

**Giancarlo Vilella**

# Being European

Foreword by Klaus Welle, Secretary General of  
the European Parliament



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I would like to express my profound thanks to Klaus Welle, secretary general of the European Parliament and a true European, for his important Foreword regarding the idea of a European “identity”, a contribution that perfectly reflects and completes my own analysis in this book.

Giancarlo Vilella



## On identity: Foreword by Klaus Welle

*Secretary General of the European Parliament*

Literature about identity seems to converge around the view that identity is about what we are not or no longer: we are not like our neighbours and we are not what we used to be. That rejected alternative is called "the other".

Germany wants to put maximum distance to the Third Reich and Spain to the Franco regime. The European Union is not like Putins Russia, Erdogan's Turkey, our southern Muslim neighbourhood across the Mediterranean, Trump's United States or Brexit Britain. But is it satisfying to have to refer to an identity that only knows what it is not? And doesn't that approach immediately devalue our neighbours?

Attempts to define what we are have historically run into trouble. 19th century Nationalism established as a reaction to the Napoleonic wars singled out minorities that then suddenly became foreigners in their own country only to be discriminated, expelled or massacred in a process of ethnic cleansing. Race and class as identity patterns were used to create violent movements and justify the appalling mass murders of the 20th century.

If that is what identity does we should better do without. Should we limit ourselves therefore to individual identity rather than collective identities?

The fact is that collective identities do exist. From your football club to your town to your family, your religion or you being an atheist we form identities that go beyond ourselves. The several identities we adhere to contribute to who we are. We are not somebody else. So it is not about denying who we are, it is about accepting the other as equally valid.

Identities need a pluralist frame to do no harm, to not be weaponised: I know who I am and meet the other in mutual respect.

We Europeans have committed and been the victims of all atrocities imaginable. As a consequence we built a wide variety of protective mechanisms to not fall victim of other people's identity ambitions. The rule of law meaning that also the rulers need to adhere, minority rights, human rights catalogues, accountability mechanisms and parliamentary democracy and

market economy and private associations further limiting the power of the state.

And the European Union as a community of law guaranteeing the rights and the integrity of smaller European nations against the ambitions of their bigger neighbours as well as the rights of the individuals.

European history can be understood as a continuous struggle for freedom. Church and state represented two separate sources of power neither of them ever able to completely dominate the other. The division of levels of government and separate people of separate language increased the complexity on our peninsula further and served as a protective mechanism providing also alternative solutions and institutional arrangements as in a gene pool.

If Europe is looking for an identity it is exactly there. Not demos, the obligation to feel and behave as one, brought to its extreme by "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuehrer" in the perspective to wage war on your neighbour, but pluralism protected by a constitutional order as enshrined in the European Union treaties. Diversity needs tolerance and pluralism, not demos.

Could it be that it is our identity to have overcome identity politics or at least to always try to?

There is a philosophical base for this approach. Kant is asking us to choose the reasons of our own actions in a way that they can always become general laws. No space for one community against another. This finishing stone of the philosophy of enlightenment is the base for a tradition of thought that allows to counter factually understand this world as one in vocation. Human rights being universal and not dependent on who you are or where you come from or the consent of your local dictator.

This idea of one world based on undeniable rights can be an authentic contribution of Europe to the global debate. The increasing capacity to destroy our globe not only through nuclear weapons now being acquired by rough states, but also the foreseeable disastrous consequences of continuing climate change and mass migration make a philosophical basis of world interior politics a necessity.

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For Margherita, Teodoro and Emiliano.  
And for my students.

*With European unification, a dream of earlier generations  
has become a reality.*

*Our history reminds us that we must protect this  
for the good of future generations.*

Berlin Declaration  
25 March 2007