

**Outline of Inaugural Lecture of prof. Tariq Ramadan,
Erasmus University Rotterdam,
Chair Citizenship and Identity
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**The final text of the lecture can be watched/heard at
www.eur.nl/fsw/ramadan**

Citizenship and Identity: Old Concepts and New Challenges

For more than two centuries the Western societies have been dealing with the ongoing process through which they were securing the rights of the individuals while setting clearly their duties towards the structured community they were belonging to. It is through that historical development that our societies have become more and more democratic by clarifying the common legal framework and setting the central principle of “rule of law”. It has been then possible to speak about *freedom*, *equality*, and *citizenship* and to deal with ideologies and political views embodied in social organisations or political parties. This was the natural way to deal with social and political pluralism. After the World War II, the arrival of new immigrants – sometimes coming from the previous colonised countries – added a new dimension to the old concept of pluralism : we had thus to deal with “other” cultures and religions, and mainly with “Muslims”. For the last forty years, the Western societies have been dealing with a new complex challenge in the form of a new kind of cultural and religious diversity. Not only the situation is new and difficult but all the figures and the economic prospects are informing us that immigration is not going to stop: whatever strong might be our cultural resistance (and sometimes our rejection of the “foreigners”), our economic needs will be stronger as our societies and enterprises need more and more workers and our “indigenous populations” become more and more older. This conflicting picture creates tension, doubts and fears.

Even with a positive take on the facts, one shall ask: how can we deal with this new historical situation? In other words, how to adapt an old effective framework regulating political pluralism to a society facing cultural and religious diversity and cultural heterogeneity? Are the old references and concepts (such as secularism, rule of law, citizenship, etc.) still meaningful or efficient? Do we have to change our vision and propose to take into account the rights of the new comers, as individuals or as communities. It is clearly not enough to state bluntly “the new comers must simply adapt” as we hear in some political discourses and among the majority of the French sociologists (Kepel, Tribala, Taguieff, etc.). We can’t accept a pure culturalist positioning saying that we must be ready to change the laws to accommodate the immigrants for democracy is about freedom and respecting cultural and religious minorities. We also need to go further than to assert, with no clear vision, that we need “to compromise on both sides”. Our responsibility in such a debate is to clarify the terms of the debate, to know from where we start and to circumscribe the different challenges and fields at stake.

We must begin by stating that the Western democratic societies are based on a common legal framework (sometimes constitutions) that must be accepted and respected by their members (as long as they are not imposing an unjust behaviour like the apartheid legalisation in the old South African regime for instance : here consciousness objection should be understood as “lawful”). Thus citizens must be law abiding and get equal rights and equal duties before the law. We must add here a third dimension related to the principles of secularism: the State should be neutral as to the religious affairs and does not intervene in theological matters. In our view, a clear debate must start with a clear picture based on these three principles: rule of law, citizenship and secularism. These are the starting points of reference but the passionate debates over the last decade have shown that they would not be sufficient to solve the new challenges we mentioned earlier. People are driven by negative perceptions, mistrust and fears “on both sides” so to say: on the one hand we hear “they will never be integrated” (which is not a new statement when it comes to immigrants); on the other “we will never be accepted”. All are experiencing a kind of “identity crisis”: the question “What is Dutchness, Britishness or Frenchness?” echoes the interrogative doubt: “Would it be possible for us to remain Muslims in the West?” In such a climate it would be wrong, and even dangerous, to reduce the debate to a “pure legal problem” for its scope is clearly wider. Nevertheless, it would be as dangerous to accept, voluntarily or not, to read the texts of the law through the distorting prism of the common (negative) perception: the same text could be read in an inclusive way when we trust our fellow citizens or, on the contrary, in a very exclusive way in times of mistrust: during the latter, to ask the same rights might be wrongly perceived as claims to get specific treatments. Another mistake would be to “culturalise” “religionise” or “islamise” all the social or socio-economic problems we are facing: lacking good and effective social policies, politicians end up instrumentalising cultures and religions for the sake of bad politics. Laws are essential, as we have mentioned, but the challenges are more complex and require taking into account other dimensions.

As we referred to perceptions constantly interfering into the current debate, we must add a central and essential psychological factor. Whatever is our take on the common law and equal citizenship, we will not succeed if we are unable to shape and feed a strong and shared “sense of belonging” among the citizens. We are witnessing the creation of closed areas and social ghettos where people (rich or poor, coming from the same cultural background and/or economic status) are isolating themselves. Some white indigenous French, British or Dutch citizens are migrating from within the cities to the outskirts because they no longer feel at home in some areas. On the other hand, the new European citizens, asked to “integrate” on almost a daily basis, feel that they still have a long way to go before being accepted and thus feeling at home. Negative perceptions, fears, mistrust are undermining the common sense of belonging and create virtual or real walls between people. It is urgent to rebuild bridges and to promote mutual knowledge and a common awareness as to the immigrants’ contribution to the Western societies not only through material and economic inputs but also by assessing the cultural and religious richness they add to the societies. It is important to push citizens from different background to get out of their respective ghettos and to become more proactive. *Mutual knowledge, general awareness of respective contributions* and *proactivity* are the prerequisites to reach *mutual trust* and to feed a sincere feeling of *loyalty* towards the country: all these dimensions, in turn, nurture the *sense of belonging* our societies need.

Hence, it will not be enough to repeat obsessively that we want to promote common citizenship and that we respect people’s identities. These theoretical discourses, full of good and humanist intentions, will be neither heard nor trusted by the citizens if they are not part of a prospective vision and concretely translated into effective multidimensional policies. We

need a holistic approach based on a vision, overall objectives and practical steps to follow. It is crucial to understand, upstream from the problems we are facing on the ground, that solutions will be reached through a two way process. Our democratic societies, without changing their laws, must reconsider their traditional and inherited narrative to make it more inclusive. Inclusiveness is the key when it comes to teach the official History of a country. The western populations have changed tremendously and it becomes important to think about, and shape, a more comprehensive and consistent common *History of memories*. We must be willing and able to integrate in our official curricula a self critical discourse as to what have been done to previous colonised people who now have become our fellow citizens : to speak about the two sides of our past, the light one as well as the dark one. A positive discourse on the immigrants' contributions to our societies and a better knowledge of the cultural and religious diversity should go along all the social policies promoting civil engagement and social cohesion.

Our requirements towards the new citizens or the residents with diverse cultural backgrounds must be clear with no compromise. They have to know, and abide by, the laws, respect the institutions and accept the cultural Western environment (they may be selective for their own sake and behaviour but they have to be inclusive as well and make the national culture theirs). It is important that they refuse to feed a kind of "victim mentality" and start addressing, not as *potential-suspect-on-the-defensive*, but as fellow proactive citizens some of the legitimate concerns and fears people might have around them : on violence, women, cultural heritage, etc. This should be the intellectual and social attitudes the new citizens have to promote by being in the mainstream debates regarding common values, national identity and domestic issues: they must refuse to create a new kind of citizenship which is a psychological alienated "minority citizenship". It does not exist in our legislations but it may be created in some minds (this is one of the reasons why the legal approach is necessary without being sufficient and exclusive).

This overall vision of a constant two way process within our societies should rely on effective concrete policies. We need courageous politicians (refusing to instrumentalise people's fears and play the easy game of polarisation) and committed citizens engaged within the civil society: it means exploiting the potential richness and contribution of each individual or cultural and religious community through new and creative social projects. Dialogue is not enough; people need to do things together. This is why the local level, and the local political authorities and institutions are so instrumental and important for now and for the future : this is where the people can know each other, reach mutual trust, be proactive and get a strong sense of belonging. Local initiatives, far from the political national rhetoric, are essential to change the climate and mentalities: a national movement of local initiatives is of course necessary and it must be accompanied by the government which should listen more to the positive messages coming from the people building at the grassroots than to the distorting images and (naturally bad) news carried by the media. By saying that one should realise that the key of success in that field is also to think of a "media strategy" : to get journalists involved with a better understanding, an more accurate knowledge of the stakes and a civic willingness to speak and write more about "what's work".

Every institution has a role to play and among them our universities. Professors, lecturers and students cannot think *far from* the society and think *for* it and even judge its failures. The role of the professors and the teachers is to clarify the terms of the debates, to refuse to be driven by passions and fears and thus to come with a critical and positive contributions within the civil society. When dealing with concepts such as "citizenship" or "identity" we witness on a

daily basis the degree of confusion and tension and our universities should be the space where deep, free and critical debates are still possible. The unique condition would be not to think on behalf of the people or by proxy but with our fellow citizens, within the civil arena, and to be proactive. It means to be able to listen, to learn from practical experiences and to talk *with* the average citizens and not only *to* them. This is why I think that this Chair at Erasmus University connected with the local involvement of the municipality is a pilot project: it means respecting the competences of each other while working together for a better future

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