUB:** You are being politically incorrect.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Is it also counterproductive when it comes to policy, to not—I guess you alluded to this—be acknowledging some of the data on jobs, like your professor in Sweden—

**JAMES TRAUB:** Of course you have to.

**STEPHANIE SY:**—who wouldn't give you his name because he was so worried about sounding politically incorrect?

**JAMES TRAUB:** No. He sounds politically incorrect for a living. He was worried about people knocking on his door and telling him that he was a monster.

How can we have an honest policy discussion? Let's think about an analogy in this country. For a long time there were a lot of things about welfare that it was considered unacceptable to say, and [Bill Clinton](#), to his great credit, said a lot of them. He said we have to change the welfare system because there is such a thing as welfare dependency, and the problems of the underclass are not wholly caused by racism, structural and otherwise, but also caused by behavior that is being reinforced by our welfare system.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Which to a lot of Democrats was sacrilegious to say.

**JAMES TRAUB:** It was anathema. It was racist. That's why it's really hard to say that stuff, but it is true. The more the Democrats couldn't say that, the more they backed themselves into a corner which was all too easy for Republicans to exploit because they couldn't bring themselves to say things that a lot of people believed to be so. Clinton kind of lanced that boil by speaking that painful truth. We need to separate the need to recognize honestly hard problems from the wish for simplistic and cruel answers.

It is simply not the case that being honest about hard things causes Donald Trump. If anything, I would say refusing to talk about those hard things leaves the field open to a populist demagogue like Donald Trump.

### James Traub: Macron's Strategy to Fight Extremism



**STEPHANIE SY:** You bring up Trump, and there are politicians—not only Trump but others; you mentioned PEGIDA in Germany, and, of course, there have been more successful movements in Hungary and Poland and, for example, in France, obviously where [Le Pen](#) was defeated soundly in the second round of the [election](#)—who are playing off fear and anger of the other without regard to fact and willing supporters are okay with accepting alternate realities. How do thinking people who are more moderate, who are willing to accept hard truths, respond effectively to these movements? Have you seen an example of that in a politician?

**JAMES TRAUB:** The French election, which brought [Emmanuel Macron](#) to power, was really interesting. Of course, I was very happy, and I am very hopeful about France. What was interesting and surprising was the following thing: A month before the French election there had been an [election in Holland](#) carried out on very similar grounds, which is to say a large and growing part of the Dutch population was deeply anxious about and hostile to the immigrants in their midst. In the case of Holland, you have Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, cities that are maybe 40 percent, even 50 percent, immigrant. This is a big deal.

That election also pitted a nationalist named [Geert Wilders](#) against a right-centrist named [Mark Rutte](#). Rutte quite cynically—or let us leave aside what his motives were—adopted a good deal of the nationalist language, and he famously said on television, "If people don't want to adopt Dutch values, they should go home." He was trying to inoculate himself from the xenophobic vote, and he succeeded; he won.

Now, France: The politically prudent thing for Macron to do might have been the same thing, and indeed the then-[Socialist](#) Prime Minister [Manuel Valls](#) did just that, and he said [Merkel](#) made a terrible mistake in taking all those refugees. Macron never said that. He said it was an act of "tremendous nobility" on the part of Merkel that she did that, and "We should all say 'This is what it means to be European.'" So he didn't run against the refugees. He didn't promise in the case of terrorism, for example, that he would do superhuman things. He didn't say that he would keep a state of emergency going. He said, "These are hard problems that we have to find difficult solutions to." He represented the liberal point of view about as honestly as you can. And he won; he won resoundingly. He won two-to-one, 66 to 33 percent.

That is very hopeful. That implies that maybe there is a way that you can speak honestly. And then it makes you ask, "Okay, well, why did it work for Macron and not [Hillary Clinton](#)?" Macron was a genuinely new person, and at the moment when anybody who feels like they are part of the system is hugely suspect because people are so hostile



and angry and lost and alienated, somebody like Macron, who says "The whole system has been wrong—left, right; they're part of the same game—and I come from outside of that," he was able to thread that needle.

**STEPHANIE SY:** He may have also won because there might have been an anti-Trump backlash in France.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Yes. I think some piece of it, not a lot, but certainly the hardcore Le Pen supporters think Donald Trump is great. I know that. In fact, the person who was my French teacher in Paris, one of the first things he ever said to me was, "Je suis un [déplorable](#)—I am a deplorable." He was a Le Penist.

**STEPHANIE SY:** He wears it as a badge of honor.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Absolutely. He thinks Donald Trump is great. So, maybe in effect, the Trump backlash had a small effect.

However, Let's say there are two huge problems here: the one we've talked about, the problem of the other; and then the economic problem. They are connected because people blame their economic misfortune on the other. The thing that will be the experiment that a person like Macron is going to carry out is the following: I don't think he can do very much about the problem of the other. He might be able to do something about the really stagnant French economy. If that is so, we will see the extent to which we can solve the cultural issue by virtue of unsticking the economic issue.

One of my fears is that a big renewed flow of refugees or illegal immigrants will rekindle what is now, thank god, a kind of guttering candle because the—that metaphor is probably too gentle, but let's say something that was really hot—heat has clearly died down. There haven't been new flows of immigrants and enormous numbers of refugees in recent times, but there may very well be again. How are we going to deal with that problem?

**STEPHANIE SY:** Even if there isn't that problem—and I get back to this issue of the narrative—for example, terrorist attacks that continue in [the United Kingdom](#), that [continue in France](#), that [happened in Belgium](#)—the United Kingdom didn't take a ton of the migrants in that big wave in 2015.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Hardly any.

**STEPHANIE SY:** France didn't take a big wave.

**JAMES TRAUB:** No.

**STEPHANIE SY:** What we are really talking about here is third- or second-generation immigrants, albeit from Muslim-majority countries, that have executed these attacks. Then you have someone like President Trump, who turns that into an immigration issue. How do the terrorist attacks fit into the politics and the geopolitics of this?

**JAMES TRAUB:** Obviously a lot. There is a tendency to blur the word "immigrant" with the word "Islam," and a tendency to blur the word "Islam" with the word "terrorism." In any given country there is some mix between Islamic and non-Islamic immigrants. For example, in Holland, I don't know, it's about half and half. They have many from the Dutch Antilles and other places. But people talk about it as if there is not the problem of the assimilation of the outsider, but the problem of Islam is implicated with everybody.

Of course, the more you have these terrorist incidents the easier it is for people to say "Islam is terrorism," or even to say more fairly: "Terrorism isn't coming from other people, it's only coming from Muslims, and so our problem is with Muslims. So we don't want to have any of these people here."

**STEPHANIE SY:** Which is patently untrue, actually. There are examples of far-right extremism and far-right mass murder in this country and in other countries.

**JAMES TRAUB:** It's true, but we're not going to win that argument.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Because the other is the easier—

**JAMES TRAUB:** That is not going to be a useful way to go, to say, "You're right, but what about the far-right lunatics or what about the far-left lunatics, or whatever?" I think it is still correct to say that there is a real sense that life has become more insecure, and that sense that life has become more insecure is because of the rise of these terrorist incidents in Europe. So that can't be argued away.

But neither can it be very easily resolved. When the incident in Manchester, the several incidents that happened in England in late May and early June, occurred, [Theresa May](#), the British prime minister, held a press conference or gave a speech where she said, "Enough is enough." Okay, but what? What are you going to do? She said, "We have to stop tolerating extremism." Okay. What does that mean? England has in the past deported extremist imams.

My point is that it is very hard to find a good answer to this. Unless and until, however, states can find some kind of answer to this, the impulse that says "The problem is Muslims; let's get rid of them"—or at the very least, "Let's stop taking any more of them," is going to happen.

One can imagine in France, for example, whether or not Marine Le Pen, who lost to Macron, is going to remain the focal point for those many people who feel that way, somebody will. In the case of Germany where Angela Merkel is in a much stronger position, nevertheless you have the rise of this [Alternative für Deutschland \(AFD\) party](#), which originally was a kind of anti-European party but then discovered that the real thing that would propel them to power was refugees and immigrants. They are a growing force. They are not going to have a prime minister in Germany for a very long time, thank god. The Germans have a lot of inoculation against extremism and racism. But they are a growing force. They are an increasingly mainstream force.

When I was in Dresden I met with a member of the ruling party, the [Christian Democratic party](#), Angela Merkel's party, who said to me: "You know, I'm a member of her party, but my views are much closer to those of AFD than of the Christian Democrats, but AFD is too extremist, their rhetoric is too hot. I've asked them to tone it down." He said, "My constituents are more comfortable with the AFD."

If that very sharp line between this mainstream party and this extremist party is seen as being basically blurry, or if Merkel is seen as having taken that party too far to the left—and that's what I think a lot of conservative Christian Democrats in Germany would say, "She's more like a [Social Democrat](#) now than a Christian Democrat"—then German politics could be more turbulent than we think.

## James Traub: European Identity, Liberalism, & Globalization



**STEPHANIE SY:** Merkel is a good person to bring up, I think, in a conversation about humanitarian responses to what happened with migration starting in 2015 because she was really considered the moral leader of Europe with initially, at least, an open arms policy, which she later moderated. I go back to the moral question and also the issue of identity, which you bring up, and who gets to take claim for what it means to be European.

European identity or American identity means one thing to a daughter of immigrants. To me it means opportunity, individual rights, inalienable rights, things like that. Yet, the paradox is these far-right groups are claiming national identity as their own, and their national identity tends to be one that I think is anti-universal human rights.

How do you square that in that battle, and is that ultimately—this is the fraught phrase—a "clash of cultures" as well, a clash of civilizations even?

**JAMES TRAUB:** "What is good nationalism?" is a very fraught question in Europe, not in the United States. In the United States it has become a fraught question because of Trump and white nationalism. But until then, patriotism in the way that you've just described it was a consensual thing, even if those of us on the left are a little queasy about it.

Because nationalism led Europe into apocalypse in [World War II](#), and arguably really in both [wars](#), nationalism is a bad thing. The advent of the European Union included an effort to create a new sense of community; European-ness. As an attempt to create an affirmative identity it hasn't really succeeded. Yes, we're all European, and yes, we all value European civilization, and we have many things in common. But it's too thin an identity, and the effort to transfer those identities from your country to this abstract thing called "Europe" with its institutions that you don't like very much in the European Union hasn't worked. So there is a kind of vacuum of national identity.

The right has filled that with an explicitly anti-European and, as you say, anti-universal identity. To be German, from the point of view of the AFD, means to be against Europe. It means to "return our country from the Europeans and the universalization which Merkel has engaged in." So to say, as Merkel does, "We're going to do this because we have a moral obligation according to international law, according to moral principles, according to European law," is a way of saying "This is not about German-ness" or rather saying German-ness has to do with these universal principles. Then there are people who say, "No. This is an ancient culture. We dress in a certain way. We eat in a certain way. We talk in a certain way. That's who we are."

In Holland you heard this, and it was very interesting because unlike Germany, Sweden, or Poland, it's not very easy to say what is Dutch national identity. So when you'd say to people—they were complaining that "we're losing our

sense of national identity"—

**STEPHANIE SY:** What does that mean?

**JAMES TRAUB:** What is the thing that you are afraid of losing? People bring up these odd things.

There is a big controversy in Holland over this Christmas figure called "[Black Pete](#)." Black Pete is a racist figure. He's like a [pickaninny](#). He's Santa Claus's little helper. There has been, understandably, a movement against that by Dutch people who are themselves black, but they're Dutch, and they don't want to think Holland's representation is this pickaninny-like figure. Just like people in this country who say, "They're taking Christmas away from us because we have to say 'happy holidays.'" Come on. That has happened also in Holland, that Black Pete has become this rallying point.

**STEPHANIE SY:** It's like identity politics played out on a world stage.

Is all of this a backlash to globalization?

**JAMES TRAUB:** Globalization would be another way of talking about this question of a universal identity, about a non-national, non-communal identity. For people who are the beneficiaries of globalization, who can pick up at a moment's notice and fly from here to there and actually have a familiar life there—

**STEPHANIE SY:** A cosmopolitan.

**JAMES TRAUB:** My son lives in India. He was living in Calcutta, and now he lives in Delhi. He loves them because they are radically different, but in each one of those places he can find people like him. That's what globalization means for its winners.

For other people it is a word for a thing that is assaulting them. It is bringing in people who don't speak the same language that they do. It is transforming a world that they love and that they cherish and that they don't want to see go away. Then it becomes a word for them for elites, for condescension to everything I am.

To wish it away, as people like Donald Trump do, obviously is the demagogic response. But the problem is real. How you say to people who quite rightly think—they're not wrong; they are right in thinking that in many ways they are the losers of globalization—how you talk about that is one of the profound problems of liberal politics for this generation because if the answer is protectionism, that is suicide. It is not going to work better now than it did a century ago. If liberals can't find some means of speaking to not just the economic but also the cultural sense of loss that people have who have gotten the short end of the stick, well, they're going to keep losing.

**STEPHANIE SY:** I'll let this be your final thought. Again, you are writing a book about the fall of liberalism and all of the great things that those of us who have enjoyed liberalism have enjoyed; not living in a totalitarian society; living in a place where we have those inalienable rights. Is the ultimate outcome of the liberals not getting it and thereby empowering in some ways the right, the fall of these values that I assume you and I both hold and cherish dear?

**JAMES TRAUB:** As I say, we hope that Emmanuel Macron is a straw in the wind.

Here's the hope: The hope is that by applying a certain kind of liberal medicine, which is to say economic reform, we can begin to lower that fever. For example, one hopes that it is true that—let's say I believe that it is true—that extreme inequality produced by the nature of capitalism, but also by a very ideological view that it is only the marketplace that matters, has had incredibly destructive effects culturally as well as economically, and that we have to address that. I would like to think that that classically liberal solution would help save these values that we believe in.

But these questions of globalization, of the other, of loss of identity, I don't think they're all going to be solved by economics. I don't have very good answers to the question of how you speak to people's profound sense of loss. A politics that only thinks in terms of economics and thinks: "Values? They're just a dependent variable of economics, and people will stop having bad values when they are doing better," I think that's naïve.

**STEPHANIE SY:** What I like about the way you write is that it's not morally relativist. You acknowledge that you're a liberal, and you acknowledge that there are values that you stand for—for example, gay rights, women's rights—that another group of people may not stand for. How much do you worry that those values are under attack by the other? Do you find yourself falling into that mental trap of "The other is threatening my"—

**JAMES TRAUB:** If now by the "other" you mean the world of Islam—

**STEPHANIE SY:** I mean radical Islam and fundamental Islam.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So now we're not talking any more about how the xenophobic—

**STEPHANIE SY:** But also far-right values. I would also say far-right values may also threaten your values.

**JAMES TRAUB:** My answer to that question is: I think that most things that have to do with social libertarianism in the United States are heading in one direction, and I think that the recoil against it is because of that recognition. But I don't think anything is going to change the underlying dynamic that leads to greater tolerance for previously marginalized people, whether it's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people or women's rights or the disabled, that's where America is going.

It is a much bigger problem in Europe where you have by far more secular societies than our own into which large numbers of conservative religious people are coming. They have that problem which we fortunately do not have, and that is going to be an ongoing problem.

**STEPHANIE SY:** James Traub, such an important perspective to have. Thank you so much.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

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