



Community:

Discovering ties that bind

Frans Timmermans

May 2016

policy network *ideas*



Policy Network
Second floor
11 Tufton Street
London SW1P 3QB
United Kingdom

t: +44 (0)20 7340 2200
f: +44 (0)20 7340 2211
e: info@policy-network.net

www.policy-network.net

Summary

Europe faces an unprecedented maelstrom. The fallout from the financial crash has stoked anger at a system perceived to be stacked against hardworking citizens. The refugee crisis has overwhelmed in some areas and fuelled fear and hate in others. The recent barbaric terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels serve as a shocking reminder of the threat from fundamentalists hell bent on destroying our way of life. A near perfect storm that imperils the peace, security and liberty of all.

How should European societies respond? That is the key question that Frans Timmermans sets out to answer in this extended thinkpiece. He ponders the difference between boundaries and barriers and asks how we can foster stronger communities within our society. His conclusion is one of optimism: that a bright future will prevail if we can discover the ties that bind and have the courage to see interconnectedness as an opportunity not a threat.

About the author

Frans Timmermans is first vice president of the European commission. He is a member of the Dutch Labour party and previously served as the Netherlands' minister for foreign affairs.

© Frans Timmermans, 2016.

The lyrics quoted on page 4 are from the song Klein gebedje by Tourist LeMC.

Published by special agreement with Uitgeverij Podium, Amsterdam. This volume was originally published in Dutch by Uitgeverij Podium under the title Broederschap. All proceeds from the original publication were donated to the NGO Vluchtelingen Werk, supporting refugees in the Netherlands.

Cover image credit:
Mihailo Milovanovic

Our century is 15 years old. Fifteen momentous years which, all things considered, have produced a negative balance for most people. Years with many new and serious challenges that we perhaps had not bargained for. Years of much doubt, self-doubt and mutual distrust.

The century began with a major terrorist attack on our values and our way of life: on things that we hold dear, that are fundamental, that enable us to live freely and in harmony with our fellow human beings. And the past year has been marked by other major attacks in the heart of our society, in a city that has been a symbol of liberty, equality and fraternity since the Enlightenment, and in a city where many international institutions and people have made their homes.

The situation in which we find ourselves

In 1875, Victor Hugo named three concepts as the three steps to the highest stage. Liberty is a right, equality is a fact and fraternity, or as we might say now, 'solidarity', is an obligation – an obligation that, if not met, makes liberty and equality irrelevant. In Hugo's eyes, no man is an island: we are all interconnected, the weak must be the concern of the strong and the protection of the rights of the weak is their sacred duty.

The principle still holds just as true today. For all the extra liberty, equality and solidarity in our society compared to a century and a half ago, the necessary connection between the three concepts has become too deeply buried in our collective consciousness by all the challenges we face. How have we reacted to the series of crises we have faced in the last 15 years? Has our response given sufficient consideration to the values that we explicitly – and much more often implicitly – share with one another?

The invasion of Iraq and the lies that accompanied it. The financial sector, that pillar of our capitalist model, built on greed, deceit and deception. The global economic development that brought great economic gain for a few and great uncertainty for many. Our planet, which is telling us that it can only bear so much and that it is high time we started to treat it better if we want to survive. The international tensions, which seem only to be increasing, and which have led people to question the self-evidence of peace, justice and liberty not only outside Europe, but also within it. And perhaps above all: the lack of boundaries in our personal, social and economic actions, which may be liberating for the individual but, because of the confrontations to which it inevitably leads, represents a source of insecurity, fear, and therefore a lack of freedom and real or perceived injustice for the majority of people.

Hard on the heels of this succession of crises, which hit the western middle class particularly hard, comes the refugee crisis. It is almost a perfect storm. All the plagues of Egypt at once. This is the situation we find ourselves in. How do we respond? What do we do about it? Moaning will not help, nor will running away. My message is: we must get to work. There is so much to live for, so much to love, to work towards.

The solution is the same one proposed by Victor Hugo all those years ago: look at how things are related, how we are all interconnected in our society, which in turn is inextricably linked with other

societies. Have the courage to see that interconnectedness not as a major threat, but precisely as our greatest opportunity. In the remainder of this short essay I will attempt to show where the opportunities lie, how society can better position itself to repair old connections and make new ones. And why there really is no reason not to believe in a bright future that does justice to all the values that we all hold dear.

The ability to see the world through the eyes of others

Tourist LeMC is one of the most brilliant performers, artists, poets and composers working in the Dutch language. In the song *Klein gebedje*, which means 'A little prayer', he describes the fate of a Syrian refugee who has fled the hell of her homeland with her child and ended up in Flanders, in northern Belgium. He looks at her, he gives her a voice and an essential humanity that means we are no longer unmoved by her fate. If it can happen to someone who really seems so like us, it can happen to us too – so it should also concern us. But then LeMC looks at himself, at his own actions, and says something that could apply to all of us:

Strange how it goes, as I watch from my sofa. After a day pounding hard on the path of my career. I pick my way very carefully.

At least for me, sorry, no hands free. Hypocrisy it ain't, it's the issues of the day.

It's the restlessness in my head, buried in the sand.

I would like to help, and I'm a good listener.

But you think the same too: that's what the Red Cross is for, right?

And it's quicker to close both eyes than to open them.

I wish the best for everyone, but do I really have to do something myself?

I wouldn't know where – I really wouldn't know where – to start.

Because a little rapper can't pull it off any more. It's dirty everywhere, victims everywhere.

40 million people fleeing before the night is out.

Too big to comprehend, and no one can be untouched now.

I assuage my guilt via direct debit.

LeMC puts his finger on exactly where the problem lies. I too find myself wondering whether we haven't lost just a bit too much of our ability to really look at other people. And if you can no longer see the world through another person's eyes you also lose something of yourself. Not out of malice, not out of bad will, but because, as Tourist LeMC says, maybe it's just too big to comprehend.

It's like walking on a path that is so uneven and has so many pitfalls that your gaze narrows to the point directly in front of your feet and all you see is that one spot, to make sure that you don't step into a hole or trip up on a loose stone. If our gaze narrows, so do our minds, and our attention is focused solely on the here and now, the next step. We no longer see what is happening around us, yet we fear the worst because of the shadows that we have not yet seen looming in our peripheral vision.

People first and foremost

A refugee is first and foremost a person, something we all too often lose sight of in this refugee crisis. We talk about categories. We talk about fortune-seekers, we talk about immigrants, we find all kinds of words to absolve ourselves from looking or feeling or really caring. But just look for a moment. Who is that person? Why are they doing that? What would I do in those circumstances? What would

we do as a society if this happened to us? Then look at the people who are trying to hitch a ride, in the slipstream of the war refugees, to a richer and more prosperous Europe. Because they want a better life. Because they admire our lives and want a part of it – and a few, unfortunately, because they hate us for our freedom, because our existence is to be obliterated, because sowing death and destruction is seen as a sacred mission.

Look. Let us start with that. In 1941, the refugee Erich Maria Remarque published his novel *Flotsam*. It is a tale of people who have fled Germany because their lives are in danger. Because they were Jewish, or of the wrong political persuasion. These refugees criss-cross the continent like hunted animals, from Vienna to Prague, from Paris to Zurich. They are illegal as they have no German passports and therefore no residence permits. So they find themselves chased across Europe by the police, end up in jail or manage to survive with a false identity or forged documents. They find shelter in small rooms in dingy hostels or sleeping on a park bench. They fall ill because of their poor conditions.

Some of them are seriously traumatised by the horrors they have witnessed or the torments they have suffered. They use dead people's papers and exploit loopholes in the law and differences in legislation between countries. They cross borders illegally at night, go from country to country, hide on trains as stowaways. They are fortune-seekers, in the most literal sense. They are trying to find a glimmer of good fortune in the madness caused by an all-destroying, nihilistic ideology that excludes people because of who they are, their background, their ethnicity, their sexual orientation, religion or political beliefs. People who are considered to be pathogenic infections to be purged from society and eventually destroyed.

We now look at refugees like Erich Maria Remarque, Thomas Mann and Albert Einstein – and the many anonymous Germans who fled Nazism – with a great deal of compassion and respect. In the 1930s, we debated whether we could cope with this stream of refugees, whether there were not too many fortune-seekers among them, whether the lack of sexual morals of the young Jewish men were not a direct threat to our young women and girls, whether it was not a dangerous provocation of Hitler to take in refugees.

A time for reflection

Look, listen, talk. See what is happening, who it involves. Recall what we as nations and as communities did or did not do in the past and how we look back on that now. Note the similarities and differences between the present situation and previous waves of refugees. So that we can demonstrate our humanity and put it into practice if there is a justified call upon it, and demonstrate our ruthlessness if fanatics and nihilists threaten our lives. Only if you are willing to see foreigners, to know them, will you know if you need to fear them. If, to be on the safe side, we are simply afraid of everyone, it becomes impossible to fulfil the essential condition of coexistence, namely the recognition that we, as people, are connected to each other. I often find that people have never spoken to a refugee. They have never made the effort to listen to these tales. To make these tales their own. Once this connection has been established on the human level, I believe it is also easier to reach solutions.

The power of fear

Being afraid of everyone: fear has become perhaps the greatest driving force in politics over the last 15 years. As a political instrument, nothing is more powerful than fear. There is nothing more tempting for a politician than playing on fear and instrumentalising it. Why? Because it is fear that stops us looking: when people are afraid, they look for just one thing. They see just one thing: confirmation that their fear is justified. And there are plenty of politicians in Europe who are simply itching to keep

supplying the evidence. When fear dominates, we see only the threat, not the opportunities.

If you look at how, let's say, the populist right – or the extreme or radical right – is responding to the refugee crisis in Europe, you almost always see the same pattern. And the reaction to that pattern is perhaps even more worrying than the pattern itself. It starts with the notion – which I can understand in the light of the last 15 years – that we are losing something. That we are losing status, that we are losing our jobs, that we are losing our future. That we are losing something.

The easy response – from those who do not share the fear, or who think there is nothing to fear – is, 'That may be true, but we get something in return'. Or else, 'Well, shit happens'.

That is too simple. And it shows that you are unable to put yourself in the shoes of someone who does feel that fear. That, too, is a form of narrowing one's gaze that causes great harm to our society. Do not underestimate the fact that there are dozens, maybe even millions, of people in Europe who are losing something but have no idea what they are getting by way of positive compensation.

Time to level with people and talk seriously

So it starts with 'We're losing something'. If you fail to recognise that there is a substantial risk of loss in this time of global upheaval, you estrange yourself from your own society. If you don't immediately set to work to tackle the challenge that gives rise to that threat of loss, just wait until you reach step two: 'We've lost something and it didn't just happen like that, oh no, it was stolen from us by the elite and by the Muslims.' How are you going to counter that? Simply say 'No'? Just, 'Tut, tut, that's not very nice'? If you cannot put yourself in someone else's shoes, you cannot discuss something with them.

On top of that, those who are labelled the 'elite' (let's assume this means those in influential positions in society) obviously have no self-confidence left either. So the elite retreats into its shell, muttering 'Look, we're not an elite, OK? We're really just like everyone else. We're no elite – ha! Elite! The very idea!'

There may well be good grounds for criticising the 'elite', but that doesn't mean that all criticism is justified, or that it must be meekly accepted without any challenge. Taking criticism seriously also means giving a serious, substantive and well-reasoned response. It means being prepared to learn from your mistakes, but also standing by your convictions. We have lost this balance. We have become very good at frankly acknowledging what we have done wrong, but much less good at showing why our ideas are still worth fighting for. Setting boundaries is also vital here. Acknowledge your mistakes and show how you intend to correct and prevent them in the future, but don't give in to all-too-easy calls to do away with the entire political system. It doesn't solve anything and simply adds to the frustration. What we have is in need of reform, but that can be effectively done via rebuilding; there is no need to tear everything down. If your roof is leaking you don't have to demolish your whole house. 'Down with the elite!' has a ring to it and can even be a cry to help lift our heavy hearts, but it only makes sense if we have also considered who and what will replace it. In my view, what is said in the pub is still not the measure of all things in this regard. And if we think people are waiting for bar room politics, we are not taking the people – or ourselves – seriously.

An institutional scapegoat?

Of course, the European Union is always depicted as the plaything of the elite. The greater the distance between a level of administration and people's day-to-day lives, the greater the aversion. And the EU, of course, is further from the people than national or local politics.

If this meant that the EU could be made the scapegoat, while the other institutions upon which

the organisation of society depends could all count on the warm support of the people, then I would reconcile myself to the idea that we could put all our ills down to Europe. Then we could say goodbye to the European project, go off and do something else and all would be well. Alas, the crisis of confidence affects all forms of government and every level of politics, and thus can only be addressed at all levels. The EU's role in this will continue to be to find common solutions to issues that go beyond the influence or power of individual countries, and, by means of treaties, agreements and laws, to resolve conflicts that in the past were only resolved by force and with enormous bloodshed.

Putting things in perspective

We all have a responsibility in this regard. Gone are the days when we could leave objecting, interpreting and clarifying to the political class, administrators or those with a leading role in society. So the question is whether we collectively feel the responsibility to put things into perspective. Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that people are wrong to be afraid, as I think there are many reasons to be concerned and afraid.

The question is just whether you translate that fear into 'it's all because of x and y' and 'if we get rid of them I won't be afraid any more'. We need to make a stand against that. Fear of loss is certainly not unjustified given what has happened in recent years, but I believe the answer that has been produced is too facile and will not solve our problems. Worse than that, it will only increase the disillusionment. In the end it will become apparent that borders with walls do not work. And what then? What is left if you have been telling people that for years?

Shared values in the face of fear

It is a simple argument: we had something, it was precious to us, it has been taken away and we want it back. And we will get it back if we shove the elite aside, allow the people to take charge and get rid of the ideology that cloaks itself in the religion of 'Islam'. Then we will be able to say: this isn't possible, we don't want this, this isn't nice. Very practical, but very defensive. But why not counteract it with something attractive instead? What about holding up democracy, tolerance, mutual interaction and respect? We cannot just shout that things should be different. Why not clearly state that we are against judging people by who they are, rather than by their deeds and words?

In the political arena there is nothing wrong with saying that a fundamental and irreconcilable difference in values makes political cooperation impossible. The first question you need to ask when assessing a political position is whether it is based on values that you can share. If that is not possible, you cannot do business. This provides clarity for you and your voters. And it shows that some things are not negotiable.

Suggesting an alternative

When politicians tell us that something has been taken from us by 'the elite' and 'foreigners', the debate about immigrants and refugees quickly becomes very loaded. Their reasoning is that the more people come, the more they take from us, so our only salvation is to keep foreigners out, build up borders and protect ourselves – then everything will be fixed. It will not work – everywhere it has been tried, it has worked at most for a while and then failed miserably. That does not prevent it from being an attractive option, as it seems to offer a simple solution that fits with our intuition. In a world that will face permanent issues of migration there will always be such calls. The question is, what are we suggesting as an alternative?

Too often the response is mostly fatalistic. 'Well, that's globalisation: you'd better get used to it, we don't want borders any more.' This is definitely the wrong approach. People cannot exist without borders. Borders, boundaries between people, cultures, languages or countries. A border is a useful thing, a handy thing, an important thing. It defines who you are and how you relate to those on the other side. Having no borders is a fiction, an illusion, a plaything of those who think they can blow their own egos up to galactic proportions. Every person, every family, every community, large or small, exists by the grace of borders and boundaries. Where one ends, the next begins. Mutual respect begins at the point where one person respects the other's border.

The value of boundaries: structure, not exclusion

Five years ago the French author, Régis Debray, delivered an ode to the existence of borders at a conference in Japan. His words struck a chord with me. Not because I agree with all the points he made, but because I was drawn to his idea that a border is beautiful and valuable because it provides structure without excluding those on the other side.

Debray contrasts borders with the absence of borders, of boundaries, often in our personal relations with other people too. People who attend information meetings for local residents and then verbally abuse others, deny them the right to speak or demean them essentially lack any boundaries in their private life. They are allowed to impose their ideas and opinions on everyone else. Their opinion is untrammelled; it is not restricted by anyone else's opinions or feelings. Those who lack boundaries in all areas will ultimately end up lawless and amoral, if not immoral.

Laws, it follows, are the enforceable standards that result from our values. Laws lay down boundaries, social conventions lay down boundaries, our common sense lays down boundaries.

We need boundaries and borders not only for ourselves and our relationships with each other, but also for the relationships between communities, countries and continents. For that reason it is also a misconception to regard the EU as tantamount to a 'borderless' Europe: that very 'borderlessness' would mean the end of our European venture.

To be absolutely clear: those who are currently clamouring loudest for the borders to be sealed would actually like us to be surrounded by walls. They regard borders as like the limes of the Roman Empire: bastions against barbarism, defences to keep all that is alien outside the gate. Yet borders are not there to keep people out, or indeed in – that is what walls and fences are for. Borders are a delimitation of one thing from another, a delimitation that regulates and facilitates mutual relations. Borders are there precisely to facilitate and increase exchange and mutual understanding, without discarding the useful distinctions between communities.

Cohesion and the European project

How are we to view the European project in the light of the current refugee crisis? Let us begin with two sober observations. First, as a political issue, migration will always be a challenge. Second, global developments will lead to more diversity in all societies on a permanent basis. The question is thus not whether this will happen, the question is how we plan to deal with it. Do we just allow it to happen to us?

Or do we provide some direction to ensure better use of the opportunities and management of the risks? A more diverse society is a more dynamic society, a younger society. Such a society is better placed to face the challenges of the future. But this diversity is not boundless. Societies also need internal cohesion. Our social security is organised on a national basis and we must also be able to protect it nationally in order to bear the weight of collective solidarity. This brings us back to Victor Hugo's duty of fraternity.

Enforcing a consistent asylum policy

We draw a distinction between refugees and other migrants because otherwise a humane and sustainable asylum policy is impossible. That is the rule. Alas it is not the practical reality. Because we, collectively, as Europeans, have not been able to apply this significant distinction in practice, the asylum procedure has exerted an attraction on people who actually have no right to asylum. They know that the chance of their having to leave Europe in the short term is small once they have arrived.

So what you actually have to look at is not the legal situation, but the practical one. If we were to apply the rules in the same way all over Europe, things would be different. The Netherlands, for example, determines whether or not someone is entitled to asylum quite quickly. In Germany, it can take much, much longer. The immediate consequence of this is that people from the Balkans, who know full well that they will never be entitled to asylum, do not come to the Netherlands but go to Germany, on the basis that they can maybe have a year there before they are sent home.

This shopping around by people who do not belong in the asylum procedure seriously undermines public support for providing asylum to genuine refugees. These 'asylum shoppers' should be treated strictly: if they abuse the procedure, they should be sent back to the country responsible. This needs to be much more clearly enforced in practice if we want to maintain some support for a humane asylum policy in Europe.

You could see refugee policy as a litmus test for Europe. If we can make progress in this area, this will increase public support for working together. That, in the end, is what is most needed for the collective protection of Europe's external borders: it is not something we can just leave to those countries that happen to be located at the external borders. These borders need to be controlled jointly, in other words at European level.

Working beyond external borders

So now comes the question: if you are so dependent on controlling that external border, might it not have been better to start with much greater European efforts to end the conflicts that generate all these refugees? We have neglected this terribly over the last five years. Shouldn't we give the countries in the region the wherewithal to accommodate these millions of people humanely, while also giving them the prospect of a future? And that is not just about the prospect of going back to where they came from, but also the prospect of a decent existence in the place where they are residing.

To put it in terms a businessman would understand: that is much cheaper than allowing them to come here before we deal with them. And that is without even going into the human misery that migration streams create. Support these countries in the region much more, financially and materially. This is something we should have done much earlier and that we are now doing, in particular with Turkey.

Then, if you still want to bring people to Europe, go over there and identify them. You will find the real refugees in the refugee camps. Agree, as Europe, that you will take a significant number of people from these regions each year for resettlement. Criminal peoplesmugglers will then immediately be

out of a job, as there will be no need to make use of their services – you transport refugees yourself safely to safe countries across the European Union.

If people still continue to come on their own initiative, there will be a need very early in the process – ie on arrival in the EU – to take fingerprints, establish their identities, assess whether they are entitled to asylum and then quickly provide decent accommodation. If countries of first arrival are overwhelmed, there should be a fair distribution through an allocation formula across the member states of the EU. Those who are not entitled to asylum need to be swiftly returned to their country of origin.

It is so complicated because all this has to happen simultaneously and be implemented by countries that do not currently trust each other sufficiently. We have a serious shortage of both trust and funding. The first is explicable, the second is strange because it is much more expensive for taxpayers as things are than if their money were used for a more common approach.

A false fear of integration

More consideration also needs to be given to the integration of refugees in the host countries. Slowing down or impeding integration for fear that an integrated refugee will never go back is a policy I regard as unwise. It is based on a false dichotomy, it is this idea of ‘no, above all do not integrate them, because then they will not go back’ that makes people so unhappy. Those who really want to go back will still want to go even if they speak Dutch and have integrated here. And those who do not wish to return will not have a change of heart just because they are not allowed to learn Dutch or find a job. Unless you want them to starve, but fortunately no one has come up with that idea yet. It seems to me better from both a moral and a practical point of view to give people the opportunity to continue to improve themselves, and in my view the most successful route for refugees is to give them space to learn the language of the host country and to give them the opportunity not to waste their time doing nothing.

At the moment, many Syrians who have fled to Europe would like nothing more than to go back to their homeland. To a country where they had a home and a job, went on holiday, took their children to school and had a car parked outside. We sometimes have a false image of the people we are dealing with. That’s why I’m talking about looking at, talking with and listening to these people. Why not invite them in when you see them on the street sometime? I don’t believe there is a contradiction between helping people to integrate quickly and the desire of some refugees to return home when the war is over and they no longer need to be afraid of bombs dropping on their heads.

Common solutions

We can tackle the refugee problem. We can make it manageable. But we can only do so together. We can manage it. It does not need to be such a big problem, if we work together to better protect our external borders. If together we ensure that refugees who are entitled to asylum actually get it and those with no right to asylum are also humanely treated but are returned to their countries of origin. If we conclude agreements with other countries about taking their citizens back. If we ensure that the burden is not placed on just a few of the 28 member states, but shared equally.

Yet it seems to me that this practical approach (that we could roll out, organise and fund from the money we will recoup later) is only possible if we are willing to take the moral stance that I described at the beginning. Thus, we should not accept the view that something is being taken away from us by a particular group or that a particular group is to blame. Refuse to accept these assumptions and search instead for common solutions.

The European commission needs to show a certain degree of humility in this regard, given the inadequate results achieved by the EU as a whole in tackling the refugee crisis. I therefore say to my colleagues, it is too easy to claim that we in the European commission have presented good proposals, but the member states have let the side down. Either we get through it together, or we don't get through it at all. There is absolutely no point in saying, 'we're doing it right, they're not'. And if there is one habit the commission really must break, it's that of constantly insisting that the European Union is so good for you. That kind of propaganda does not work. It only leads to irritation. What would really be ambitious? Letting people see that European organisations can help to ensure that those things that cannot be solved by member states alone are tackled collectively.

Solidarity from the centre: the ripple effect

In Europe there is a glaring lack of solidarity within and between societies. Why? Because, in my experience, solidarity is not something that can be imposed from above. It's also not something that occurs from below. In a modern society, solidarity is something that is organised from the centre. This is because then, like a stone thrown in a pond, it can cause a ripple effect right across society.

And herein lies the problem, both within and between countries. We suffer from a lack of self-confidence that things will turn out alright, and we lack trust in each other. We have too little trust in one another. Will you be there for me if I need you in the future? If I cannot rely on you, then why should I help you now? The interaction between these two issues paralyses our societies and has a crippling effect on the member states of the EU at a time when there are far-reaching decisions to be made that require national leaders to stick their necks out for one other. And all of this at a time when domestic voters are keener than ever to have your head on a plate. Little wonder then that blood is often seen as thicker than water and short-term self-interest outweighs the collective long-term interest. Yet the only sustainable long-term answer to the challenges we face is a collective response, which requires the essential links within and between societies to be repaired and maintained.

The links that bind our societies lie in the centre, where most people are: people of good will, people with the desire to make the world a better place. You can only organise that solidarity if the people who need to organise it – the people at the centre – feel that something is not only asked of them, but that they are also being offered something: a society that will also stand up for them when they need it.

Tragically, that feeling has eroded, or even disappeared altogether. When I talk about the lack of trust between countries it begins within the countries themselves, in communities, in our streets, in neighbourhoods, in our towns and cities. Our societies are in danger of a new form of segregation: we are living increasingly separate but parallel lives, divided along the lines of inequality of opportunity.

Young Europeans

In that context, it is intriguing to look at the generation of young Europeans. There are many young people whose experience is that everything is going well: they feel at ease, are idealistic and want a better world. On the other hand, many of their peers are gloomy: they have little chance of a job, no education or an education that offers few prospects. They are anything but optimistic, but they are not on the radar of the optimistic young people, and vice versa. Here again we see elements of segregation: two groups that actually never converse, never come into contact and have a totally different outlook on their own position in society and the future. There is a very, very urgent need here to restore links by understanding each other's language, literally and figuratively.

That always begins in education, but is also a matter of how you experience your culture together, where people get together – whether it be in a concert hall, a sports club or a stadium. The places where people meet, where at the moment they all too often merely pass alongside each other, should be places where people speak to each other, listen to each other, see each other and where awareness develops that we are part of a society that cannot afford to be segregated once again.

I think that, as parents and as a society, we have neglected our duty to educate the young generation in citizenship. European citizenship is only a small and contingent part of that more general citizenship that most children are taught at home and at school almost naturally. Children can easily learn things that we deem valuable. Perhaps the most important question is how can we ensure that we are better able to deal with differences? How can we ensure that tolerance does not tip over into indifference or even blindness to difference? Learning to live with – instead of alongside – one another: is that not the most important thing that we need to pass on to our children?

Managing diversity

This is more urgent than ever before because we will have to learn to deal with greater diversity in our society on a permanent basis. Not everyone shares the same frame of reference. The idea of things being ‘as they should be’ is much less often implicitly built into our upbringing. As in all other immigrant societies, the rules of social intercourse need to be much more emphatically brought to our attention too. Only in this way do people learn to define together the boundary between what can be different and what must be the same in order for society to be accessible and liveable for everyone, to understand and tolerate one another better.

Without education, this will not work. With education, it can be a great success. You cannot get on your high horse and demand that people adhere to the generally accepted rules of social intercourse if you have never really given them the chance to make those rules their own. It’s like someone asking to take part in a football match because he wants to join in, but he has no idea about the rules, so he spends the entire time in an offside position. The result is that everyone grumbles at him, and after a couple of tries, no one passes him the ball any more. He doesn’t understand and decides that the others don’t like him. He turns around and walks off. He is now even more excluded than before he went on the pitch. This is exactly the wretched position in which many migrants and their children (or grandchildren) have ended up. Everyone in our society should give a bit more thought to this; everyone needs to face up to the consequences. Allowing people to join in our football games, getting them on the ball, putting them into scoring positions: that is the only way out, the only solution. Instead of making grand pronouncements about how ‘multiculturalism has failed’. Fatalism is a curse. A society that takes refuge in fatalism has really ‘failed’. A society that believes in education, growing, learning and bringing people together cannot fail.

Good education exists by virtue of the capacity to transfer knowledge, the capacity to listen and to be able to tell stories. The beauty of storytelling is being lost precisely at a time when the need for stories is perhaps greater than ever.

The urgency of education

And that need starts with education. Children who are exposed to a rich vocabulary and read a lot become smarter. Letting them read more, listen more, talk more with each other and with other generations is, in my view, an essential prerequisite for the development of the active and engaged citizenship that our society so craves. Children who are not raised with language start school already significantly behind. Children who are not raised with language in a multilingual environment start school even further behind. There are still far too many children in our society who start school

so far behind that it is impossible ever to bridge that gulf. Four years old, and already hopelessly disadvantaged. To our utter shame. Children in that situation grow up in isolation. They have no connection with the rest of society. They have not developed the capacity to articulate their dreams, their worries, their grief or their anger in a way that they can share with others. The result is that these emotions are expressed in another way: through destructive behaviour, self-harm, blind rage and violence. This then generates an allergic reaction in the rest of society. And finding a 'home' thus becomes an almost impossible task. No society can afford the lack of a collectively shared 'home'. That home is formed on the basis of things that you share, of a collective consciousness. That is something we are urgently in need of.

A shared public space

Europe too urgently needs a more collective consciousness of what we share and what divides us, of where we come from, of our shared destiny. It is problematic that there is no European demos, no European public space. There is no agora, where Europeans might meet as in Greek antiquity, where we all speak the same language and have the same conceptual framework, where opinions can easily be exchanged and consensus sought.

There is a complete lack of such a forum. This is what national political arenas are for. It would be good to see these national arenas feel a greater political responsibility to defend what we build together in Europe, rather than focusing all their efforts on opposing the European level.

If there is a European public space, it is the sum of the national public spaces, and the area where they overlap. Yet there are also plenty of things of value that we Europeans share and which we rarely or never stop to think about. For example, our shared passion for the arts: Shakespeare speaks to Europeans across language barriers, and all Europeans recognise Rembrandt as part of our collective heritage. The same applies to Van Gogh and Mozart, to Beethoven, the Beatles and Stromae.

Expressions of art also form a European public space that, although not translated into political action, is of cultural value for European society as a whole. Pieter Steinz has written a wonderful book about this entitled *Made in Europe*, a book that would fit into the curriculum of our secondary education. Our European culture exists, it is fantastic, we enjoy it and could not get by without it, yet we are not aware that it is something that we, as Europeans, share with one another, let alone how relevant it is to our experience of our identity.

Lessons from history

Back to more prosaic questions. Why have we organised European solidarity in this way? Why is European society structured the way it is? Why do we have all these treaties? Because European history has taught us that treaties are the only way to permanently tolerate one another. If we lose what treaties are based on – firm commitments – sooner or later we will want nothing more to do with each other and we will revert to relying on force to impose our will on each other. That, after all, is a constant in European history.

These agreements have grown out of the horrific experiences of Europe's double attempted suicide in the first half of the last century. European cooperation has been forged by human hands, like any other form of political organisation. An essential characteristic of human achievement is that what can be done can be undone again. The structures that form our society can indeed all be built, but they can equally well be demolished too.

Over the last 30 years we have slowly come to take it as read that societies cannot 'be built'. As if

the organisation of our societies were a natural phenomenon and governments could do no more than to wield the sword where necessary or apply a lick of paint here and there if things became really desperate. Society 'can just run itself'. This is a fallacy. Especially in free societies, it is vital to set democratically established boundaries based on the rule of law. Enforcing those boundaries is the collective duty of the authorities and the citizens. Where no boundaries are set collectively, the law of the jungle prevails, and it is the survival of the fittest.

Paradoxically enough, the idea that society cannot be built too often leads to the assumption that society cannot be broken. Our society has become fragile and breakable in places and could certainly do with a bit more building work. In particular when it comes to the urgent and unavoidable transition to a sustainable society, all levels of authorities will be required to give their utmost in terms of organisational and transformative capacity: local, regional, national, European and global. The fact that those authorities cannot fully rely on the support and confidence of those who put them in power – the people – is the only true and by far the greatest obstacle facing this generation, and the next.

Perfectible societies

All things considered, in political circles there is still a sacred belief in perfectible societies. Here, people are promised a return to the safety and security of the 1950s. In doing so, all the dark sides of that society, notably the oppressive lack of freedom for the individual, are conveniently forgotten, so that a world is depicted that never actually existed. And on that basis a future is promised that will never happen. Nevertheless, it is an attractive prospect for many who see only a loss of wealth and identity in the world of today and tomorrow.

What effective prospect is the political centre offering as an alternative (apart from 'we'll manage things a bit')? For me, the effective prospect is still a society where solidarity can be organised from the inside out. On the basis of commitments you agree upon in law and which you respect. Because then you know that you will get respect back when you need it.

This is also how European cooperation came about: through agreements laid down in law, instead of imposed by force of arms, as had been the practice for centuries. European cooperation is based on the rule of law, rather than the law of the strongest. Yet everything that has been built up over 70 years by means of laws, treaties and agreements can also be unravelled again and destroyed, if we forget that there is more that unites us than divides us, and more solutions can be found by strengthening ties than by undoing mutual responsibilities.

The dangers of division

'Every man for himself' has become a promise again. Not only between countries, but between people too. There is a danger of society once again splitting along fault lines, along the lines of knowledge, income and background. We must not allow this to happen again. It is sometimes said that religion is dangerous, Islam above all, because it would take us back to division and servitude, in other words to that part of the 1950s that we are not nostalgic for. Islam, the argument goes, would bring back something which we had liberated ourselves from.

Yet if you believe freedom is a precious good, it must surely be possible to grant other people the freedom to believe in their own God? Understanding what faith is, what faith means, does not come naturally to our secular societies. Yet that understanding is necessary for it to be possible to establish connections between everyone in our society; learning to show respect again for those who draw courage or solace from their faith, whose faith gives meaning to their life. It would be both tragic and

a huge mistake to see faith only as a source of danger, intolerance, backwardness and oppression. Barbarity sometimes makes use of 'God', but our own 20th century showed, at the expense of many, many tens of millions of victims, that barbarity does not require any god. Our history has also demonstrated that you can bring out the worst and the very best in people by invoking God – whatever name that god may go by.

The trouble with 'absolute rightness'

'Absolute rightness', that is the key; and it constitutes a great danger. Whether that rightness derives from one god or another, or from human hubris is beside the point. People are so sure of something that nothing can get in the way of that certainty. In totalitarian ideologies 'absolute rightness' dominates. In the heads of the 'true believers' of these ideologies, there is no room for doubt, and absolutely no room for people who do not share that absolute rightness or who reject it. In these visions, such people do not deserve a place in society and have no right to exist. They are, in fact, not human, and can legitimately be eliminated from the human race. Like weeding your crop. Jews, Muslims, Gypsies, Cathars (or Albigensians), gays, heretics, Papists – you name it. A group sharing common characteristics that is labelled threatening and unacceptable. Take 'that man' and label him 'a Jew', before lumping him in with 'the Jews', and before you know it you have taken the first step towards dehumanisation.

Totalitarian regimes always think in terms of categories, of groups. Jewish-American writer Elie Wiesel said it begins when you treat people not as individuals but as part of a group, and then attribute certain features to this group: "Jews are greedy, everyone knows that", "You can't trust Muslims, and that's how it is", "The French are infidel crusaders, just look at history". Commonplaces like this, which subsequently turn into stereotypes. And a stereotype means that you no longer see the individual as an individual and you have started to strip him of his humanity.

And in the same context, let us mention religion: how you bring God into play in the choices you make in life is purely your own responsibility. You cannot palm it off on him (or someone else). The trouble usually starts when people come to believe that their truth is an absolute truth, whether it is divine in origin or not. Such an absolute truth would then entitle you to impose it upon others by force, and to single-handedly dispatch anyone who does not share it with a one-way ticket to the afterlife.

This was the source of the greatest misery that we Europeans inflicted on each other and other citizens of the world. Allowing each other the space, within the confines of the law, for our own truth is the only formula that will work to keep our European society viable in the long term. To my mind, European integration has also made an important and valuable contribution in this area. We have left the days of confrontation far, far behind us. Yet it is by no means certain that it will always be like this.

The perfect storm?

I do not wish to come across as over-optimistic in this regard, because in reality I am not. I want to be honest. This is the first time in my conscious experience of European cooperation that I feel that it really could run aground some time. I have never said or thought that before. Yes, the euro crisis has been a long and painful experience, but we are getting through it.

But we are now facing the threat of a perfect storm: so many things are now converging that not only relate to the actual crisis, the refugee crisis, but to things that touch us deeply as a society, that relate to our survival, our safety.

I no longer see it as inconceivable that we will go back to seeking confrontation rather than cooperation, as has so often been the case in Europe's history. That is why I believe it is so important that we keep hold of treaties as the basis for ensuring that we continue to tolerate one another.

A threat to our shared values

This is necessary because the values which our old continent has so painstakingly cultivated are once again threatened. As the distance from our past mistakes increases, so does the risk of repeating them. The annoying thing about repetition in history is that it always manifests itself in different forms and is usually only recognised as repetition when it's too late. 'Yes, but this time it really is different' is probably one of the most overworked phrases through the ages in the psychological transformation that is self-delusion.

It seems to be part of human nature to look for a scapegoat as soon as things take a turn for the worse. A group of people to blame. A group of people that we can isolate. Intolerance grows, then exclusion and self-isolation combine to lead to social fragmentation. 'If you don't want me to belong here, then I don't want to belong either.' And through the centuries it has always been the Jews who have been first in the firing line in Europe.

The re-emergence of antisemitism and discrimination

In November 2014 I visited a friend of mine in Paris, Robert Badinter. As a young Jew he had witnessed the persecution of the Jews and antisemitism in France first hand. The 1930s. The war. The walls of Paris were daubed with the phrase 'Death to the Jews'. On the radio, Jews were talked of as the 'rats of humanity'. And he said to me, 'There is something going on in European society that I wouldn't have thought possible 20 years ago. In Paris I hear the same slogans on the streets again. I can see antisemitism emerging again. It can happen again. We have clearly forgotten what that leads to.'

It is unacceptable that in the Netherlands, too, Jews are verbally abused if they can be identified as Jewish in the street. It is unacceptable if Jews then go on to think, 'I won't wear my kippa on the street again'. It is unacceptable that Muslim girls simply take off their headscarves when they get to school to avoid being taunted or abused.

Antisemitism is an age-old phenomenon with characteristics all of its own. The greatest philosophers have wracked their brains about this issue. Some have even been seriously guilty of it themselves, such as Voltaire, now back in vogue and promoted to champion of free speech (which quite frankly makes me wonder whether the eagerness with which this claim is made is matched by any eagerness to read what he actually wrote). I have no intention of getting involved in that debate, and will take a purely practical line. When people are attacked for who they are and not for what they do, that is discrimination. This is happening today in parts of Europe to Jews, Muslims, Christians, gays, Romas and Sinti. Intolerance and discrimination are on the rise. If this increase is left unchallenged and unanswered, we need have no illusions about the consequences. As I have already pointed out, saying that it is different this time is merely deluding ourselves.

We do not all need to be the same. It is precisely that diversity in our society that makes us learn more about ourselves.

One man who expressed the value of diversity in society outstandingly well was the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus. Camus told us that the only thing that separates humanity from the animals is our ability to see the world through the eyes of another. Moreover, he argued, man only becomes himself when he is ready to see the world through the eyes of another.

Building tolerance and dialogue

Being willing to look through the eyes of another does not mean that you will always agree with the other person's views. It means that you develop tolerance for other people's ideas and you try to put yourself in their shoes. The best discussions I have are those in which I do not agree with the other person. Where I get the opportunity to sharpen my thoughts and ideas, and so does my interlocutor. The point of dialogue is not to agree on everything. All too often we closet ourselves away with people who share our opinions, which we then repeat back and forth. Seek out people with different views from your own, people in whose shoes you cannot imagine yourself, and start talking to them. That is dialogue.

Camus said that only through others can we see ourselves, but we alone bear the responsibility for using our liberty. This means that, as individuals and as a society, we need to find the right balance between 'I' and 'we'.

Antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, violence based on religious fundamentalism or political extremism – for decades these were dormant diseases in Europe that occasionally erupted. These ills are now gaining ground across the board, against the backdrop of a deep economic crisis and global paradigm shifts in economics, politics, society and – at times – morality. The world has become a place full of dangers and uncertainties, and our response to these, especially if we feel a threat to our existence and our values, is accordingly intense. The threat needs a face, and that face is rarely that of individuals but is instead stuck onto a group as a whole.

The value of remembrance

The question is, of course, how do we react to this? What is now being tested is our willingness to stand up for the values that we as a society cherish and share, to defend them against threats old and new and to enshrine them in the hearts and minds of all our citizens. Those values include treating minorities and those who think differently with consideration and respect.

In his not always accessible, but always fascinating oeuvre, the philosopher Theodor Adorno raised precisely this question: how do we avoid estranging ourselves from our fundamental values?

In the end, his answer is clear: by not forgetting, by recognising the value of remembering. If we cease to remember the second world war, and certainly the lead-up to that war, we cease to be adequately aware of where an insidious process of intolerance can lead – an uncontested campaign of lies, a slow dehumanisation of those who are different.

A fight against collective indifference

The works of Joseph Roth sparkle with their clarity, seduce us with their humanity and oppress with their pervasive foreboding of an enormous calamity. Roth drank himself into an early grave before the war broke out. He wrote about rising antisemitism and conscious dehumanisation without knowing what was to come. This is particularly valuable, as most of what has been written about the 1930s has been written in the full knowledge of how things turned out. And then, of course, everyone could see it coming: we are all wise after the event.

Roth, on the other hand, produced a perfect case history before the patient succumbed to the cancer of hate. And what did he conclude, or at least, how do I read it? It is not the hatred of the big-time villains and the small-time thugs who are their henchmen that drags society down. It is the indifference of the majority of the people that allows an entire society to be derailed. Is this our

greatest challenge today too, our fight against individual and collective indifference? Haven't we perhaps become too much of a 'so what?' society?

Indifference begins when we fail to contradict things we hear that are unacceptable. When we think, 'leave it alone, there's no point in arguing'. When we think, 'this will blow over'. When we think, 'that's them, we're not like that, we're decent people'. When we think, 'soon they'll come for me too'. And so we just let it go.

Engaged and vocal citizenship

Let us be honest: for decades we have acted as if tolerance and indifference are the same thing. But tolerance will always fail if it simply means looking the other way. Tolerance can only exist on the basis of active, engaged citizenship. Where people are prepared to make the effort to look through the eyes of another person – be they Jewish, gay, Muslim, Roma or whatever. Living together is more than just existing alongside each other. It also involves doing things together. Indifference also begins in education if we fail to teach our children properly about active citizenship. About making allowances for each other and respecting other people, because everyone has the right to be different.

In this connection it is important to realise that active tolerance also means that you do not only protest and spring into action when it is your faith, your group or your community under attack. Obviously, charity begins at home for everyone. Of course you will spring into action first when you yourself are under attack. But in truth I would like to hear more angry reactions from Muslims to a Jew being abused, or to see Jews protesting when a Muslim woman does not dare to wear her headscarf, or is spat upon. I would like to see more of us following the example of Father Frans van der Lugt, who was murdered in the Syrian city of Homs, and who refused to turn a barbaric war into a religious one and never took account of background or belief when he could help people in need.

The problem of dehumanisation

How can it be that the terrorist movement of the so-called Islamic State is able to get some of our young people to dream of a heroic death and a reward in the afterlife, yet we are unable to get these young people to dream of a society where the law applies to everyone and everyone has the opportunity to prosper from their talents and abilities? Is it because we do not articulate our dream? Is it because we no longer believe in that dream ourselves? Why do we so often look away if a teenage boy shouts 'whore' at a girl in the street? The same teenage boy who probably lashes out if he thinks someone is attacking the honour of his sister or his mother? Why do loving sons and brothers, who would give anything for their mothers and sisters, go to Syria to treat women as objects that they can use, permanently damage or kill? Time and again the same thought occurs to me: 'this is that age-old process of dehumanisation at work'.

We need to become more resilient. We need to combat hate, which now has every opportunity to spread its deadly poison over the internet. Goebbels knew that a lie told well enough and repeated often enough becomes true in people's minds. You can see this happening every day on the internet, and we need to come up with a strategy to work together with providers and stakeholders to vaccinate the internet so that the spread of the poison that is hatred can be better contained by confronting it more effectively with the truth.

Extremism, violence and criminality always go hand in hand. This was the case with the fascists in Italy and Spain, just as it was with the Nazis and just as it is with fundamentalism. We urgently need to combat this collusion by cracking down on criminal networks, counteracting radicalisation in

prisons and significantly improving international collaboration.

The importance of community

A society that is not a community will fall apart. The greatest achievement of the past century was the growth of individual freedom. When I think of how little freedom my grandparents had, trapped as they were in a social, religious and moral straitjacket, I am struck by what has been achieved in Dutch society during the half century of my lifetime. The fact that this has left the sense of community much weaker than it was is a logical development. However, we must not allow this feeling to become so weak that people share next to nothing with others and thus understand next to nothing about others, let alone feel anything for them.

My plea for Europe is about rediscovering where we come from and, based on that, mapping out the path to where we want to go. And where we want to go can only be a society of solidarity organised from the inside out, which is to say from the centre to the edges. That is the only morally acceptable answer to the challenges of globalisation, including the refugee crisis. Why does this answer deserve an impassioned plea, an unwavering commitment? Because our children deserve a Europe that is a shining example for them and for the rest of the world. A Europe that does not fall back into its old mistaken ways, but knows how to give new meaning to the three steps to the highest stage: liberty, equality and fraternity.

The difference between solidarity and altruism

Solidarity without self-interest does not exist. Solidarity and altruism are not the same thing. Altruism is giving something, while solidarity is sharing something. It is important not to confuse these concepts. Because solidarity dries up if those who are asked to show it get the impression that the solidarity they are showing amounts to enforced altruism; that they have to give away something they would actually prefer to keep. That will not satisfy even the most well-intentioned of people forever. You cannot build a society on altruism: sooner or later people will start abusing your good nature.

Solidarity is acting together in the knowledge that you share the same fate. Sharing something with someone else because that makes us stronger collectively. Helping someone else in the knowledge that should you ever, God forbid, need help yourself, that help will be there. That is the principle on which our welfare state was built, and the first article of the social contract that binds us all as citizens. It is also precisely where the problem lies in our society: fewer and fewer people have confidence in the durability of that first article. Certainly, Europe's middle class feels that its solidarity is constantly being called upon, whereas it can no longer rely on such solidarity itself. We thus have a problem with our social contract, with the popular support for our welfare state.

Regaining confidence

I can only really see European societies regaining confidence – both in ourselves and between us – if we once again believe in what should bind us together, in the social contract that underpins every community. The certainty of a good social safety net, the certainty that security does not depend on your postcode, the certainty that what children learn at school will also give them the chance of a job and the freedom to organise their lives as they see fit. The certainty that the elderly will not be left in the lurch and that the sick will receive good treatment.

All of these certainties have become fragile, too fragile, despite being closer than we sometimes want to believe. Above all, because I notice in everything that there is a strong yearning for

connection, certainty and the restoration of mutual confidence. No one feels truly comfortable with the Hobbesian state in which we now seem to find ourselves. Everyone at war with each other is a horrific scenario. Everyone for themselves and none for all provides no prospects at all, except endless, destructive confrontations.

A tool to make communities stronger

Seeking out what unites us has become vital. Leaving that search to people who are only capable of thinking along ethnic or religious lines of exclusion will only lead to renewed segregation. Societies are becoming more diverse, more multicoloured. The challenge is thus to look for connections while being fully conscious of our diversity and respecting our differences. Asking people to share more with one another is different from requiring people to adopt our identity. That is in fact impossible unless it is forced upon people. Experience teaches us that this always ends in tragedy.

Connections need to come from both sides and cannot be forced on people at gunpoint. Connecting does require that you speak each other's language to a sufficient degree, both literally and figuratively. If you completely fail to understand each other, you cannot reach agreements and find what you have in common. You also lack a civilised way to strongly disagree with one another. If we do not let anyone in, if instead we build a wall, we will suffocate from a lack of fresh oxygen. If we stop setting boundaries altogether, cohesiveness disappears and we dissolve like a sugar cube in a cup of tea. Here, too, it's about setting boundaries, not building walls.

That is how we work on restoring confidence; that is how we fix old connections and make new ones. Making connections is not an objective in itself. It is a tool to make a community stronger and to give individuals in that community the opportunity to make the most of themselves. People need to be given the opportunity to interact with others and allow others the leeway to improve themselves. A welfare state that aims only to offer comfort to people in their current plight and no longer has the ambition to encourage people to improve themselves is like a fast food restaurant: quick, convenient and occasionally very nice, but not a place to spend your entire life. That would not be a healthy way to live.

Making connections only really makes sense if it continues to provide the impetus for upward mobility. Here too the centreground of every society has a decisive role to play. That is because it has experience of upward mobility, but also of loss. It is home to the ambition to improve, but also the fear of losing status. A fear that currently has the upper hand and makes those in the centre unwilling to champion the cause of those less well-off, out of fear of being swallowed up by that group themselves. They therefore try to distance themselves from those lower down the ranks.

But if those connections are restored and we get a glimpse of shared dreams, the opportunity for upward mobility returns. Then together we can restart the process that lifts people out of poverty and deprivation. Then more people will believe in progress again. Then self-confidence will grow and mutual trust will re-emerge. And things will get better for all of us.

The power of a shared discussion about the future

We do not have much reason to look back with great pleasure or satisfaction on the first 15 years of this century. Too much has gone wrong and we have done too little to counteract it. What will we do about it in the next 15 years? There is so much strength lying hidden in our society, though we often fail to spot it.

Just imagine if it were possible to get 100 people born in 1900 in every town, in every village, to go

for a stroll with 100 people born in 2000. They would chat together about the town or village. The old people would talk about their experiences, the youngsters would discuss their dreams for the future. And we, the rest of us, we would listen to how it was and see how much has been achieved. And we would listen to the dreams and see how much can still be achieved. It is this connection between the past and the future that can free us from the stifling prison that the present can be if you have forgotten how things were and if you no longer dare to dream of how things could be. Telling your story, making connections, upward mobility. Now that is fraternity.