

Redefining The 'We'

INTERVIEW BY THOMAS SEIFERT

According to **Charles Taylor**, integration can only occur if immigrants are permitted to collaborate in the definition of national identity. In this interview, published on the occasion of the philosopher's 85th birthday on November 5, he proposes an intercultural approach based on shared experience.

Thomas Seifert: Nationality is crucial in a welfare state like Austria, since it determines access to benefits. It is also the central issue for the resurgent far-right. How can tensions around nationality be overcome?

Charles Taylor: The solution isn't easy, but it is to re-define what it is to be Austrian. Trying to understand your national identity purely in terms of where you come from is going to become increasingly impossible for all North Atlantic societies, because economics and war has made it necessary that we receive people from outside. This is particularly hard for Europe, which traditionally does not consider itself an immigrant society. We have the same problem in Canada, particularly in Quebec. Until twenty years ago, the French speaking part of Quebec was made up of people who mostly were descended from original settlers. When immigrants started arriving, we needed to develop an approach to integration. We call this 'interculturalism', not 'multiculturalism'. This concept could be relevant to a country like Austria. Starting from this originally German-speaking Catholic country, with all its particular traditions, you can elaborate, together with the people that have come in, a new understanding of what it is to be Austrian. Interculturalism means developing the sense, particularly among younger people, that nationality is a work in progress. This can be very difficult in a period of economic pressure and austerity, and that's why we see a rise in right-wing populism in many—though not all—European societies. The far-right targets the European Union precisely because it stands for this kind of openness. It's a tremendous struggle, but you can start winning if the younger generation gets excited about this idea of Austria.

Seifert: But what could this entail for migrants from Turkey and the Arab world?

Taylor: I co-chaired a commission in Quebec on integration, and we asked people: Why did you come to Quebec? They gave two reasons. First was *liberté*, freedom. These were Muslims from the Maghreb. And the second reason people gave was their children's education: I want my children to have a chance at a career that I could never have hoped for, to go to university and so on. That's what draws people. If some part of that dream is fulfilled, then they become very attached. The next generation goes through school, they come to love French literature and the Quebecois sense of humour, our *chansonnerie* and so on. That's how integration comes about. If all goes well, you can create this idea that yes, we

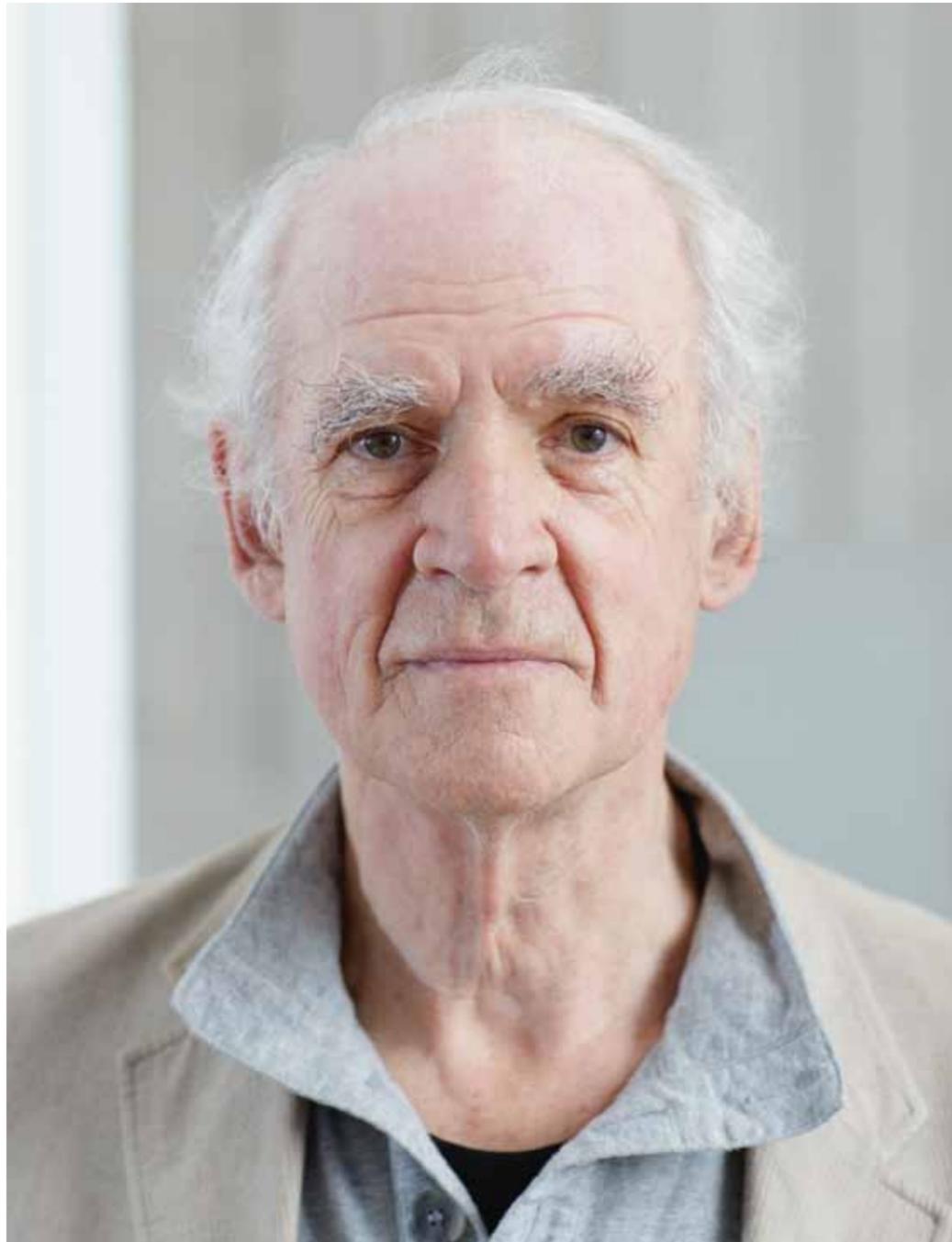


Photo: Philipp Steinweller

have this culture that comes from way back, but it is evolving and changing. Young people understand that well.

Seifert: So culture is one avenue for integration?

Taylor: Yes, definitely. The problem is that it doesn't happen just like that. You need time and you need

Maghrebi, partly because after the post-war boom there was a problem with employment, and partly because of the fraught history of France in Algeria. So you get a majority of these Maghrebi living in the *banlieues*, they are not getting jobs and they are very frustrated.

long. On the one hand you have to avoid provoking the sense that 'they don't want us here', and on the other hand you have to avoid saying, 'this identity is dangerous'. This is not easy given the geopolitical situation. We are going through a dangerous passage. There are better and worse

Interculturalism means developing the sense that nationality is a work in progress.

to avoid deep rifts. Deep rifts happen when the dream doesn't get answered. In Europe, one of the paradigm cases of this is France. Between the two wars, France integrated a huge number of people from Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal. Admittedly, these are Catholic countries, but the integration was incredible. After the Second World War, the same thing didn't happen with the

An anti-identity starts to form, the 'new French'. That's one way in which the thing can fail. And the other way in which it can fail is if the host society immediately starts stigmatizing. Unfortunately, the French have got into a terrible rut of stigmatization. They have this absurd legislation prohibiting the *hijab*, which is purely symbolic, but which signals to the migrants that they don't be-

performances in Europe at the moment. Societies need to understand why some young people get turned by Islamic extremism and need to work with leaders in the community to prevent this happening. If they do that they will get through this transition period.

Seifert: How can there be reconciliation between Islamist groups who consider the West to be the ene-

my, and groups in the West who consider the enemy to be Islam?

Taylor: What you need is the understanding that we are developing among ourselves, that we are working together to stop this. Along with the best possible police intelligence there has to be real collaboration with people who have some kind of authority with these kids. You need to create the sense that it's not just the host society, but society as a whole, including representatives of people from outside, that is working to prevent Islamic extremism. When a culture has been highly homogeneous for a long time, then it's natural that the arrival of newcomers makes people uncomfortable. One doesn't have to moralize this. But with time, and if we can avoid really terrible conflicts, we can get people beyond this anxiety. We see this happening all the time, people who are very xenophobic enter into some kind of contact with immigrants and begin to see that they're not that different, that they're not that bad.

Seifert: What causes xenophobia? Is it competition for resources and welfare benefits? Is it anxiety that immigrants work harder, that their children will do better? Or is it a deeper kind of anxiety, based on what Zygmunt Bauman has referred to as the dystopia that immigrants represent, the possibility that one's existence is not as secure as one imagines it to be?

Taylor: There may be something in the last idea but it isn't articulated. However the first two are articulated. Even in situations where careful study shows that jobs are not being stolen and that there are fewer immigrants claiming welfare benefits than others. In the end, the express belief about these threats, even when it isn't valid, can be overcome by working and living together. In a big city like Montreal, problems do exist, but so does the antidote. When you get polls asking whether people want French-type legislation, the numbers in favour are higher in the suburbs, where the French-Canadian middle class lives.

Seifert: How do you account for the fact that, in Europe, support for the far-right tends to come from the lower end of the social spectrum?

Taylor: Growing inequalities undoubtedly add to the sense that one is getting a raw deal. It's easier to blame the immigrant next door than certain features of the system. This is a problem not just for integration, but for democracy as such. When you get growing inequalities, people at the lower end check out of democracy and become recruitable for parties offering this utterly simplistic solution.