Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project

Hans KUNDNANI
London, Hurst, 2023, 246 Pages, ISBN: 9781787389328 (Paperback)

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Taking Europe as a post-national and inclusive entity is not something new. It has often been taken for granted. Hans Kundnani's book challenges this assumption by tracing the cultural, racial, and imperial dimensions underpinning the European Union (EU). The book critically explores European identity and the EU through Kundnani's personal experiences. Raised in Britain by an Indian father and a Dutch mother, Kundnani developed multi-layered attachments to Britain, a fellow EU member state, the Netherlands, and a country once colonized, India. This multi-layered attachment shaped his distance from the European ideal. While initially perceiving the EU as a force for good, Kundnani's work experience at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and his observations of transformations following the 2010 Eurozone crisis led him toward a more critical stance. Kundnani briefly outlines the history of the European idea, from Ancient Greece to World War II, providing a historical basis for his argument. He then focuses his analysis on the "decade of crises," beginning with the Euro crisis in 2010 and ending with the war in Ukraine in 2022, as he argues this period reveals the EU's shift from a universal-liberal "model" to a defensive, culture-centric "civilization" vision. The book represents a critical perspective on the foundations of Europe and its identity.

Kundnani challenges the conventional portrait of the EU as a post-national peace project or an antidote to nationalism. Instead, he proposes that it maintains a form of regional nationalism. He argues that European identity relies on universal civic principles and cultural and ethnic notions of a superior European civilization. To conceptualize this cultural structure, he introduces the term "eurowhiteness" (p. 4, pp. 39-41), based on József Böröcz's ideas of the internal stratification of whiteness and the distinction between "dirty whiteness" (pp. 117-118).[1] Kundnani uses these concepts to examine Central and Eastern European countries'

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[1] The author uses these terms to examine the historical evolution of European identity and the formation of the post-World War II European project. According to Kundnani, this term refers to an ethnic/cultural element of European regionalism, particularly the post-World War II version centred on the EU. Dirty Whiteness is a concept proposed by

identity struggles during their integration processes. He interprets being an EU member as an aspiration to move from dirty whiteness to eurowhiteness.

Building on the literature on nationalism, the book distinguishes between civic regionalism (attachment to liberal principles) and ethnic/cultural regionalism (exclusive identity based on shared culture and ethnicity). Kundnani proposes that Europeans tend to perceive European identity as an inclusive umbrella. However, while it may integrate national European identities, it excludes non-Europeans or those who do not self-identify as European, thereby generating an external exclusivity (pp. 20-23). These tensions reveal the dual dynamics within European identity—internal inclusivity and external exclusion. According to Kundnani, European identity has long defined itself through exclusion, consistently drawing boundaries around who counts as "non-European." In the medieval period, Jews were cast as the internal other, while Muslims were framed as the external threat. With colonial expansion, European identity increasingly overlapped with whiteness, pushing non-white populations further to the margins. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was portrayed in civilizational terms as an "Asiatic" outsider. In recent times, EU enlargement debates have reflected cultural and religious exclusions, as seen in the rejection of Turkey's membership bid. The refugee crisis of 2015 made these dynamics even more visible. While Ukrainian refugees were welcomed mainly, those from Africa and the Middle East faced harsh deterrence, reinforcing the idea of Europe as a "white fortress." Questions about where Europe's boundaries lie and who is considered truly European form a central thread of Kundnani's analysis. The notion of the EU as a cosmopolitan project is also discussed (pp. 15-17). Kundnani bases his argument on how the EU's expansion and approach to its southern borders have undermined the cosmopolitan ideal, on works by Habermas written long ago. This reliance weakens the foundations of his argument.

Kundnani traces the development of European identity from its early fusion with Christianity in the 14th and 15th centuries, through the Enlightenment, to the emergence of racialized notions of European universalism (pp. 43-47). He argues that although postwar Europe sought to distance itself from Nazism, it largely overlooked its colonial past. While Holocaust remembrance became central, Europe's imperial histories were pushed aside, a tendency Kundnani describes as "imperial amnesia" (pp. 94-95). Early European integration also allowed former colonial powers like France and Belgium to maintain their overseas holdings, embedding colonial legacies into the European project. For Kundnani, the invisibility of colonialism remains a core issue.[2] Though celebrated, the EU's post-Cold War expansion to the east reinforced perceptions of Europe as an exclusive cultural and religious space. The rejection of Morocco's membership and the resistance to Türkiye's accession revealed that Europe's boundaries were shaped more by cultural and ethnic lines than by geography (pp.

József Böröcz, from which the book is titled. It refers to less perfect, diasporic or eastern variations of whiteness. This concretizes the demand to be accepted as properly white in response to the denigration of Eurowhiteness. For more: Böröcz, J. 2021. "Eurowhite" Conceit, "Dirty White" Ressentiment: "Race" in Europe. Sociol Forum 36: 1116-1134.

2   For a more limited but systematic examination of Europe's colonial and imperial past, see: Ejdus, F. 2022. Anxiety, Dissonance and Imperial Amnesia of the European Union. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 19, 73: 45-60.

85, 109, 111-112). Old associations between Christianity and European identity lingered, while the post-9/11 rise of Islamophobia further complicated Turkey's candidacy, exposing an implicit divide between "white" and "non-white" states. Despite its rhetoric of "de-bordering," the EU has, in practice, strengthened its external frontiers, deepening the link between Europe and whiteness (pp. 112-113).

The crises, starting with the 2010 Eurozone crisis, pushed the EU to take a more defensive stance, presenting itself more and more as the guardian of a distinct European way of life. Based on this, Kundnani argues, an ethnic and cultural European identity, what he calls eurowhiteness, became stronger (pp. 125-126). Defensive civilizational language impacted migration policies, especially towards the EU's southern neighbors. Along with the spread of neoliberalism and the decline of democratic participation, the European project shifted from a civic idea to a politics of culture and ethnicity (pp. 145-147). Starting with the Eurozone crisis in 2010—which exposed deep divisions between creditor and debtor states and shook the EU's image as a universal project—European identity began shifting toward a more defensive and civilizational posture, with whiteness increasingly at its core. The refugee arrivals in 2015 intensified this shift, framing east–west tensions in cultural terms and fueling rhetoric about protecting a distinct "European way of life." Brexit in 2016 echoed these concerns, with even some ethnic minority Britons describing the EU as a "white fortress" that favored European over Commonwealth migration. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine further cemented this turn, as the conflict was widely portrayed as an attack on "blue-eyed, blond-haired" (pp. 149-150) Europeans and spurred renewed calls to defend "European civilization" itself. However, some criticisms need to be mentioned. While the point that the EU carries hidden assumptions of whiteness and imperialism is essential, the claim that it has developed a form of "European nationalism" is more debatable. Founding figures like Jean Monnet saw integration as not building a new macro-nationalism but an alternative to nation-state nationalism. Also, the EU's attempts to create a common identity, like introducing a flag and an anthem, only began in the 1970s, and the Maastricht Treaty later reinforced the priority of national identities. Also, it uses little empirical evidence, like Eurobarometer data, and gives limited attention to how EU institutions work. The connection between "Eurowhiteness" and broader forces like neoliberalism or class is also not drawn (pp. 51, 155-156). Another point is that the motivations of non-white voters in Brexit seem more complicated than the book suggests, with things like immigrants wanting to be treated differently from EU citizens playing a role.

In conclusion, the book offers a critical and timely intervention into debates on European identity and the European Union, especially for post-colonial literature. Kundnani demonstrates that enduring cultural, racial, and imperial legacies lie behind the EU's inclusiveness and peaceful integration narrative. His argument that the ethnic and cultural dimensions of European identity, captured by the idea of eurowhiteness, have become more visible during periods of crisis is persuasive. By tracing the historical development of European identity, the imperial past, and the EU's political evolution, the book offers a more critical reading of the European project. That said, some significant limitations should be noted. Kundnani does not claim to use a distinct quantitative/experimental method in his book. He describes

it as "a short book – a long essay" and explains that he did not aim to write a "historical narrative." In this context, Kundnani constructs his argument through an intellectual historical framework and case studies rather than an empirical data set. Therefore, the book gives limited attention to the EU's institutional structures and relies less on empirical data than expected. However, this methodological shortcoming is not a scientific weakness but rather a limitation commensurate with the type of book, and it is precisely this free theoretical maneuvering space that contributes to the discussion in the literature. The other issue is that the complexity of non-white voters' motivations during Brexit also seems somewhat simplified. Moreover, considering how much the British political landscape has shifted since 2016, some of the book's arguments feel slightly disconnected from the present moment. Despite these issues, Eurowhiteness remains a valuable and thought-provoking contribution for scholars interested in questioning the narratives that continue to shape Europe's identity.

References

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