

VIEWPOINT

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The Rights of Passage

Europe and its immigrants both need to improve their assimilation skills

ONCE THERE WAS A KOREAN IMMIGRANT IN NEW YORK with a bright idea. He would open a food store in the basement of a fancy condo building on Park Avenue. No victuals were sold for half a mile in either direction. He would provide a vital service and make a pretty penny to boot.

But up on the penthouse level, there lived Mrs. Wassermann (or was it Ryan or Santini?) who loathed the idea. A Korean? Fruit crates? Never mind that her grandfather had probably started out the same way with a pushcart on the Lower East Side. Now she was on top.

She and the other residents were not going to let the interloper ruin the neighborhood. But the Korean was lucky because the press waded in. Amid ringing editorials invoking opportunity and the American Way, the authorities relented, and the little Korean got his licence (though he had to promise also to carry champagne and Godiva chocolates). Thus began another chapter in the unending story of the American Dream.

When will we celebrate such sagas about Turks, Bosnians or Afghans in Europe? Well, there is "Zizou" Zidane, born of Algerian parents, who propelled France to victory in the World Cup. But there aren't many more. Instead, we read about the National Front party that scores double-digit triumphs in French elections. Or about center-right parties in Germany campaigning with the slogan, "Don't vote for us if you want more immigrants."

With the exception, perhaps, of some ex-colonial powers like Holland and Britain, Europe is not well prepared for the inevitable. Europe can brake, but not stop the influx. Take Germany: the 350,000 asylum seekers and "guest worker" relatives arriving per year is about the same rate as America receives, relative to population size.

But Europe has two vexing problems—one of its own, one of the immigrants' making. The recipient countries are organized in such a way as to make integration as difficult as can be. And the immigrants don't necessarily want to become French, German, etc. In the main, they want to prosper while dreaming of returning to the "old country." Putting one and one together equals maximum trouble.

Of course, Europe *should* want immigrants. They inject fresh blood into aging populations, they fill gaps in a shrinking labor pool, and they contribute to depleted social security systems. Because newcomers have to work harder and think faster to even the ethnic odds, they keep the pot bubbling. Those who make it from the basement to the penthouse break down the barriers of privilege and stoke the fire of creativity. Everybody wins. Which is the more interesting society—open America or closed Japan?

But look how Europe is organized. Rigid labor laws don't allow the outsider to sell his labor at a competitive rate to surmount the handicap of attitudes toward race and color. Our Park Avenue Korean could not keep his store open all night

in Berlin because the law says "Nein" after 8 p.m. Asylum seekers aren't even allowed to work in Germany; no wonder that these welfare recipients draw hostility.

If Europe dismantled these barriers, if it allowed the immigrants to do their best, life would improve for both. If it made naturalization as easy as does the U.S., which requires only five years of legal residence, aliens would become citizens. Even better, they would acculturate faster and *want* to become citizens. But Europe is not as lucky as America used to be. The classic immigrant kept eating pasta and gefilte fish, but he wanted to become a real, non-hyphenated American. His counterparts in Europe today (and, increasingly, Hispanics in the U.S.) seek a better life—but otherwise phone home a lot while watching hometown TV on the satellite channel. This is not a winning strategy. Unwilling to learn the language and the ways of the new country, the new entrants often don't make it out of the basement. And so, the statistics everywhere tell a sorry tale of alienation and crime. Naturally, this "proves" the point of the Pied Pipers on the right who scream, "Don't vote for us if you want more immigrants."

Yet despite their proven inability to keep them out, the rich nations should want the immigrants in. But there is a limiting condition: the rate of immigration must not exceed the pace of integration. In that respect the multiculturalist left is as obtuse as the nativist right. If every community speaks its own language, there goes the national dialogue, the lifeblood of liberal democracy. If each group listens only to itself, obligation to the whole goes *kaput*. In the worst case, democracy turns into a racial and ethnic spoils system that replaces "we" with "us against them."

"Make it easy and make it tough," is the better maxim. "Make it easy to make it" is the first part. The second part contains the obligation: You can keep the taco and the tandoori, but you must learn the language and the cultural skills that turn aliens into effective competitors and citizens. Too harsh? But why should a liberal democracy be different from a tennis club? In both cases, the acolyte must learn the game, respect the rules and affirm the cause. ■