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A European civilization: is there any such thing?

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There is no culture that is both general throughout Europe and unique to Europe. So we cannot speak of a 'European civilization' in the same sense as in phrases such as 'Chinese civilization' or 'Jewish civilization' or 'French civilization'. It is therefore prudent not to appeal to the concept of a European civilization in an attempt to justify the attempt to create a European Union or to accelerate the process of Europe-wide state-building. Nor should we feel constrained by such a concept: the future of a European Union should not be influenced by current or traditional ideas of what European civilization is, since such ideas are mistaken: it can be as protean and pluralistic as we wish to make it.

A European civilization would be a good idea. At present, we have only a myth or a sniff of it. Europe is civilized in as much as some Europeans share civilized values with people in other civilizations. In addition, some European communities may have distinctive civilizations of their own. However, there is no such thing as a European civilization that is shared by all the peoples of Europe and is unique to them – a civilization that marks 'us' out from the rest of the world.

By 'a civilization' in this context I mean an area or group – of the largest size possible according to the chosen criteria – characterized by common and distinctive features of culture. We can speak of an Islamic civilization or a French civilization or a Jewish civilization or a Hispanic civilization or a Chinese civilization and know what we mean. The attempt to identify an analogous European civilization turns out, on examination, to be at best a mistake and at worst a pretence. If we want to build a viable future for an enduring European Union, we have to recognize this inconvenient reality, because lies do not necessarily last, whereas, in state-building, facts make reasonably firm

foundations. We have to see 'European civilization' for what it is: a concept like a lifebuoy, useful to cling to only because it is empty.

The impossibility of identifying a European civilization is related to the difficulty of saying who Europeans are. In French and Hispanic civilization, people share an identity based on language. People in Jewish civilization are Jews; in Chinese civilization they are Chinese. Shared identity is, in all these cases, part of the common culture. In Europe, European identity is, at best, under construction: those of us who share it still have a lot of fellow-citizens to convince; and our efforts to promote it are self-hampered by our inability to agree on what it is. Some of us want to assign geographical boundaries to Europe – but that is evidently a pointless exercise, since our region blends into others with no clear defining boundaries. The old French schoolbook definition 'from the Atlantic to the Urals', which De Gaulle notoriously used or abused, is meaningless at both ends. The Atlantic – so impressive at a distance – looks unconvincing as a boundary when viewed close-up. In the last five hundred years or so it has functioned as a means of linking its banks, rather than dividing them. It is speckled with islands, but how many of them are permanently or properly trapped in Europe's trawls? If the Canaries and the Azores are European, what about Iceland or the Cape Verde Islands? If Iceland, why not Greenland? The Canaries and the Azores might be granted anomalous status on the grounds that they are part of European states. But what logic could then exclude St Pierre and Miquelon, say, or the Netherlands' Antilles? Or even Bermuda or St Helena or Ascension Island? And if any of these can be European, dare one mention the Malvinas? Any boundary ruled through the ocean looks as arbitrary as the Tordesillas line.

As an eastern frontier, the Urals are a ridgeless bump, which important historic communities straddle, including the Mordvins, Udmurts and – dare one say? – Russians. Featureless plains flank them to the north. To the south, the Ural river seems a disproportionately modest choice for the demarcation of continents. One must question, moreover, the presumption that only Europe's eastern and western frontiers are problematic. The Mediterranean is not a barrier but the internal sea of a world of its own. On its southern and eastern shores, and on those of its islands that we usually count as being off African and Asian coasts, there are plenty of communities whose cultural profiles and historic experiences have at least as much in common with peoples to their north or west as, say, the Greeks have with Swedes, or Faroese with Friulians. The Caucasus is a fairly precipitous range – but where along it, if anywhere, should the frontiers of Europe run? If Georgia and Armenia claimed a place in Europe, would it not be arbitrary to refuse them? And if they were admitted, what, except prejudice, could justify the exclusion of Azerbaijan? Other pairs of continents are severed from one another by obvious cut-off points: Africa from Asia by the Suez Canal, the Americas from Asia by a strait and an ocean, Antarctica from the rest by its circumambient sea. Europe

and Asia are separated by no defining features. Europe is, in Paul Valéry's famous phrase, a promontory of Asia. It is a regional name, like 'the Middle East' or 'sub-Saharan Africa' or 'South Asia' with no more precision and no more implied unity than any other such label of convenience confers or admits. Apart from the European Union and organizations linked to it, institutions that call themselves European recognize the elasticity of the label. UEFA and Eurovision are open to applicants from what we think of as Asia and Africa. And why not? European is as European thinks: this is a club to which election is by self-assignation.

Partisan agendas – political, cultural, sometimes racist – have warped most historic attempts to locate Europeans in a neatly delimited part of the world. Herodotus's definition – the earliest I know of – was formulated to exclude the Scythians. Strabo revised it to include them, because he saw them as useful allies against Persia. Subsequent definers have insisted, for example, that Russians are Asiatic at one end of Europe or that 'Africa begins at the Pyrénées' at the other. Soviet geographers, for reasons of their own, excluded all the peoples of the Caucasus, fixing the edge of Europe at the ominously named Manych Depression. The English, on their fringe, sometimes seem self-excluded and the opinion that theirs is an irremediably extra-European island is enthusiastically endorsed on the mainland. Hitler wanted to exclude Gypsies and Jews. Helmut Kohl and Andreas Papandreou, and others with similar principles or prejudices, have been anxious for a definition that would exclude the Turks. A distinguished Dutch scholar once told me sincerely that he did not think Italians really belonged in Europe. When I edited *The Times Guide to the Peoples of Europe*, I tried to escape personal prejudices by including any and all historic communities who had ever been assigned to Europe or who lived in territories that had ever been included in proposed definitions of Europe. In consequence, a myriad featured in the pages: Chuvash and Chechens, Mingrelians and Azeri, Kumyks, Mari and Nogay, Veps, Tatars, Kalmyks and Bashkirs, Kurds, Tats, Bats, Avars and Assyrians. Even so, I could not accommodate many people of recent immigration in sections of their own, except by way of disclaimers, although future editions will surely have to include such cloud-born communities as Leicestershire Gujeratis and Yorkshire Bengalis, Alpine Turks, Parisian Maghribis, Randstadt Moroccans and Norwegian Filipinos.

If there is no obvious, objective feature which makes a European European, there may still be what we might call a cultural syndrome – a civilizational profile, composed of a number of criteria drawn from different cultural categories. If so, these criteria, in combination, would constitute the makings of what could reasonably be called a European civilization. The trouble with this approach is that every single item on the usual checklist is unjustified or inapplicable. Take them in turn. Start, say, with religion. This is a defining feature of some civilizations which are properly so called. In the scheme of classification recently

made fashionable by Samuel Huntington it is the supreme criterion. European civilization, it is commonly said, is Christian. Even Voltaire, with some regret, regarded this religion as the 'foundation' of Europe. But Christianity originated in a part of the world not usually included in Europe. It arrived as an exotic import – an 'oriental mystery-cult'. Over most of European history, it has done more to divide Europeans than to unite them. European Christendom is scored with fault-lines that divide peoples in the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions. In some places – in Northern Ireland, in parts of the Balkans – these fault-lines are still frontiers of conflict, flashpoints of violence. If Christianity were ever a wholly or largely European phenomenon, it has long ceased to be so: by proclaiming its universality and spreading Christianity around the world, Europeans have forfeited their special claim to it. Many Europeans have ceased even nominally to adhere to it. Many others subscribe to other religions. In today's world, it is hard to see what purpose is served by calling Europe 'Christian' or even 'Judaeo-Christian', unless it be in an attempt to exclude representatives of other religious traditions. Yet we need a framework for a European future in which Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and adherents of any of the other religions espoused among our citizens can live, peacefully, in the pursuit of happiness, without challenging their faith or questioning their allegiance. This is not a politically correct evasion but a matter of fact: the religious profile of Europe is diverse.

After religion, language is perhaps the most widely asserted constituent of culture. The language-map of Europe is delightfully chaotic. The great historic divisions between mutually unintelligible language-families – Germanic, Slavic and Romance – have been compounded by migrations within Europe, which have shifted and mixed up speakers of languages that belong to those groups, as well as by the importation of labour from distant parts of the world. At no level of analysis is any claim to unity convincing. The languages spoken in Europe are predominantly Indo-European; but the shortcomings of that category are glaring. Indo-European languages are, by definition, more than just European; they unite English with Iranians or Monégasques with Maharashtrians, at least as much as Luxembourgeois with Lithuanians. In every scholarly attempt to reconstruct the spread and development of Indo-European speech, the process starts outside Europe. If, moreover, European civilization were defined as Indo-European speaking, some of Europe's most conspicuous peoples would have to be left outside it: the Basques, the Finns, the Magyars, all of whom have made immense contributions to European history and exerted enormous influence on the cultures of other European peoples.

Except by believers in Black Athena, Graeco-Roman civilization is widely represented as a home-grown European product that is commonly said to constitute a uniquely European heritage. But Helicon has an 'east face'. The tradition that became 'classical' in Athens originated in islands that are now part

of Turkey, and owed a debt to influences from further afield, way beyond the usually-assigned limits of Europe. The classical heritage is lamentably irrelevant to the search for a European civilization today. Europeans have been too successful in selling classicism as part of the common heritage of mankind to reclaim a proprietary right in it. The near-obliteration of classical learning from European schools has at last made the long-lived languages of antiquity genuinely dead to Europeans. Latin has been taught in recent times with more conviction in Malawi than Milan. Postmodern architecture, with its taste for columns and pediments in unlikely materials and offensive proportions, has some claim to be the last classical revival; but in the work of most exponents the classical influence is shallow and its lessons are ill absorbed. It demonstrates the tradition's progressive weakness rather than any abiding strength. In any case, classical pastiche is now as likely to turn up in Tokyo or Disneyland as in the 'Third Rome' or the 'Athens of the North'.

Claims that Europe has a distinctive political culture are no more convincing. The key ingredient is usually said to be democracy. Belief that democracy is a European invention rests on a tendentious identification of the modern democratic tradition with an ancient Greek term for a kind of self-interested elitism. Some years ago, the Greek tourist authority mounted an advertising campaign, featuring shapely bathers cavorting amid ruins over the slogan, 'You were born in Greece.' The campaign was redeemed from obscurity by everyone's familiarity with the myth of the Greek origins of everything worthwhile in European traditions; yet it is a myth we have learned to distrust. Today, when we look at the ostraka and jurors' tokens that once seemed fragments from the very foundations of democracy, we see evidence only of a harsh and rigidly stratified political system. Really, representative democracy, as practised in Europe today, is a recent, largely American invention. It is neither exclusively European nor precociously European. It reached Europe late and. in most places, has been fitfully, faithlessly sustained. The first lasting system that made the franchise roughly universal for adults was introduced in Norway in 1907. Even today, most countries in the region have barely begun to experience democracy or have had only a couple of generations of uninterrupted exposure to it. Most European states that tried it in the past have discarded it at one time or another. Objectively considered, democracy in Europe could be characterised rather as an aberration than as a vocation.

The suggestion is often made that there is a particular European intellectual culture: distinctively European styles of science, technology or thought. Yet industrial and post-industrial revolutions in other parts of the world have made nonsense of the notion that Europe has a special genius for technical prowess. China has had an empirical scientific tradition for millennia and the Chinese advocates of 'self-strengthening' in the last century represented themselves as

recovering it from their ancestors' past, not merely imitating something similar from the west. This k'ao-cheng tradition was certainly older than western empiricism and may have been its source. Logic, individualism and subjectivism, which have been claimed as originally European and peculiarly western, are all paralleled in east and south Asian traditions at least as old as their European counterparts. Western histories of logic usually begin in ancient Greece, and it is a common error in the west to suppose that the 'oriental mind' is relatively unresponsive to formal reasoning, either because it is trained on higher things, such as mysticism, or borne or befogged by clouds of traditional wisdom, or deafened to logic by the crackle of fortune-cookies and the practical snap of Confucian epigrams. Yet ancient Chinese and Indian logic were as rigorous in their ways as western counterparts. There is no meaningful sense in which any resource of the human mind can be said ever to have been the privileged preserve of Europeans.

Is there, then, a distinctive European economic culture? Capitalism is a contender. Claims of social theory in the tradition of Weber represent capitalism as essentially and uniquely western – and, more particularly, European in origin. Recent debates about 'Asian values' have helped to create, by contradistinction, an impression that the ends of Eurasia have been destined to diverge because of deeply incompatible value-systems, which equip Europeans for individualistic and Asians for collaborative systems in economic and political life. Unprejudiced historical enquiry does not support characterisations of this kind. The assumption, for instance, that Hinduism is irreconcilable with capitalism is widely made but insecurely founded: partly because Hinduism, like all religions, sets standards in theory that are ignored as a matter of course and partly because, for most of history, Hindu merchants commonly embarked on their profession at a young age, before departures from the contemplative life incurred loss of caste. The strict limitations that caste imposed on merchants' freedom in the nineteenth century were peculiar to the time, when the grinding structures of economic change had anyway diminished the role of commerce and industry in the economy. In Jainism, wealth creation is morally neutral, as long as the wealthy man relieves the need of his neighbours and labours 'that many may enjoy what he earns'. This is not much different from a properly Christian characterization of the morals of capitalism. Merchant-endowments helped to make Jain temples a feature of the Gujarati skyline and merchants became the subjects of monkish eulogies in return – praised for industry, frugality and generosity. In many *Jataka*, Buddhahood is incarnate in merchants – a strong rebuke to the view that 'oriental religion' is hostile to capitalist vocations. In the reliefs of Borobodur, the potential sanctity of a merchant's life is made apparent in reliefs that depict the story of Maitrakanyoka, and other adventures in which commerce resembles pilgrimage. This is every bit a model of the compatibility of capitalism and religion as Pirenne's favourite text,

the *Life of Goderic of Finchale*. Jack Goody's work on the history of double-entry bookkeeping has disclosed a proto-capitalist world in historic Asia, which seems in no way deficient in the technical prerequisites of capitalism. Although not obliged to mechanize in the same degree as the labour-deficient economies of Europe and America, China and India were highly industrialized in modern times, in key respects: intensive production-methods, large-scale organization of labour and primary materials, enormous output, regional and local specialization.

It might be argued that even if no common, distinctive culture is identifiably European, Europe possesses a transcendent unity derived from shared historic experience. Now it is true that contiguity promotes exchanges of culture, along with commerce, pilgrimage, proselytization (both religious and political), inter-marriage, educational exchanges, diplomacy, and shifts of population and of political frontiers. Europe, as much as any region, has been characterized by these kinds of exchange. However, these exchanges have created links of uneven strength, which have made Europe an arena of competing cultures rather than a single civilization; and they have been cultivated, by peoples on Europe's frontiers, with neighbours outside, with a sort of centrifugal effect. Common historical experience is a dangerous background to which to appeal: its effect is generally divisive. Most of the region normally regarded as European is occupied by peoples long established in their own heartlands, with the consequently baffling array of micro-cultures that characterize all 'Old Worlds'. Historic experiences, sometimes centuries-old, have erected barriers of exaggerated courtesy or open hostility between neighbours of otherwise similar cultures, in, for example, Portugal and Galicia, Sweden and Norway, Serbia and Croatia, Down and Dundalk. It is understandable, especially when conflicts threaten, that people should make doomed efforts to find some over-arching unity with which to cover up the differences, or – to modify the metaphor – look for some way of stitching patchwork-Europe together. However, that makes it no less of a patchwork, and like all the best patchworks, it expands bit by bit, without ever being conceived as a whole.

In most respects, in any case, such genuine historic experience as has encompassed the whole of what we conventionally call Europe has been even broader in range, uniting us with peoples deep in what we think of as Asia and, in some cases, Africa. If we think back as far as the last great Ice Age, the first great movement in the making of what is now Europe was the northward drift of population that accompanied the 'global warming' of the Mesolithic era. The spread of farming and of Indo-European languages penetrated Europe from a south-easterly direction. The Phoenician colonizations started from Asia, in an area not far removed from the Asian cradle-lands of Greek civilization. So did those of early Jewish settlers in Europe. Christianity was transmitted from outside Europe. In late antiquity and the middle ages, some of the formative migrations

of Germanic and Slavic peoples can be traced to regions beyond (narrowly defined) Europe. Incursions and settlement by steppeland peoples followed. The European end of Eurasia would have remained backward and under-developed without access to ideas and techniques from the east, including Indian mathematics, Arab science and Chinese technology. Chinese inventions transmitted to Europe across Eurasia included printing, which was the basis of large-scale, long-range communications for most of modern history; paper money, without which capitalism would have been unthinkable; the blast furnace, without which industrialization would have been impossible; gunpowder, without which Europe would never have experienced a 'military revolution'; the shipbuilding and direction-finding technologies, including the compass, the rudder and the separable bulkhead, on which European expansion relied. In many ways, in the context of a long-term look at history, it makes better sense to speak of Eurasia as a unit of study, as Jared Diamond insisted *in Guns, Germs and Steel*, than to try to hive Europe off.

An obvious objection is that over a shorter period – say, the last five hundred years – Europe has developed a peculiar historic profile as a result of overseas expansion and global imperialism, the rise of capitalism, the 'scientific revolution', the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, romanticism and modernism, precocious industrialization, and a history of constitutional conflicts which have led, albeit patchily and fitfully, towards societies of civil liberties and human rights. On close examination, this argument dissolves. Overseas expansion and global imperialism are loosely called 'European' achievements: really, however, they were launched from a particular European region and, indeed, from a relatively small number of communities within it, along and around Europe's Atlantic-side 'Rimland'. From Europe, unless one counts the brief Courlander enterprise in Tobago and west Africa in the late seventeenth century, only two states without Atlantic outlets had overseas empires: Italy, with conquests in the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, and Russia, whose short-lived overseas empire hopped across North Pacific islands and touched North American coasts. These were late and brief ventures. By contrast, every state with an Atlantic opening engaged in overseas imperialism, except for Norway, Iceland and Ireland, none of which achieved statehood until the twentieth century and so missed out on the great imperial age. (Sweden, in this context, counts as a power of Europe's Atlantic edge, because Gothenburg opens onto the North Sea and because in her principal period of expansion Sweden had privileged access to ports in Norway and to Bremen.) Although hinterland Europe, in areas far removed from the ocean edge, supplied huge numbers of long-range, ocean-borne migrants, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of these went to the Americas and became part of a history quite distinct from that of European imperialism.

I doubt the force or validity of most of the other experiences that are said to

have given Europe a common heritage. The Enlightenment is an exceptional movement because it did, at one time, genuinely contribute towards a sense of cultural unity in Europe and its legacy in this respect can surely still be felt, however feebly. Once, in the past, in selected minds, Europe really existed. In the late eighteenth century, a citizen of Europe's Republic of Letters could travel from St Petersburg to Seville via Sans-souci with no more sense of cultural dislocation than a modern tourist feels in a succession of airport lounges. In no part of Europe, according to Burke, could a European 'be a complete exile'. 'There are only Europeans', Rousseau believed, no Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards 'or even Englishmen'. When Alessandro Malaspina was exploring the Pacific, he thought of home as Europe – the term occurs more often in his writings than the names of his Italian homeland or his adoptive Spain. 'It is the duty of a patriot', Gibbon admitted, to prefer and promote the exclusive interest of his native country: but a philosopher may be permitted to enlarge his views, and to consider Europe one great republic, whose inhabitants have attained almost to the same level of politeness and cultivation.'

This confidence in Europe now looks like the illusion of a brief era, an episode in the long migration of the 'European spirit' in search of embodiment, without ever actually taking flesh. The Europe of the *philosophes* existed only for the intelligentsia who practised *l'art de penser à l'Européenne*. Now even the most committed intellectuals can confide in it only by an act of self-deception. The Enlightenment soon came to seem streaked with shadows. In 1798 Étienne Gaspard Robert displayed a freak light-show in Paris, projecting horrific images through clouds of smoke. In other demonstrations of the wonders of electricity, real-life precursors of Frankenstein made corpses twitch to thrill an audience. Goya etched the 'sleep of reason', which produced these monsters; but really they were creatures of its watchful hours – the hideous issue of scientific experiments, the nightmares of crimes in the name of liberty. Kant proposed a rickety, human-scale world of 'crooked timber' in place of the ruined structure of the age of reason. The Enlightenment dissolved in blood and the concept of Europe cracked in nationalist violence, like a marble edifice shattered along the veins. The enlightened legacy was better preserved in America, where the constitution of the United States encoded Enlightenment shibboleths and – although they have often been honoured in the breach – they have survived there as guiding principles of an enduring civil society ever since.

All that survived throughout Europe, for much of the intervening period, was a conviction of European superiority, 'distinguished', as Gibbon said, 'above the rest of mankind.' In the nineteenth century the doctrine was affirmed by what was then called 'anthropology', re-arranging a world sliced and stacked in order of race. It was rattled off, with invincible authority, by the maxim gun and enforced by a short-lived industrial and economic advantage which European imperialists

enjoyed over the rest of the world. Where Gibbon's generation had been able to congratulate itself on superior politesse, nineteenth-century European 'civilization' was spread by superior barbarism.

Now Europeans no longer have even that grim sense of their own greatness. America dwarfs them. Japan rivals them. China and India are arising to challenge them. Their empires have dissolved and the scientific basis of racism has collapsed. Cultural relativism has put us Europeans back in our place – on a par with everyone else. Cartography has adopted new conventions, according to which Europe no longer seems necessarily central or disproportionately important. Technical and economic challenges from other parts of the world have made European achievements seem commonplace. The 'European miracle', which once looked awesome, and demanded 'explanations' long enough to fill libraries, now looks ordinary. Whether you look for it in language, religion, values, aesthetics, historic experience or habits of thought, you find European civilization asserted but never snared. If we are to give it a future, we must begin by admitting that it does not already exist. We have imagined Europe but have hardly experienced it: we have, perhaps, mistaken our imaginings for experience. Europe hasn't happened yet. To appeal to European civilization in support of European integration is a potentially fatal mistake. We should abandon the illusion that a cultural basis is to hand for an 'ever-closer union' or for the rapid fusion of institutions, reconciliation of laws or homogenization of sentiments. Europe's past affords no warrant for an instantly infused European future. A Europe constructed teeteringly on mythical foundations will topple easily or need constant, desperate underpinning. If we pretend that Europe is in being, we may prevent it from ever becoming.

Yet none of this is any reason to repine. The myth of European civilization can be an opiate or an opportunity, an illusion or an inspiration. Europeans who want to build Europe together have a tremendous opportunity as well as a difficult challenge. Because Europe is not historically or necessarily anything in particular, we can create it *ab initio* in any way we want. It does not have to embody any ideology inherited from the past. It does not have to be crafted or dominated by a single religious tradition. It does not have to be fenced by pickets of prejudice. It does not even have to be confined geographically, for geographical criteria are arbitrary and are usually invoked to justify policies of exclusion. Most such policies are framed with malign intent, to disqualify people from a share in Europe on grounds of recent arrival or unacceptable culture or some other invented shibboleth – and this itch to define Europe exclusively has to be resisted or blood will flow from the scabs. Europe is being renewed all the time by the arrival of newcomers, the re-emergence of historic communities, the self-discovery of regional circles of common interest. Vital contributions have been made by peoples who, in historic terms, are recent arrivals, including the Magyars, the

Gypsies and the Jews. Black Europeans and Europeans of Asian or Maghribi origin will modify and enhance the region in their turn. To try to fix Europe along lines derived from the past is to interrupt its enrichment. If we want a concept of Europe strong enough to become a reality, we shall have to create it for the future, not derive it from the past.

Europe can be an elastic concept, stretched to include peoples, wherever they live and wherever they come from, who want to belong, and are willing to make the commitment required. Cultural criteria are bogus: the building of European culture, like the story of the creation of a European political union, is *une histoire inachevée* and there is room for new contributions to it. European identity – if we ever succeed in creating it and diffusing it throughout a European Union of the future – will be multi-layered and there will be no need for any European citizen to forego any already-treasured historic identity. This must and will apply as much to being, say, Pakistani as Parisian or to Moroccans as much as Mecklenburgers. It must and will be possible, for instance, to feel Black and European or Muslim and European. At present, paradoxically perhaps, pluralism is all we have in common – the precious ingredient of a potential European civilization and the essential starting-point for turning it into a reality.

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