

## **Reading A What is Europe? Where is Europe?**

***Hugh Seton-Watson (1985)***

The word 'Europe' has been used and misused, interpreted and misinterpreted, in as many different meanings as almost any word in any language. There have been and are many Europes: the Europe of Greek mythology; the Europe of the geographers – the two extreme western peninsulas of the Asian land mass: the Europe of the Carolingian empire and its successor the EEC: the Europe of Byzantium: industrial Europe and agrarian Europe: 'capitalist' Europe and 'socialist' Europe: the Europe of the great powers and the Europe of Woodrow Wilsonian self-determination; the Europe of self-styled national states and of disaffected national minorities. That is not an exhaustive list. ...

And now we come to the successive paradoxes of my parents' lifetime and my own. The cultural unity of Europe, the allegiance of educated persons all over this continent to an overarching idea of Europe, grew all through the nineteenth century, and especially in its last decades and in the first of this century. And side by side with it grew its negation: healthy natural devotion to individual national cultures, variant flowerings of an overall European culture, became perverted into nationalist fanaticisms; defence and self-defence of the disinherited and the oppressed became perverted into the fanaticism of unlimited class hatred; and boredom with routines of civilian life and yearning for the heroic was perverted into dreams of purifying blood-baths. And the dreams came true; nightmares were surpassed by real life. And the nightmares are still with us.

Russia, as a European great power, made its contribution to the launching of the second great European civil war, but was its chief victim. Russia's was not the highest casualty rate: that was the fate of Serbia, which lost a quarter of its population. But the successive disasters of war, civil war, famine, more famine and purges which overtook Russia surely surpass the record of any other country in modern times. Perhaps China could compete in ghastly rivalry.

And here is the paradox most relevant to my theme. The revolution made by one small political party against the parties which thought they had taken power when Czardom collapsed in war, was made in the name of what was then thought to be the most progressive body of thought in modern Europe – revolutionary Marxist socialism. But the effect of the Bolshevik victory was to destroy or drive into exile the greater part of the Europeanized section of Russian society – at least a million people. ...

Does a belief in the existence of a single European culture require the creation of a single European state, or federation of

states? This was not the expectation of European intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After 1918, in search of thinking minds for drastic measures to prevent a repetition of the recent blood-bath, a few voices were heard in favour of the abolition of state sovereignty. But this was not prevalent in the heyday of the League of Nations, of Briand and Stresemann, whose outlook could well have been described by the slogan of a later generation: '*l'Europe des patries*' [Europe of nation states]. In the 1930s, of course, Europeanism of any sort became remote. In the mid-1940s, during the third and worst European civil war, which was also truly a world war, the only unity offered to Europeans had as its spokesman Dr Joseph Goebbels and his weekly paper with cultural pretensions, *Das Reich*, to some extent an echo of the mythology of European unity favoured by Napoleon Bonaparte, and directed against the same two powers at opposite margins of the continent, Britain and Russia.

In the movement for greater European unity which developed after 1945, the nostalgic memory of a lost cultural unity was certainly a factor, but it was less prominent than a number of others which must be briefly mentioned.

One was the awareness of a common peril. Europe was threatened by Soviet power, as Christendom had once been threatened by Muslim power, first Arab then Turkish. ...

A second force was the reaction of millions of Europeans against the destructive nationalism of the Age of Fascism. This was especially evident amongst French and Germans. ...

The reaction against nationalism went naturally together with the notion of European solidarity. Especially for the defeated Germans and Italians, Europe was a replacement for the fatherland, the claims of which had been so long and so monstrously exploited and perverted by Hitler and Mussolini. A similar tendency was also to be seen further east, especially among the Austrians, Czechs, and Hungarians. ...

The French case is rather special. A sceptic may suggest that French enthusiasm for Europe is to some extent based on an identification of Europe with France, that European culture is French culture, that the appropriate language of European discourse is French and that the horrid patois of the Anglo-Saxons should be banished. There is something in this, but we must not exaggerate.

A third force which needs mention is American pressure for European unity. ...

Lastly I mention the economic forces for the creation of a West European common market ... Moreover, it is, I think, true that the motives of the founding fathers of the EEC were not primarily economic, but that it seemed to them – no doubt

rightly – that initial progress would come more easily and quickly in the economic than in other fields.

I come now to the question, what connection is there, or should there be, between a movement for European economic and political unity, and a sense of a European cultural community? The second can exist without the first: it did for more than 200 years. Can the first exist without the second? It can, but at great cost, and perhaps not for very long. Let us not underrate the need for a positive common cause, for something more exciting than the price of butter, more constructive than the allocation of defence contracts, a need for a European *mystique*. This was understood by the founders of the EEC, men well aware of the European cultural heritage, deeply marked by it. But when a *mystique* gets into the hands of the bureaucrats, there is apt to be trouble. Remember Péguy's aphorism, '*Tout commence par le mystique, et finit par la politique*' [Everything begins with mystique and ends with politics]. The Brussels Eurocrats' *politique* may have much to be said for it, but it is a long way away from the *mystique* of Europe. The basic EEC territory was the former Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne: even the border between the Federal Republic and the DDR is not very different from the line of Charlemagne's advance into Germany. Gradually this neo-Carolingian empire has been extended, but with increasing pontifications as each new recruit was added.

Europe, whether it be a geographical, a cultural or a moral concept, has never been, and is not now, coterminous with the Carolingian empire. Attitudes to the concept of Europe today have striking similarities to those of the distant past. In particular, the two dichotomies of lands of civilization and barbarism, and lands of the true believers and the infidels reappear under new names on both sides of the Lübeck-Trieste line.

Of the dichotomies as seen from the Soviet side, and of the strange similarities in the Muscovite '*mentalités*' [mentalities] of late twentieth and late sixteenth centuries, I have already spoken. The two dichotomies apply also, though in different form, on the western side of the line. The spokesmen of the EEC and NATO readily seek to appropriate the *mystique* of Europe, implying, even if not categorically asserting, that those beyond the line are sunk in a lower level of civilization, in fact in barbarism. They also see something which they call alternately 'the West' or 'Europe' as the protagonist of a true faith which most of them publicly identify with an abstraction called 'Western democracy' while some still think in terms of the older contrast between Christendom and infidel or heathen. Their attitude recalls that of the leaders of late medieval and early modern Christendom who increasingly and implicitly wrote off the Christians living under Muslim rule.

But the truth is that nowhere in the world is there so widespread a belief in the reality, and the importance, of a European cultural community, as in the countries lying between the EEC territory and the Soviet Union. It is true that this belief is complicated by political considerations. The peoples of this region feel a certain resentment against the West Europeans for having done, as they see it, so little to help them; and at the same time, in terms of world power, they see the counterweight to their own imperial master not in Western Europe but in the United States. It might be argued that what they long for is membership of a Western community rather than of a European community. But these two concepts overlap in their imaginations, and the cultural community which they remember, or their parents remember and have told them of, is essentially European.

To these peoples, the idea of Europe is of a community of cultures to which the specific culture, or subculture, of each belongs. None of them can survive without Europe, or Europe without them. This is of course, a myth – by which I mean a sort of chemical compound of truth and fantasy. The absurdities of the fantasy need not obscure the truth; and whether admirable or not, any complex of ideas which gets a powerful hold over whole peoples is historically and politically important.

Source: 'What is Europe, Where is Europe? From Mystique to Politique',  
*Encounter*, July/August 1985, vol. LXV no.2.