

Eye to eye with the unwanted

By IAN BURUMA

NEW YORK — Baruch Spinoza, the 17th-century Dutch philosopher, Benjamin Disraeli, the 19th-century British prime minister, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the 21st-century French president, have one thing in common: All were sons of immigrants.

People have migrated to other countries for thousands of years — to escape, prosper, be free or just to start again. Not a few enriched their adopted homelands by achieving great things or producing children who did.

New waves of immigrants are rarely, if ever, popular. But they are often needed. Many people have migrated to Western European countries from North Africa and Turkey during the last half-century, not because of Western generosity, but because they were required for jobs that natives no longer wanted. They were treated as temporary workers, however, not as immigrants.

Once the job was done, it was assumed that the migrants would go home. When it became clear that most had elected to stay, and were joined by extended families, many were grudgingly allowed to become citizens of European states, without necessarily being treated as such.

Xenophobes, as well as leftist multicultural ideologues, regarded these new Europeans as utterly different from the native born, albeit for different reasons. Multiculturalists saw attempts to integrate non-Westerners into the Western mainstream as a form of neocolonialist racism, while xenophobes just didn't like anything that looked, talked or smelled foreign.

We who live in rapidly aging societies, such as Western Europe or Japan, still need immigrants. Without them, necessary institutions, such as hospitals, would be unstaffed, and more and more elderly people would have to be supported by fewer and fewer young people.

And yet many politicians, especially in Europe, now treat immigration as a disaster. New populist parties garner large numbers of votes simply by frightening people about the supposed horrors of Islam, or of clashing civilizations. Mainstream politicians are so afraid of this populist demagoguery that they often end up mimicking it.

The failure of integration of non-Western immigrants in such countries as France, Germany or The Netherlands is often exaggerated by hysterical alarmists; Europe, after all, is not about to be "Islamized." But the fact that some young people of African, South Asian or Middle Eastern descent feel so alienated in the European countries of their birth that they are happy to murder their fellow citizens in the name of a revolutionary religious ideology means that something is amiss.

Children of past immigrants, however unwelcome they might feel, rarely wished to blow up the places to which their parents had chosen to move. Politics in many Muslim countries is partly to blame. Islamist extremism is a handy revolutionary creed for vulnerable young people to latch onto, to gain a sense of power and belonging. Hindus, Christians or Buddhists lack such a cause, which is why political terrorism is largely confined to Muslims.

But as the occasional riots in French immigrant areas show, violence is not confined to Muslims. National policies have something to do with this, but so do the deeply flawed immigration policies in all European Union countries.

Apart from EU citizens, who in theory are allowed to seek work anywhere in the Union (Romanian Gypsies in France might argue otherwise), three other categories of people have been allowed to settle in Europe: former colonial subjects, such as Algerians in France, Indians and Pakistanis in Britain, or Surinamese in The Netherlands; "guest laborers" who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s; and political refugees, the so-called asylum-seekers. Unlike in Canada or the United States, economic immigrants are not allowed to become citizens in exchange for their necessary labor.

Immigrants — not "guest workers" — who come for work are more likely to want to integrate to some degree, and to be treated as fellow citizens, than people who come with the baggage of empire, or simply as refugees, or, worse, people pretending to be refugees because they have no other way to gain access to wealthy countries' job markets. But European welfare states are better equipped to deal with asylum-seekers and other newcomers as needy dependents than as people in need of a job.

When European politicians claim that France, Britain or The Netherlands are not traditional "immigrant countries" like the U.S., they are right only up to a point, as the examples of Spinoza, Disraeli and Sarkozy show. What is true is that large numbers of de facto immigrants have accumulated in many countries in a very short time, in a haphazard way that makes it seem as though no government was ever in control.

Children of guest workers feel unwanted. Refugees languish helplessly in welfare nets, or are suspected of being cheats. And former colonial subjects, though in many cases remarkably well integrated, still bear the scars of troubled imperial histories.

Japan, and even the U.S., is not immune to these problems, either. The Japanese government simply got rid of its Iranian guest workers when jobs dried up. But it won't be as easy to deal with the hundreds of thousands of Chinese who live in Japan without the rights of citizenship. The same is true of Mexicans working in the U.S., often illegally.

There is no quick or easy way out of this problem, especially in bad economic times. But Europe — and Japan, for that matter — should start by making economic migration legitimate. This means working out what jobs need to be filled, and welcoming those who will fill them, not as guests, but as equal citizens.

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