

## What is identity?

By Tun de Jong

I'm not from here, you know. I was born somewhere. I grew up somewhere. I moved. I lived. I moved again and I lived some more. I have an address book full of names, numbers and, well: addresses. It's an eclectic mix. But we revere oak trees because they are solid, strong, and above all: grounded. Or under all? "Immigrant": a bad word. "Alien": a bad word. "Unrooted": a bad word. Why? The clue might be found in epigenetics, the new scientific understanding that how we spend our lives can alter the way our genes express themselves in our lifetime and beyond. When we pass on our genes to the next generation, we don't only pass on a certain set of data but also the way in which that data will express itself, depending on the point of time in our lives in which we pass on our genes. The conclusion I draw from this is important because it explains so much: trauma, in a certain way, can be inherited. And there is plenty of trauma related to people leaving and never coming back again to go around. There is plenty of trauma related to people from far-off lands coming to pillage your village, subjugate your community and lead you to despair. The people you love are leaving and people who have no intention of loving you are invading. That's the innate anxiety that has been passed on to us for generations. It's no wonder then that we are having a hard time accepting migration.

I was born in Luxembourg, a country that has changed hands so often that the best national motto its people could come up with is: "Mir wëlle bleiwe wat mir sinn" – We want to stay what we are. It's an expression of the deep wish of a constantly subjugated people having to deal with ever changing conquerors to just be *left alone already*. It also raises a very important question: What *are* we? It's a question that has come to consume my every waking hour, even if I have since moved on from trying to find any singular identifying traits of *luxembourgishness* and moved on to ask the question just for me personally and for anyone confused by myriad influences in their lives which, such is the word on the street, are incompatible. Luxembourg is a good example of that because it finds itself wedged between Germany and France, two European powerhouses which for much of Europe's history have

been the sworn enemies of each other. Recent efforts of Franco-German cooperation do little to mitigate that inner conflict every Luxembourger feels of being partly one thing, partly another, feeling sad about not really belonging to either and yet somehow still proud that they're their own thing. If anything, Germany and France teaming up just exacerbates Luxembourgers' claustrophobia and the fear of not being big enough to have their voices heard on the international stage – a fear that seems daftly unfounded when considering how many high offices in international organizations are held by Luxembourgers exactly because they have been given the gift at birth of perfectly understanding both the French and the Germans and can play mediator between the two. This is not just a Luxembourgian issue. I merely choose Luxembourg as an example because it's the country whose psyche I know best.

All of this to say that as a white, male, rich European, you'd think I would be the last person to have identity issues. And yet... The resurgence of the nation-state as an ideal seems baffling when one considers the global and even universal scale of the challenges we face. Yet on an emotional level, it makes sense, because the idea that there's a limited group of people with which you share a common history, a common language, perhaps a common religion, and looking forward: a common fate, is comforting. It is, of course, mostly a delusion. The identities that nations carve out for themselves are based on the highly subjective predilection for one era over another, one stream of thought over another, etc.

History, then, is but the attempt of trying to find the red thread that binds everything together and makes it seem like a logical consequence of events after the fact. We need these stories to make sense of the present, to feel grounded and tell ourselves that we are part of something bigger, but whatever kernel of truth there might be in any one of these stories, there's just as much fantasy, embellishment and bending of facts to suit the chosen narrative. Identifying with the people that live close by and thus empathizing with them is what allows governments to sell its people the idea of paying tax money that might be used for projects that an individual taxpayer might not be the direct beneficiary of. It's also what makes the concept of health care contributions more palatable. It is, however, also what

leads to headlines such as: "Plane crashes over the pacific. No survivors. 13 Brits among the dead." The assumption is, of course, that nobody will really care about any of the people who have died holding a different passport and that the only reason we should feel the gravity and sadness of this tragic event is that there were "some of our own people" on that plane. You can swap out "Brits" for "Germans", "Americans", "Frenchmen" etc. It's the same pattern everywhere. Perhaps it's a way of shielding us from constantly feeling bad because let's face it: horrible things happen somewhere every day and if we want to keep our sanity and get on with our lives, having such cues to tell us what we should really be upset about because it affects "our community" makes it easier to ignore all the other bad news.

Trying to foster a renewed spirit of community in a village, a borough, or even a street in a particular city, is of course not a bad idea. Caring for those with whom we are in immediate contact every day is usually the best way to start changing the world at large. But does it have to happen at the detriment of those we know a little less about? The cost of fostering more close-knit relationships at home should not be the demonization of outsiders.

The world feels like it has considerably shrunk over the last hundred years or so. Travel times have been cut short, the most remote places have become easier to reach, communication with the other end of the world is now instantaneous, goods and services are often just as easily imported as they are purchased at home.

Each one of these changes on their own would have provided enough for people to adjust to. The accumulation of them has left millions of people behind, not understanding why all they were taught as children suddenly does not apply anymore, why the security (and yes, limitations) they thought was theirs, is gone, and why in order to survive in this world, they have to actively discard all of their parents' advice, their parents who have an even harder time at grasping how the world works these days than they themselves. But: is the antidote to not coping with the speed of globalization really retracting into a closed-off localism of the sort not seen since before World War I? I think not.

What matters about me, in the end, is not where I was born, where I spent most of my life, who my parents were, what their job was and how rich they were. My essence might be influenced by these factors to varying degrees, but it also transcends all these aspects and exists irrespective of the situation you put me in. Never quite fixed and open for transformation, but constant in its change still. What matters is how you see this world, how you engage with it and what contributions you make to it. Your name, the colour of your passport, your creed, your clothes... all of those things contribute to making you *you*, but they alone do not define you.

So, who am I and what community do I belong to? I don't exactly know because as I live, I change, but I've come to realize that it doesn't really matter, for wherever I am and whoever my neighbours might be, I'll try to make the biggest contribution possible and that, I believe, says more about me than anything else. Say hello to your neighbours, keep open doors, help with small chores, clean the local forest but don't forget that there's more than your hamlet and engage with the rest of the world. Just like, according to epigenetics, we have genes who can express themselves differently depending on what we do, the true strengths of our character will only show when we confront ourselves with new situations, different people, belief systems, ideas. Our identity does not get watered down or muddied by contact with external influences, it becomes clearer and stronger and we become more confident about it.