

Josep Fontana

# Europe, history and identity

**The concept of Europe beyond a mere geographical name, as the collective term used to identify a group of men and women as Europeans, initially emerged for the purpose of defining the members of societies that had supposedly reached the height of progress and civilisation, something distinguishing them from the “others”.**

This was at first—and even today still is in many senses—a racist concept, which has often been identified with “white”, in contrast with darker-skinned men and women. This option involves the added advantage of being able to extend the term to the peoples descending from Europeans settled in other continents. This was how Kipling used the term in his poem “The White Man’s Burden”, written in 1899 to celebrate the United States’ conquest of the Philippines, encouraging them to carry out the white man’s civilising labours there. This meant that the Spaniards who had been on the islands for three centuries were not deemed white and, one might suppose, not even European. The idea might well tie in with a famous one of Mr. Fraga, who, when he was Minister for Propaganda and Tourism, took pains to inform any Europeans who wished to visit this country that Spain was “different”.

Until recently there were almost no attempts to write histories of Europe because what sense could there be in writing the history of a part of humanity living in a poorly-defined space and with no common past? What had usually been done was to Europeanise the history of the world, putting forward the Europeans and their own North-American relatives as the spearhead of human progress and placing all the others on a scale of greater or lesser backwardness in relation to them: historical progress was thus roughly identified with the others’ efforts to imitate European societies.

The other way this sort of history has been used, stemming from the one I have just mentioned, was to seek a justification of the wealth acquired by the Europeans, in

**Dibuix negre II (Black Drawing II),**

Antoni Tàpies (2005)

paint and pencil on paper

23,8 x 16,5 cm



Tàpies

opposition to the idea so widespread among colonised countries that this enrichment came from plundering them<sup>1</sup>. Hence, such histories were used in the search for some reasonable form of explaining what has been called “European exceptionalism”. It would be practically impossible to cover the great number of hypotheses that have been put forward to explain the causes of this economic superiority, which would only seem to have started from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Some of them are based on natural advantages (on biological, ecological or geographical reasons),<sup>3</sup> on certain moral and cultural “virtues” (such as late marriages, giving rise to a less expansive demography, and consequently leaving more resources available for investment),<sup>4</sup> diverse reasons of economic efficiency or technology of sails and guns,<sup>5</sup> amongst many others. One of the latest ones, for example, explains European superiority through the use of glass, which “transformed humanity’s relations with the natural world” and “changed the meaning of reality, favouring vision over memory and suggesting new concepts of proof and evidence”, all of which is supposed to have given the West an unquestionable advantage over the short-sighted societies of the East.<sup>6</sup>

Another wide variety of explanations associates western superiority with its progress in the field of forming the modern state, initially exposing us to a number of misleading elements, through both the difficulty involved in defining exactly what the “modern state” consists in, as well as the fact that a comparative approach to the history of the states of Europe and Asia reveals more parallelisms than divergences in this field.<sup>7</sup> The thing is that we Europeans have decided that the others are incapable of attaining modernity on their own account—in the same way as we have decided that they are “societies without any history” through the simple expedient of ignoring this—and disqualify any attempt to take the same road towards the “modern state” on the other hand. In our setting nationalism is a sign of modernity, but doctor John Warnock, an Englishman who held an important post in Egypt for over twenty-five years, diagnosed Egyptian nationalism as “an infectious mental disorder”.<sup>8</sup>

■ <sup>1</sup> For example, in Walter Rodney’s book, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, London, Bogle-L’Ouverture, 1972.  
<sup>2</sup> Paul Bairoch (ed.), *Disparities in economic development since the industrial revolution*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981; by the same Bairoch, *Victoires et déboires. Histoire économique et sociale du monde du xvii<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, especially volume III. Contradicting Bairoch, Angus Maddison claims that the European advantage started long before, possibly even in late medieval times, but his speculations on the figures of GNP per inhabitant from 1000 to 1820 are fanciful and the historical arguments that he seeks to use to support these end up being unworthy through their coarseness (Angus Maddison, “Western Economy and that of the rest of the world in the last millennium”, in *Revista de historia económica*, xxii [2004], n<sup>o</sup>. 2, pp. 259-336).  
<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence. China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, for example, gives basic importance to the availability of mineral coal.  
<sup>4</sup> To restrict myself to the most recent examples: J. R. McNeill “The reserve army of the unmarried in world economic history: flexible fertility regimes and the wealth of nations”, in D. H. Aldcroft and R. E. Catterall (eds.), *Rich nations-poor nations. The long-run perspective*,

Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 1996, pp. 23-38; John P. Powelson, *Centuries of economic endeavor. Parallel paths in Japan and Europe and their contrast with the Third World*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1994.  
<sup>5</sup> An idea of Carlo M. Cipolla (*Guns and sails*) which Alfred W. Crosby later pursued in *Throwing fire. Projectile technology through history* (Cambridge, 2002). Crosby had previously written about ecological imperialism (Cambridge 1986) and about the advantages stemming from the diffusion of quantification (*The measure of reality: quantification and western society, 1250-1600*, Cambridge, 1997).  
<sup>6</sup> Alan Macfarlane and Gerry Martin, *The glass bathyscaphe. How glass changed the world*, London, Profile Books, 2002, p. 18; also Chiara Frugoni, *Medioevo sul naso*, Rome, Laterza, 2001.  
<sup>7</sup> Victor Lieberman, “Transcending east-west dichotomies: state and culture formation in six ostensibly disparate areas”, in Victor Lieberman (ed.), *Beyond binary histories. Re-imagining Eurasia to c. 1830*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 19-102.  
<sup>8</sup> Bernard Porter, “Strew the path with flowers”, in *London Review of Books*, 4th March 2004, p. 33, in a review of James Mills’ book, *Cannabis Britannica*.

**Still, the search for a European identity** has for some time now left legitimization of exceptionalism in the background —since now that the Far East has the greatest rates of economic growth this has lost interest as an explanatory element— to concentrate instead on seeking historical background for the present European Union. This is not an easy task at all, as the most distant precedent that one can find dates back to 1648, with the peace of Westphalia, which is the first time that a group of governors talks in civil terms and not as members of Christendom, and which more strictly begins with the Vienna congress of 1814-1815, which was the first international meeting held on behalf of the European powers, and which gave rise to the appearance of the first hymn of Europe, now surprisingly forgotten —a cantata which Beethoven composed with the title of “The glorious moment”, which exalted the coalition of powers. This was first performed on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1814, at the same time as the “Battle of Vitoria”, and when it came to the point where the choir sings, in the city of Vienna’s voice, “everything lofty and sublime of the Earth has come together within my walls”, met with public acclamation, in a reaction which to me does not seem to be particularly Europeanising.

The subject of a permanent alliance of European powers was dropped much before, with the failure of the system of congresses. And the very idea of a possible union had almost no success until the nazis recovered this with their programme of “new European order”; but this would have to be considered rather more as the history of empires than that of unions. Outside this, there is little more than count Coudenhove-Kalergi and his Pan-European Movement’s lucubrations without much practical content in the nineteen twenties, or those of Aristide Briand in 1929. The most forward-looking step was taken in 1944 by the governments in exile of Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg, who decided that, after the war was over, they would form a customs union with the name of Benelux. After the end of the Second World War some great projects for unity were put forward, with a lot of festivals and lofty speeches, given at events like the 1948 celebration of a European congress which was attended by 750 politicians, from veterans like Churchill or Adenauer to the young Mitterrand, and which started a movement which led in 1949 to the creation of a Council of Europe made up of a Commission of Ministers and a Consultative Assembly that actually did little more than produce and disseminate rhetoric.

The origins of the European Union have nothing to do with the background mentioned above, but, as is well known, stemmed from very modest economic initiatives starting with the European Coal and Steel Community, the result of the Schuman plan in 1950, which was got under way in 1952 and followed in 1957 by signing the Treaty of Rome, which created the European Economic Community. Though significant in the field of the economy, and if you wish even in that of international relations, these did not go very far at all as regards political bonds. This would be seen in De Gaulle’s attitude opposing Great Britain’s joining because —as one French minister said to a British politician— at that time, the six members of the community were five chickens and a cock, understood to be France, while if Great Britain were allowed to join with the countries that were associated with it, there would be more chickens, but also two cocks, and that would not bode well for life in the farmyard.

The endeavour to give some kind of political content to this community explains why the attempts to construct a history of Europe legitimating this have proliferated, just as the

supposedly national histories sponsored by states since the 19<sup>th</sup> century were used to legitimate modern nation states, inventing genealogies going back to prehistoric times. But to the same extent as this European Union is a union of states to which their histories attribute an immemorial origin, the results tend to be little more than the more or less compared sum of the individual histories that form these. This statist fallacy forces historians to work from the modern political frameworks, artificially projected backwards, deliberately ignoring the fact that today's "ethnic" frontiers have nothing "natural" about them, but are the result of centuries of wars, of forced migrations, expulsions and cleansing and cultural genocide operations. One could for example think of the case of a Yugoslavia bonded and broken up again in seventy-five years; twenty-five years ago we would have considered it quite sound to speak of medieval Yugoslavia, and now that has become meaningless. If this is the case, why should it be any more meaningful to talk of the medieval history of other similar "national-state" entities? And what is the worth of a Europe made up of comparisons between a non-existent medieval France, Germany or Italy?

**This all stems from the dire confusion** between a cultural and awareness phenomenon, like that of the nation, and the political fact of the state, the foundation which we should look for in the social contract, and not in a common history. The way that nation states have sought to unite, or —perhaps more accurately— *compact*, the diverse cultural traditions in their sphere, absorbing these into a dominant one, succeeded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, linked with the compulsory teaching of "national history", like the sort we had to suffer as recently as under Franco's regime. But insofar as the last few decades have witnessed the fragmentations of old state structures, as occurred with the Soviet empire, and we have seen new states rushing to make up their own national historical traditions, the validity of this form of understanding the past has started to be questioned. As opposed to a view exalting frontiers which did not exist until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which ignores the fact that the limits defined by treaties were easily crossed or that currencies flowed around internationally, with no guarantee other than their cash value,<sup>9</sup> we have learned to value the zones of contact on both sides of frontiers, which were the setting for many economic, cultural and ecological exchanges at times when persons, goods and ideas moved around them freely.<sup>10</sup>

Getting rid of the mythology confusing the state with the nation is necessary not only to understand history better, but to live in the present. After having to face conflicts like the ones in Nagorno-Karabakh or Chechnia, Evgeni Primakov, who was the prime minister of Russia not so long ago, gives us this reflection on the reality of the current world in his memoirs: "If we take into account that there are two thousand nations and ethnic groups coexisting in 150 states, we should come to the universal conclusion that the best solution is to guarantee the rights of national minorities within multinational states".<sup>11</sup>

■ <sup>9</sup> Eric Helleiner, *The making of national money: territorial currencies in historical perspective*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2003.

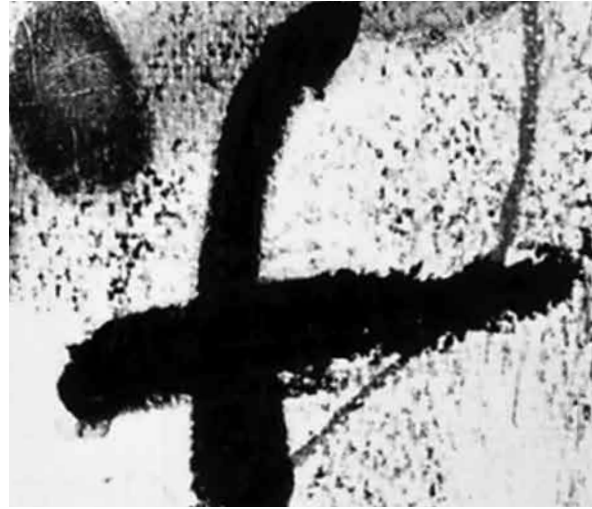
<sup>10</sup> Mark von Hagen, "Empires, borderlands, and diasporas: Eurasia as anti-paradigm for the post-soviet era", a text appearing in *Ab Imperio*, a magazine published in Kazan, which I know of thanks to professor Sergey Glebov's paper.

<sup>11</sup> Evgeni Primakov, *Russian crossroads*, chapter IX.

<sup>12</sup> Barry W. Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean. The Atlantic world and its peoples, 8000 BC-AD 1500*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The corrupting sea. A study of Mediterranean history*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000; see also John Wansbrough, *Lingua franca in the Mediterranean*, Richmond, Curzon Press, 1996.

“Getting rid of the mythology confusing the state with the nation is necessary not only to understand history better, but to live in the present”



The truth is that the immense majority of states are multinational in one way or another, which means that they ought to abandon their claim to justification established on a patriotism based in turn on founding myths, often built on an identitarian racism, to assume that the new legitimacy is based on the social contract that their subjects renew in general elections, in exchange for requiring the social services that the state is supposed to have to provide.

A legitimate history of Europe cannot thus be that of the present states projected backwards, but one which tackles how the relations between the inhabitants of the diverse areas of the continent were established over time. Barry Cunliffe has published an ambitious review of ancient and medieval history which sustains that there is an Atlantic Europe going from Iceland to Gibraltar, through Galicia, where thousands of years facing the ocean have meant that “Celts, Bretons and Galicians have closer relations with their maritime neighbours than with their English, French or Spanish compatriots”<sup>12</sup>. Something similar, even more complex, can be said of the Mediterranean, in respect of which Horden and Purcell have published the first volume of what intends to be the history of three thousand years of common life of Europeans, Asians and Africans around the sea<sup>13</sup>.

Against so many studies on non-existent European states in medieval or modern times, there are just a few which talk of the migrations, of the trade routes which connected the Baltic with the Black Sea, of the coexistence of shepherds and flocks over and above the political borders, of the routes taken by travelling traders over all the continent’s roads, of the communities of seamen, of the paths that would be taken by religious dissidents (which explain why the persecuted English Lollards took refuge in Bohemia with the Czech Hussites); cultural phenomena such as the ones stemming from the scattering of the Sephardim expelled from the Iberian Peninsula (who found in Holland the freedom allowing the development of thought like Spinoza’s, which could have led to burning at the stake here in Spain), the diffusion of the rationalist ideas of the Enlightenment, passed on in books that no state censorship could manage to curb (from 1751 to 1782

25,000 copies of the *Encyclopédie*, which meant 900,000 volumes, were circulating around Europe), and of so many other activities and group relations that established bonds of attachment and facilitated cultural rapprochements many centuries before governments thought up European unity from the higher spheres.

What particular characteristics, defining a possible European identity, can be found in the culture that emerged from such exchanges? The academic convention tends to repeat that its defining signs are the traditions of classical culture and Christianity. But if we look into the most fertile points in the formation of European reality in medieval times we will discover that there is a lot more to it than that. There is a borderland region, permeable to the circulation of goods, men and ideas, where the classical and Christian substrates, but also those of the old local cultures, were blended in with the contributions of the science and techniques of Asia, arriving above all through the Moslem world, with such essential items as the Indian numbering system, with new crops and new farming techniques and such important technical imports as those of gunpowder and paper, which enabled

“... European values are today threatened by a dangerous involution”

the multiplication of written texts. We will also see how this crossbreeding could be more fruitfully developed, creating a genuinely European culture from it, thanks to a large extent to the political failure of the attempts to reconstruct the framework of the empire and to the Church's powerlessness in its attempt to impose strict patterns of thought.

The main characteristics that have enabled this culture to form and identifying traits to be wrought from it are on one hand the tradition of struggles against the despotism of empires—all imperial ventures have been either largely ineffective, like the Holy Roman German Empire, or short-lived, like those of Napoleon or Hitler—which would lead to the development of representative government systems; and on the other the growth of a rational and critical culture which has its remote origins in the medieval blossoming of heresies and takes form in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries with that final heresy which we know as the Enlightenment, through the work of Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, Hume, Montesquieu or Diderot, among so many others.

This dual tradition would inspire amongst us a sustained struggle for individual freedoms and human rights (from the French revolution, which was not a revolution of landowners like the North-American one, but, as Michelet saw it, was characterised by an active popular participation) and later on, those of the First International, a parallel struggle for social rights (for such substantial things as public education, public health or the pensions system) won over one hundred and fifty years of group struggle. Right up to the present day these would continue to be the distinctive traits of a European society which would in 1939 associate the struggle against fascism with the establishment of the welfare state.

These European values are today threatened by a dangerous involution, born in the United States in the nineteen seventies, from the memorandum in which Lewis Powell denounced that the enemies of “free enterprise” were above all “university students, teachers, the world of the communication media, intellectuals and literary journals, artists and scientists”<sup>14</sup>.

The result of this campaign has been the ideological counter-revolution that we are living through, financed by the great private foundations controlling television stations, sponsoring the publication of hundreds of books and paying university chairs<sup>15</sup>, in association with the Christian fundamentalist groups with visions such as those of evangelical leader Tim LaHaye, one of the founders of the Moral Majority movement, which has spread its prophetic message in a series of utopian novels which have sold fifty-five million copies in the United States. This message consists in an interpretation of the biblical texts, particularly Revelation, which sustains that when the biblical lands have been occupied by Israel—and these groups help to speed up the process by financing the Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory—the legions of the Antichrist—who, according to LaHaye, turns out to be a secretary general of the UN who will promote a general disarmament policy, the reinforcement of the United Nations and a universal currency—will attack Israel and there will be a decisive battle in the valley of Armageddon. It also includes the “rapture”: according to what is said in the first epistle to the Thessalonians, the righteous, the real believers, will be caught up by God in the air “in the clouds” and seated at his right hand to see how their political and ideological enemies remaining on the planet, the people *left behind*, undergo plagues and harm in the years of tribulation elapsing prior to the second coming of the Messiah, who will establish a thousand-year reign on the Earth.

I am not talking about a couple of isolated lunatics. This fundamentalist Christian right owns 1,600 radio stations and 250 TV stations, through which they have a powerful influence on how their listeners perceive what is happening in the world, and can exert vital pressure on presidential elections: a recent article in *The Economist* claims that the “traditionalist Christians” have provided over 40 per cent of Bush’s total votes<sup>16</sup>. This 40 per cent coincides with the proportion of North-Americans who think that the Bible has to be understood as fully and literally true, which explains the inertia attained by the large-scale pseudo-science campaigns against evolutionism (in some places creationism or the theory of intelligent design now have to be explained as valid alternatives) going as far as groups whose literal faith in the Bible leads them to sustain that it is actually the sun that turns around the earth! Taking the same approach, there are all the campaigns which question global warming and which refuse to accept the measures for controlling gas emissions. Because it is indeed hardly worth getting very upset about the state of the environment if one is sure that the world will very soon be ending: a *Time/CNN* survey showed that 36 per cent of those replying thought that Revelation was a true prophecy.<sup>17</sup>

All this has a global facet which we should not lose sight of. Andreas Huygen wrote that the battle of ideas of the Cold War was between two sides sharing a common ground, who both claimed to be heirs of the Enlightenment. What they were arguing over was how progress and modernisation, equality and freedom should be understood, without considering denying these. He adds that the Western liberalism which won

■ <sup>14</sup> John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, *The right nation. Conservative power in America*, New York, Penguin, 2004, pp. 77-78.

<sup>15</sup> Sefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America alone. The neo-conservatives and the global order*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> “Social conservatives. Following their own path”, in *The Economist*, 2nd April 2005, pp. 39-40.

<sup>17</sup> Esther Kaplan, *With God on their side*, New York, The New Press, 2004, pp. 30-31; Bill Moyers, “Welcome to Doomsday”, in *The New York Review of Books*, 24th March, 2005, pp. 8-10, Micklethwait and Woolridge, *The right nation*, pp. 155-160.



this battle against the Soviet Union “is now challenged by an anti-liberal wave opposing international cooperation, constitutional guarantees of habeas corpus, the separation of Church and State and the secular rationalism of modernity”.

To show just to what extent these concepts differ from ours, i.e., European ones, in such basic aspects as the need to guarantee collective rights, two examples might perhaps suffice: the Concerned Women for America group is fighting the United Nations Convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, alleging that this means that they are being denied the right to decide about what refers to the family or children’s education and prohibited from acknowledging that “men and women are fundamentally different”; another group, the Eagle Forum, claims that the United Nations Convention on children’s rights forbids parents to force children to do housework and creates the possibility of parents who want to educate their children at home, instead of taking them to school, being accused of negligence.<sup>18</sup>

As well as this attitude, opposing any guarantee of human rights, I could mention the one referring to social rights, systematically opposed for many years now. One example gives a clear idea of the present situation: as unfavourable comments were heard about the news that a major North-American chain store, Wal-Mart, was threatening to close any shop where there was an attempt to set up a trade union, the chain published on 7<sup>th</sup> April this year a two-page advertisement in the *New York Review of Books*, with the title of “Wal-Mart’s impact on society: a decisive time for North-American capitalism”, decorated with a colour picture of a happy family with children and a dog playing in front of a detached house, where it justifies its low salaries and the lack of health care for its workers and sustains that it is not only businesses —nor those like Wal-Mart which prove to have made a 10,000 million dollar profit last year— which have to settle social problems but that in the next decade there has to be a serious debate, and I quote this literally, about the way “business, government and individuals have to share the burden of financing a decent society”.

A history of Europe able to present the traits that have gradually fashioned European identity, which does justice to what its tradition of the defence of human rights and social rights has meant, and which properly values all it has contributed to creating a critical culture, should help us today to defend ourselves, at very difficult times, from the assault of a counter-revolution which attempts to deny these ideals, the legacy of the struggles of the Enlightenment, of the French Revolution or the First International, which are essential milestones in our history and bear witness to a long-standing effort, which we should not relinquish, to build a society where there can be the greatest equality possible within the greatest freedom possible ||

■ <sup>18</sup> Kaplan, *With God on their side*, p. 31 and *passim*.