

The Idea of Europe From Antiquity to the European Union



Edited by

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Europe: Conceptualizing a Continent

ANTHONY PAGDEN

The identity of “Europe” has always been uncertain and imprecise, a source of pride for some and hatred or contempt for others. Like all identities it is a construction, an elaborate palimpsest of stories, images, resonances, collective memories, invented and carefully nurtured traditions. It is also particularly elusive because continents, far more than nations, tend to be simply geographical expressions. In recent times, postcolonial times, collective identities—at least in the face of opposition—have become commonplace elsewhere. But before the nineteenth century few would have said that they were “Asian” or “African,” and—something that the peoples of the United States tend to forget—“American” has always been carefully qualified in virtually every language but English. Only Europeans have persistently described themselves, usually when faced with cultures they found indescribably alien, to be not merely British or German or Spanish but also European: “we Europeans” (*nos Europai*), as the English philosopher Francis Bacon said in 1623.¹

Because it is collective, there are those who have argued that any such thing as a “European” identity is, at best, an illusion. “Europe” now exists as an economic, and increasingly political, entity. But this has no wider cultural or affective meaning. It merely describes the signatory states of the Maastricht Treaty. Yet if that is all Europe was now, or had ever been, the Maastricht Treaty would never have come into being. For behind the limited, practical conditions that have brought together a series of post-war states on the continent of Europe into a loose federation lies a very long history.

The origins of this history are to be found in a fictional but forever compelling story, one of abduction, and of a metamorphosis. It is the

¹ Francis Bacon quoted in John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 3.

story of Europa, daughter of Agenor, king of the city of Tyre on the coast of Sidon. One fine day she was carried off by Zeus, transformed into a white bull. Zeus deposited her, and ravished her, on the shore of the continent that would bear their offspring and her name. This is the myth. As with all myths, however, there is another more mundane version. It was suggested by the Greek writer Herodotus and later seized upon by the early Christian theologian Lactantius, eager to debunk and demystify such unsettling erotic fantasies from the ancient world. In this version Cretan merchants abduct Europa in a ship shaped like a bull and take her to be a bride for their king Asterius. Since the Cretans are what later generations would come to call “Europeans,” and Europa herself an Asian woman, her abduction was taken by all Asians to be an affront. Later the Trojans, also a people of what we now call Asia Minor, seize a (not wholly unwilling) Helen, wife of Menelaus, in revenge. In turn, Menelaus’s brother, Agamemnon, raises an army, crosses the sea, and begins the most celebrated war in European history. The Persians, Herodotus tells us (and “Persians” is his shorthand for all the peoples of Asia), found this tale of abduction puzzling. “We in Asia,” they say, “regarded the rape of our women not at all,” thus establishing an enduring Asian cultural stereotype, “but the Greeks all for the sake of a Lacedaemonian woman mustered a great host, came to Asia and destroyed the power of Priam. Ever since then we have regarded the Greeks as our enemies.”² What in myth had been a divine appropriation becomes in mythopoeic history a tale of the hatred between two continents, a hatred that would burn steadily down the centuries, as the Trojans were succeeded by the Phoenicians, the Phoenicians by the Ottoman Turks, and the Turks by Russians.

No myth, however, is as simple as that. Most myths are tales of metamorphoses where everything is not merely not all it seems but is frequently its very opposite. For fleeing from the ruins of Troy, with his father Anchises on his back and leading his son Ascanius by his hand, comes Aeneas, who years later will land on the shores of Latium and found the city and the state of Rome. It is Rome that will be the true creator of “Europe.” But Rome, too, will try to shed its mythopoeic “oriental” identity. When Virgil, in the first century CE, came to write the *Aeneid* under the emperor Augustus, he told another story that would preserve the link with Troy while at the same time effacing all traces of Trojan identity. In the twelfth and final book of the poem, the gods, who have

² *Histories*, I, 3–4.

(as gods do) taken different sides in the struggles between the invading Trojans and the native Latins, decide to bring the war to an end. Juno, who has supported the Latins, finally agrees to allow the two peoples to intermarry and thereby create a new race. But she insists that his new race will look like the Latins, will dress like the Latins, will speak like the Latins, and their customs—their *mores*—will be Latin. All they will preserve of their oriental ancestors will be their gods, for those gods were also the gods of the Greeks, and the common patrimony of all humankind.³ Europe, which will fashion itself for generations in opposition to Asia, has always owed to Asia its historical origins.

This sense of double ambiguity survives even the collapse of the political structures of the Graeco-Roman world and the dominance of Graeco-Roman origin myths. Christianity was to provide Europe with much of its subsequent sense of both internal cohesion and its relationship with the rest of the world, and Christianity began as an Asian religion. “Jesus Christ, who is the way the truth and the life, has long since given the Bill of Divorce to ingrateful Asia where he was born and of Africa the place of his flight and refuge, and has become almost wholly European,” wrote Samuel Purchas, the English propagandist for the settlement of America, in 1625 in an attempt to secure the glory of Christ’s apostolate, and of the overseas mission, exclusively for Europe.⁴ “Almost wholly” because not even Purchas could entirely discount the existence of the Greek and Russian Churches and their failure to submit to the authority of the Papacy or, as the English fitfully hoped, convert to Protestantism. The fact that the undeniably Christian adherents of Greek Orthodoxy had for long been under Ottoman rule, and thus fully absorbed into Asia, remained an additional reminder of the alien origin of Christianity. Greek and Russian Christianity, as J. G. A Pocock reminds us in this volume, would always be a threat to any sustained attempt to fabricate a single European identity with a single origin.

Thus an abducted Asian woman gave Europe her name; a vagrant Asian exile gave Europe its political and finally its cultural identity; and an Asian prophet gave Europe its religion. As Hegel was later to observe, Europe was “the centre and end” of History, but History had begun in Asia: “characteristically the *Orient* quarter of the globe—the region of

³ *Aeneid*, XII, 808–42. I would like to thank Maurizio Bettini for drawing this passage, and its significance, to my attention.

⁴ Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes, Contayning a History of the World, in Sea Voyages and Lande-Travells by Englishmen & Others*, 5 vols. (London, 1625), I, 45.

origination.”⁵ The course of civilization, like that of empire and the sun itself, moves inexorably from East to West.

In the beginning, however, the world was divided not into two but three: Europe, Asia, and “Libya,” as Africa was generally called (although as Herodotus, the first to travel well beyond the limits of his own home and who reveled in the oddities of the behavior of those he found there, complained, with characteristic Greek misogyny, he could not conceive “why three names, and women’s names at that, should have been given to a tract which is in reality one).”⁶ For most Greeks the difference between what they called Europe—by which they frequently if not consistently meant Hellas, the lands around the Aegean Sea—and Asia or Africa would remain, as it had been for Aeschylus, one not only of climate and disposition, but also of race (*ethnos*). Herodotus, however, had understood that “Europe” had no natural frontiers and that, as most subsequent cosmopolitans came to realize through experience, cultures are never so incommensurable as their members often like to suppose. If “Europe” had come to acquire an identity, it was always one that had to accommodate the uneasy realization that not only were the origins of Europe non-European, but that no one could establish with any precision where Europe stopped and Asia and Africa began.

If this geographical uncertainty meant that the landmass of Europe could not be said to be at the center of the world, it still could be placed at the center of some other conceptualization of the environment. For the Greeks and their Roman heirs, the means of establishing a relationship between them and the rest of humanity frequently rested upon a complex theory of climate and physical environment. The northern parts of the world, according to this theory, were inhabited by peoples whose inhospitable climates had made them brave and warlike, but also uncouth, unthinking, and—to use the Latinized term that will become central to all modes of European self-fashioning—“uncivilized.” Those who lived in the South—the Asians—were, by contrast, quick-witted, intelligent, but also lethargic, slow to act, and ultimately corrupt—a claim that became in time another enduring stereotype of the “Oriental.” Europeans (then the peoples of the Mediterranean), living as they did midway between these extremes, are the mean. This conception of Europe, much modified it is true, but still insistent on the radical distinction between North and South, retained its imaginative force until at least the nineteenth century.

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 99–101.

⁶ *Histories*, VII, 104.

(The current use of the terms by the United Nations and international aid agencies to mean, roughly, the “developed” and the “developing” worlds is perhaps unintentionally a continuation of the same distinction.) Even Hegel, writing in the 1830s from the viewpoint of an intellectually and culturally emergent North, could still speak confidently of the Mediterranean as the “uniting element” of “three quarters of the globe” and “the centre of World-History”—once, that is, he had relegated America firmly to the domain of the future, “where in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself.”⁷ As late as the 1960s, the great French historian Fernand Braudel was able to refer (with no trace of irony) to the Mediterranean as the “radiant centre” of the entire globe, “whose light grows less as one moves away from it, without one’s being able to define the exact boundary between light and shade.”⁸

“Europe,” wrote the first-century Greek geographer Strabo, in the earliest surviving attempt to demonstrate and explain the continent’s perception of its superiority over all others, “is both varied in form and admirably adapted by nature for the development of excellence in men and governments.” The two instincts in man (the peaceable, which Strabo significantly called the “agricultural and the civilized,” and the warlike) live in Europe side by side, and “the one that is peace-loving is more numerous and thus keeps control over the whole body.”⁹ In Strabo’s account the Greek dialectic between the world of nature (*physis*) and that of men (*nomos*, a term that relates to law and custom or as we would say “culture”) has been resolved in Europe and only in Europe.

Because of this harmony, Europe becomes—in another image that has survived unbroken to this day—the home of liberty and of true government. The Greeks, Herodotus tells us, are the most free of peoples, because, unlike the Asians, they are subject, not to the will of an individual, but only to the law. European society might have had many forms of government, some of them decidedly less liberal than others, but centuries later Voltaire echoed an enduring commonplace when he claimed that the continent constituted a “kind of great republic divided into several states,” all of which were united in having “the same principle of public law and politics, unknown in other parts of the world.”¹⁰ As Montesquieu

⁷ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 86.

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, 2d ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1966), 2 vols., I, 168.

⁹ Strabo, *Geography*, 2.5, 26.

¹⁰ Quoted in Denys Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 123.

had remarked some years earlier, most of Europe (he was a little uncertain about Spain) is ruled by “custom” (*les moeurs*); Asia, and the still darker regions of Africa and America, by despots.¹¹

The rule of law, restraint through custom rather than will, was responsible for the fashioning of societies that provided a space for individual human action, while at the same time ensuring that such action was rarely capable of reducing society to a state of simple anarchy. From this we will see the descent of the notion that all human improvement depends upon conflict, that human beings are, by their nature, competitive creatures, and that only those societies that know how to harness what Kant in the late eighteenth century called man’s “unsocial sociability” instead of attempting to suppress it will flourish.¹² As Machiavelli noted, the power of the Roman Republic had derived from the opposition between the Senate and the plebians and not from the exercise of a common will, as so many had supposed.¹³ There was from the beginning the conviction, which the modern democratic societies of the West have inherited, that this vision of the world was in the long—if not always in the short—run suitable for all peoples everywhere and that its cultural power was irresistible. This assumption could have emerged only within a collection of societies, which, while being in many significant respects very different from one another, shared the sense of a common identity.

How the highly chauvinist Greeks could speak of themselves as members of a larger grouping of peoples, which must have included non-Greek speakers and thus, in the Greek understanding of the term, “barbarians,” is probably impossible to determine. The Greeks, however, had always been peoples on the move (*poluplanês*)—“extreme travellers.” Some time in the fifth century BCE, Herodotus traveled to Egypt and Libya, to Babylon and the Phoenician city of Tyre, even to southern Russia, and reported extensively on what he had found there. Pythagoras, the great sixth-century mathematician, journeyed from his native Samos to Egypt and Crete before settling finally in Croton in southern Italy, and the earliest of the ancient geographers, Hecateus of Miletus, visited Egypt even before Herodotus had. By the third century, the rhetorician Isocrates could

¹¹ *De l'esprit des lois*, VIII, 8, *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 2 vols., II, 356.

¹² *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, in Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 44–5.

¹³ See Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli’s *Discorsi* and the Pre-humanist Origins of Republican Ideas,” in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds., *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121–41.

confidently declare that being a Hellene was no longer a matter of blood or racial origin, but one of culture and education.¹⁴

This sense of a possible communion with all the peoples of the inhabited world (*oikoumene*) may have been due, as Strabo suggests, to the fact that Europe could provide for itself all “the fruits that are best and that are necessary for life and all the useful metals” and imported only luxury goods, “species and precious stones” that he says dismissively “make the life of persons who have a scarcity of them fully as happy as those who have them in abundance.”¹⁵ Only *Europe* as a continent, crisscrossed by trade routes from East to West, could do this, but none of the many disparate peoples of the Mediterranean could do it alone. Life was so difficult for those peoples that they could survive only by developing the great commercial networks that would become the basis of their future expansion far beyond the limits of Europe. Because of the intense competition that persisted among them, they were all forced into the political unions called the *symmachiai* and *sympoliteiai* that dominated the later world of the Greek city-states, until at the battle of Chaeronea in August 338, Philip of Macedon swept it away altogether. This combination of strength and dependency made the recognition of a shared political culture difficult to withhold. “The cities of Ancient Greece,” wrote Edward Gibbon of the origins of modern Europe,

were cast in the happy mixture of union and interdependence which is repeated on a larger scale, but in a looser form, by the nations of modern Europe; the union of religion, language, and manners which renders them spectators and judges of each others’ merits; the independence of government and interests, which asserts their separate freedoms, and excites them to strive for pre-eminence in the career of glory.¹⁶

This political culture was centered upon a unique form of life: the city. Of course, as in most other civilizations, the vast majority of the populations of Europe actually lived and worked in the countryside until well into the nineteenth century. For most of the rural peoples of Europe, and the illiterate majority in the cities themselves, identity was a question of attachment to microcommunities: the parish, the village, the guild, sometimes the country, the *pays* (or what the Castilians aptly called the *patria*

¹⁴ Francois Hartogth, *Mémoires d’Ulysse: Récits sur la frontière en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 12–13.

¹⁵ Strabo, *Geography*, 2.5, 26.

¹⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Books, 1995), I, 106.

chica, the “small homeland”), only rarely the nation, and never, one suspects, such an abstract cultural grouping as “Europe.” But for the literate, intellectual elites who had far more in common with similar groups from other nations than they did with their own peasantry, the spaces beyond the city walls were, until they became sentimentalized in the mid-eighteenth century, largely invisible. What Voltaire mockingly called “the supposed savages of America” were in his view indistinguishable from those savages one met every day in the countryside, “living in huts with their mates and a few animals ceaselessly exposed to all the intemperance of the seasons.”¹⁷

Despite its dependence upon agriculture, despite the real distribution of its populations, Europe, as a collection of social and political groups with a shared and historically-determined culture, was conceived as overwhelmingly urban. Our entire political and social vocabulary derives from this fact. “Politics” and “polity” have their root in the Greek term *polis*. Similarly, “civil,” “civility,” and “civilization” have their origins in the Latin word *civitas*, which describes the same spatial, political, and cultural entity. Both *polis* and *civitas* became, in time, abstract nouns, sometimes translatable as “the state” or the “commonwealth,” and definable in abstract terms. But originally they belonged to a semantic field that described the urban space itself, and a close association between urban ways of life and true “civility” persists to this day. Cities were, of course, by no means unique to Europe. Like all else that defines European culture, the walled, largely self-governing urban space had originated in Asia.

With the rise of Athens after the sixth century, an association in the European political *imaginaire* began to form between an urban environment and a particular way of life. Man, said Aristotle, was *zoon politikon*—quite literally an animal “made for life in the polis.” True, he was not the only such animal. Bears and ants were observed to be similarly sociable. But his—and in the Greek world it was always his—way of being in the world was for him not merely the best attainable existence. It was what the Greeks called “the good life,” the only life in which it was possible for man to achieve his ends *as* a man, to achieve that elusive goal that Aristotle termed *eudaimonia*, his Latin, Christian translators, “blessedness,” and later writers rendered as “happiness,” or by the clumsy term employed by many modern philosophers, “human flourishing.”

¹⁷ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1990), 2 vols., I, 23.

Furthermore, true *politeiai* were like the persons who inhabited them, autonomous entities. They were places of *autarkeia*, or self-sufficiency, self-governing, autonomous; they were what in the Latin Aristotelian tradition came to be called “perfect communities.” This is also the moral force behind Strabo’s claim that Europe was, unlike Asia, “self-sufficient” in foodstuffs since the ability to provide for one’s own material needs suggests a high degree of personal autonomy. Little wonder that for Aristotle there could be no life beyond the limits of the city but that of “beasts and Gods.”¹⁸ Because humans, unlike both beasts and Gods, were guided by rules, by laws and customs, the city was also the source of law. Those who lived within it had to abide by its rules. Beyond was the wilderness, what later writers would describe as “the state of nature.” All humans began in this condition, and all humans are constantly threatened by it. In the Greek worldview, and in the conceptions of generations of Europeans, to live in the state of nature, to live like a “barbarian” or a “savage,” meant living as something less than human. The polis was, in this way, a bounded space. But it was also conceived as a community that could even transform all those who entered it. Aristotle—to whom we owe much of what we now know about the place of the polis in Greek life, although he celebrated the city of Athens and wrote her political history—was an outsider by birth.

This identification of a distinctive European communal life with a specific environment reached its peak with the effective domination of the whole of what we now call Europe, and much of Asia, by the greatest city of them all: Rome. Like the Greek cities to which it was heir, Rome was the source of law, the place of custom, *mores*, which in the poet Virgil’s punning vision was now encircled and protected by its massive walls (*moenia*).¹⁹ Unlike the Greek city-states, Rome (particularly after the collapse of the Republic) depended heavily for its political identity and continuing survival on the vast areas of Europe and Asia over which it exercised authority. Thus, to a far greater degree than its Greek antecedents, it welcomed outsiders within its walls, and—at least during the periods when this particular civic community offered stability, security, and the access to world power—it proved to be enormously attractive. “It might be said,” wrote James Wilson as he reflected upon the possible future of the United States as a new Rome in the West, “not that the Romans

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253 a 1–29.

¹⁹ *Bellum ingens geret Italia, populosque feroces
contundet moresque viris et moenia ponet
Aeneid 1, 263–4.*

extended themselves over the whole globe, but that the inhabitants of the globe poured themselves upon the Romans.”²⁰

It is, therefore, unsurprising that by the first century CE, this “Roman Empire,” which was merely an extension in space of the city of Rome, the poet Horace’s “Prince among Cities” (*princeps urbium*), had come to be identified simply with “the world,” the *orbis terrarum*.²¹ After the establishment of the Emperor Augustus’s new regime in 27 BCE, these imperial longings became formally expansionist to the point where Rome was transformed—imaginatively at least—into a “world-state,” bounded in Virgil’s words only by *Oceanus*.²² This did not mean that the Romans ignored the actual existence of the rest of the globe, nor that they ever seriously aspired to full domination over it. Indeed, they possessed a lively and sophisticated ethnographical curiosity about the peoples who inhabited the lands beyond the frontiers of the empire. It meant that, for the Romans, the peoples of these other worlds, the Syrians, for instance, or the Chinese, had no separate identity as communities—much less as political powers—as the Romans conceived such things. When, in the second century, the Emperor Antonius Pius was addressed as “Lord of all the World” (*dominus totius orbis*), this merely gave legal expression to long-held Roman belief that, whether those who lived beyond their borders recognized it or not, the political realm of Rome and the human genus had been made one.²³

Rome, however, was not only a political realm. It was also the embodiment of the Stoic belief in the possibility of a single law for all humanity. If the Greeks gave Europe the philosophy and the mathematics that made possible its subsequent scientific development, the Romans gave it its legislative habits. Although the concept of Europeans as law-governed peoples originated in Greece, it was the Romans who elevated the law to the place it still holds today—as the sole guarantor of the continuity of “civilization,” however we choose to define that emotive term. Much of this was swept away during the Gothic invasions that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. In the outer fringes of the empire, Germanic customary law came to replace Roman law. But despite these changes, that law remained, and remains, the single most unifying feature of the

²⁰ “Lectures on Law: XI Citizens and Aliens,” published in 1790–1, can be found in *The Works of James Wilson*, ed. Robert Green McCloskey (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 2 vols., II, 581.

²¹ Horace, *Odes*, IV.3, 13.

²² Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1, 286–7.

²³ *Digest XIV, 2.9*. See Claude Nicolet, *L'Inventaire du monde: Géographie et politique aux origines de l'empire romain* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 28.

continent. Edmund Burke, good European that he was, offered an image of a world of independent states united as a common culture, based upon “the old Gothic customary [law] . . . digested into system and disciplined by the Roman law,” in every part of which it would be possible for a European to feel at home.²⁴ For this reason the creation of a single legislative order for the whole of Europe remained an ambition of the most powerful of Europe’s rulers from the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, through Philip II of Spain and Louis XIV to Napoleon. In somewhat muted form, this ambition is held by the European Court of Justice today.

After the triumph of Christianity, ancient Greek and Roman notions of exclusivity were further enforced by Christians’ insistence upon the uniqueness both of the Gospels and of the Church as a source of moral and scientific authority. Custom, in Lactantius’s words, had been “made congruent with religion.” Christianity was thought of as spatially coextensive with the Roman Empire. The world, the *orbis terrarum*, thus became, in terms of the translation effected by Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century, the *orbis Christianus* or, as it would be called in the European vernaculars, “Christendom.” As late as 1761, such a relatively hostile witness as Jean-Jacques Rousseau conceded that “Europe, even now, is indebted more to Christianity than to any other influence for the union . . . which survives among her members.”²⁵ It was a union he frequently abhorred but from which he could never quite escape.

The scattered, diverse, and plural cultures of the ancient world that constitute what we now call Europe shared, therefore, a single identity as so many places of “human flourishing” bound together by a common system of law. When they gradually converted to Christianity, they acquired a common religion and a common cult. They also shared a language: Latin. Although, after the fourth century, Roman institutions, Roman architecture, and Roman literature gradually lost their power to unite Europe in a common culture, and the concept of a single body of citizens vanished altogether, Latin survived as the language of the Church and the learned elites of Europe until well into the eighteenth century. As the Italian Republican Carlo Cattaneo noted in 1835, Europe possessed four unifying

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *Two Letters Addressed to a Member of the Present Parliament on the Proposals for Peace with the Regicide Directory of France* [hereafter, *Letters on the Regicide Peace*], in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981–1991), IX, 248–9.

²⁵ *Écrits sur l’abbé de Saint Pierre*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), III, 566.

features: the power of the former imperial authority, the Roman Law, Christianity, and the Latin language.²⁶

Latin, however, was almost wholly a written language, and even then it was largely confined to the clergy and the lay intelligentsia. Few could, or did, actually speak it. Even the professoriat, who were bound by statute in most of the universities of early-modern Europe to deliver their lectures in Latin, spoke for the most part in a curious hybrid version of the language and when excited frequently lapsed for long periods into the vernacular. Diplomatic Latin became restricted after the 1520s to polite formulae, and writers on the increasingly important science of diplomacy, such as Ottaviano Maggi, stressed the need for living languages—although in his *De Legato* of 1566 he did so in Latin. Most of educated Europe before the eighteenth century was multilingual. Rulers, such as the Holy Roman Emperors, governed peoples speaking a bewildering number of languages. Charles V was said to have spoken Spanish to God, French to his mistress, and German to his horse. Many European languages—Breton, Provençal, Aragonese, Walloon, Piedmontese—are now minority tongues that have long been made subservient to a national vernacular. But throughout most of the early-modern period, these were the dominant and in some cases the official languages of the regions in which they were spoken. Making oneself understood as one passed from one territory to another was of crucial importance.

Since few could hope to speak all the major languages of Europe, most educated Europeans shared the conviction that there should exist a spoken tongue that, if not as universal as Latin had once been, should be widely understood. In the sixteenth century this became Italian, the language in which Dante, two centuries before had, in a self-conscious break with tradition, decided to write his great poem. Italian was the language of literature and as such as familiar to the learned elite as English is today. Michael de Montaigne learned Italian, although his father had brought him up in an entirely Latin-speaking household, and when he crossed the Alps, he changed the language of his journal from French to Italian. On returning through the Mon Cernis pass, he noted, in French, “here French is spoken, so I leave this foreign language in which I feel competent but ill-grounded.”²⁷ By the late seventeenth century, because of Louis XIV’s effective political domination of mainland Europe, French had become the language of diplomacy and the courts, and the language in which

²⁶ Carlo Cattaneo, *Sulle Interdizioni israelitiche*, ed. G. A. Belloni (Rome: Sestante, 1944), 56–8.

²⁷ Michel de Montaigne, quoted in Hale, *The Civilization of Europe*, 162.

educated Germans, such as Gottfried-Wilhelm Leibniz, wrote when they were not still writing in Latin or, in Leibniz's case struggling to devise a "universal system of characters" capable of "expressing all our thoughts" be we Frenchmen or Assyrians.²⁸ And French remained dominant until the end of the eighteenth century.

Despite the religious, cultural, and linguistic unity they had given to the continent, neither the Roman Empire, nor Christendom was, of course, identical with "Europe." Much of the Roman Empire lay in Asia and in North Africa. Christianity had begun as an Asian religion, and the first Christian churches had been established on the North African littoral. After the fall of Rome, however, and the subsequent attempt under Charlemagne to rebuild the empire in the West, the notion of "the world" shrank until it covered little more than what is today continental Europe. Charlemagne, although frequently claiming some kind of world sovereignty, called himself *pater europae*—"the father of the Europeans." The Emperor Charles V, who in the early sixteenth century came closer than any ruler before or since to uniting Europe under one sovereign, was addressed as *totius europae dominus*—"lord of all Europe"—an obvious allusion to Antoninus Pius's claim to be *dominus totius orbis*.

For all this self-confidence, however, "Europe" was, and always had been, a highly unstable term. No one has ever been certain quite where its frontiers lie. Only the Atlantic and the Mediterranean provide obvious "natural" boundaries. For the Greeks, Europe had sometimes been only the area in which the Greeks lived, a vaguely defined region that shaded into what was once Yugoslavia in the North and is still Turkey in the South. For most, however, Europe had a larger, more indeterminate geographical significance. It was seen as the lands in the West, whose outer limits, the point at which they met the all-encircling *Okeanos*, were still unknown. Beyond Europe lay Asia and Africa. Africa, South of the Atlas mountains, was dark and unimaginable and remained so, despite the Portuguese exploration and settlement of large areas of the western shores, until the nineteenth century. Only the North coast, which had once been part of the Roman Empire and from the fifteenth century was the home of Barbary pirates and the focus of disastrous crusading ambitions by the Portuguese and the Spaniards, was *terra cognita*. North Africa, however, was a frontier region where Berber states and Ottoman client rulers posed a constant threat to the settled places of Christendom until the extinction

²⁸ Leibniz, quoted in Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 100.

of Turkish hegemony in the Mediterranean in the late seventeenth century. All along the southern coast of Italy and Spain were strings of fortifications to guard local populations against the continual threat of Islamic incursions. These might be brief, but they could also be deadly. When in 1544 Francis I of France allowed the Turkish fleet to winter at Toulon, he was not merely giving assistance to the enemies of Christ (and, more to the point, of the Emperor Charles V). He was dissolving a centuries-old antagonism. He was allowing Asia into Europe.

If Europe's southern frontiers were in this way indeterminate, her eastern ones were forever undecided. Poised between eastern Europe and the recognizable Orient was the unsettling presence of Russia. Russia, sometimes friend, more frequently foe, threw into stark relief the fact that Europe was a culture, a shared way of life, rather than a place. Russia had many of the features of a European society, and it was undeniably Christian. Yet because of its vast size and the fact that so much of it had been ruled for so long by nomadic peoples who were clearly not European, it lay beyond the formal limits of Romanized "civilization." While it remained, in this way, stubbornly an oriental despotism, Russia rested firmly within Asia, the backward barbaric empire of the steppes. But once, in the eighteenth century, its rulers took to wearing silk brocade and conversing in French, it became inescapably Europeanized. In their ambition to subjugate Europe, the Russians, Rousseau declared, had themselves been subjugated. Peter the Great, the first of the Czars to "modernize," which meant "Europeanize," the Russian Empire, was described by Montesquieu as "having given the manners of Europe to a European power."²⁹ His successor, the Empress Catherine the Great, declared at the beginning of the reforming constitutional code she had devised (*the Nakaz*) that "Russia is a European Power."³⁰ (Catherine, however, was German born and French educated and Russian only by marriage.) But if the Russia of Peter and Catherine was "in," as far as the rest of Europe was concerned, it was only partially so. Frederick the Great of Prussia was not alone in denying the empire of the Czars any lasting place among what he described significantly as "the civilized nations of Europe."³¹ When seen in this way from the heartlands of Europe, Russia could appear distinctly "other." When set, however, against the image of the true

²⁹ Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, XIX, 14.

³⁰ Denis Diderot, "Observations on the Instruction of the Empress of Russia to the Deputies for the Making of the Laws," in Denis Diderot, *Political Writings*, ed. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 85.

³¹ Quoted in Denys Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 125.

Orient, she appeared, if only fleetingly, European. When William Pitt, during the Ochakov crisis of 1791, proposed sending British troops to help the Sultan resist the Czar, Edmund Burke responded angrily: "What have these worse than savages to do with the powers of Europe, but to spread war, devastation and pestilence among them?" Russia, if only briefly, had thus joined the "powers of Europe."³²

Because of this ambivalence, which survives to this day, the "official" frontier to the East, always a faintly absurd notion, was forever on the move. At the end of the fifteenth century it advanced steadily from the Don, where it had been fixed for a thousand years, to the banks of the Volga; by the late sixteenth century it had reached the Ob; by the nineteenth, the Ural and the Ural mountains. In the twentieth it finally came to rest on the banks of the river Emba and the Kerch.³³ Despite this juggling with geography and the literalness with which geographers from Fra Mauro in the 1450s to the All-Union Geographical Society in the 1950s have treated what is, in fact, a cultural frontier, despite Catherine's efforts and the absorption in the nineteenth century of the Romanovs into the families of the crowned-heads of Europe, Russia has always been incorporated into Europe imperfectly. After the creation of the Soviet Union, that tenuous sense of similarity vanished once again, and communism rapidly became for many Europeans, in particular those close to the Soviet borders, yet another manifestation of the Oriental "other." Today things are beginning to change, if only gradually. East-German politicians, such as Lothar De Maizière, conceive of a "common European house" that will "supersede the old divisions" so that "a greater Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals [will] again takes shape."³⁴ But the Germans feel a special responsibility toward the rest of East Central Europe. Europeans from farther West remain diffident and suspicious. Eastern Europe's uncomfortable proximity to Asia and its linguistic and religious separateness (made the most striking in the Russian case by the use of the Cyrillic alphabet) reinforce the belief that the East belongs on the far side of some unmarked but clearly perceptible frontier.

If European society was, and remains, one broadly committed to a life of civility, it is also one in which identity has been closely associated

³² Quoted in Jennifer Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations: The Commonwealth of Europe and the Crusade against the French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 78.

³³ See W. H. Parker, "Europe: How Far?" in *The Geographical Journal* 126 (1960): 278–97.

³⁴ De Maizière quoted by Risse and Engelmann-Martin in chapter 13.

with ownership. Citizenship in Europe has long been restricted to property owners. (Until very recently jury service in Britain—the obligation of the citizen to participate in the judiciary process—was restricted to house owners.) Even the French Revolution could be conceived by some, Tocqueville and Taine among others, as the product rather than the source of modern property relations.³⁵ The right to property could be established in a number of ways: by autochthony, by inheritance, by purchase, or by what in Roman law was called prescription—that is, prolonged and unchallenged possession. But the question for most early-modern theorists was how to establish property rights as a feature not only of the civil law, but also of the law of nature. One of the basic claims of the latter was that all humankind had been granted an equal share in the earth. Inequality was a feature of the divisions of the races of the world into different peoples and thereafter of the creation of political societies. How then had the first men acquired the right to divide up God's earth among themselves? The answer to this question, which still plays a significant role in the European definitions of land rights, drew on the Greek conception of the potentiality of nature.

In a celebrated passage in the *Second Treatise on Government*, John Locke argued that mankind had acquired possession of the earth by laying "out something upon it that was his own, his labour." So that he "thereby annexed to it something that was his Property, which another had not Title, nor could without injury take from him."³⁶ It was thus man's "labour"—precisely, that is, his *techne* (skills)—that established his right to secure for his personal use alone a portion of what was significantly called "Adam's plenty." In Emeric de Vattel's *Le Droit des gens, ou principes de la loi naturelle appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des nations et des souverains* of 1758, which became a textbook on the natural law in the late eighteenth century, the disposition to acquire property in this way is turned into a definition of what it is to be human—the imposition, in Hegel's understanding, of the subjective "will" on the "objective world of nature." "The cultivation of the soil," wrote Vattel,

is an obligation imposed upon man by nature [emphasis added]. Every nation is therefore bound by natural law to cultivate the land which has fallen to its share. . . . Those peoples such as the Ancient Germans and certain modern Tartars who, though dwelling in fertile countries, disdain the cultivation of the soil and

³⁵ Donald R. Kelley, *Historians and the Law in Postrevolutionary France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 126.

³⁶ *Locke's Two Treatises on Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 309.

prefer to live by plunder, fail in their duty to themselves, injuring their neighbours and deserve to be exterminated like wild beasts of prey.³⁷

As Talal Asad observes in this volume, European history “becomes a history of continuously productive actions defining as well as defined by Law.”

Men were thus encouraged to see in the natural world a design of which they were the final beneficiaries. “Art itself,” as the eighteenth-century Scottish social theorist Adam Ferguson was later to observe, “is natural to man. . . . [H]e is destined from the first age of his being to invent and to contrive.”³⁸ But not precisely all men. The European sense of superiority, of having been singled out, first by nature, then by God, to play a special role in the history of creation, derived from the conviction that only those who dwelt in the kind of law-governed free urban communities of which “Europe” was constituted would ever be likely to possess the capacity to harness nature to their purposes. The others, the “barbarians,” ground down by the demands of their rulers and thwarted in every attempt to express their individual selves, remained forever in unenlightened herds. In Europe the arts were, in the full sense of the term, “liberal.” And if these, too, had begun in Asia, in Babylon and Egypt, it was only in Europe that their potential had been realized. “The liberal arts,” wrote a complacent Samuel Purchas, “are more liberal to us, having long since forsaken their seminaries in Asia and Africa.”³⁹

It is this, too, which led to the assumption that science would always be superior to simple force. In Herodotus’s view it had been their skills, their *techné*, which had allowed the vastly outnumbered Spartans to defeat the Persians.⁴⁰ Generations of later Christian apologists represented the Turks as an enslaved, archetypal Asian, people, descendants of the Scythians, who had been denied not merely freedom of action by their rulers, but also all access to knowledge.⁴¹ Their military success, like those of the Persians before them, had been due in part to their ferocity and in part to the weakness and intellectual poverty of their opponents. Throughout the sixteenth century, when successive Christian intellectuals called

³⁷ *Le Droit des gens ou principes de la loi naturelle appliquées à la conduite et aux affaires des nations et des souverains* [1758], ed. James Brown Scott (Washington: Carnegie Foundation, 1916), 3 vols., III, 37–8.

³⁸ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12.

³⁹ Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, I, 17.

⁴⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, IX, 61.

⁴¹ See James Hankins, “Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 49 (1995): 111–207.

upon their rulers to bury their differences and mount a crusade against the Turk, the claim was always that European, Christian, science could never fail against Asian ignorance. And when, beginning in the thirteenth century, Europeans set out to persuade the world of the truth of their religion, they assumed a self-evident association between knowledge and belief. The European capacity to span an open space using an arch was said to have instantly persuaded one Peruvian chieftain of the truth of Christianity. The Jesuits who traveled to China in the late sixteenth century took with them clocks, astrolabes, telescopes, clavichords, Venetian prisms, and suction pumps. If, the argument went, the European God had taught the Europeans how to devise such ingenious things, the European God must be the true one. The Chinese, however, had other conceptions of the necessary relationship between technology and religious belief. While grateful for the clocks, they declined the offer of the Gospel. This refusal to accept the obvious led the most famous of the Jesuits, Matteo Ricci, to declare that “they have no logic” and the Chinese to accuse the missionaries of indulging in “countless incomprehensible lines of reasoning.”⁴²

After Columbus’s discovery of America and the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope (famously declared by Adam Smith to be “the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind”),⁴³ the European belief in the capacity of European science to dominate the world became even more assertive. Both these oceanic journeys had been made possible by the use of the compass and the skill of European navigators and cartographers. Only those whom Purchas described as “we in the West” had been able to achieve such triumphs. Asians and Africans had been capable of limited navigational feats. But only the Europeans had managed to cross oceans, to settle and to colonize. Only the Europeans had “civilized” peoples from distant and inferior worlds. In a famous engraving by Johannes Stradanus of 1589, Amerigo Vespucci is shown drawing aside a curtain to reveal the “America” whom he will have named, and thus in some sense created. In this image of the first moment of contact, Vespucci is represented with an astrolabe, the symbol of his empowering knowledge in his hand. America, in recumbent allusion to Vespucci’s own image of the continent as an ever-available female, is raising herself half-naked from the long sleep of her ignorance.

⁴² Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 242–3.

⁴³ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 2 vols., II, 626.

From the early sixteenth to the late eighteenth century images of the four continents appeared in the most unlikely places. They were reminders both of the newly acquired vision of a vastly enlarged world and of Europe's triumph over so much of it, a triumph that only the sciences and the arts had made possible. Take one striking but representative example. On the ceiling of the stairway hall of the Trappenhau, the residence of the Prince-Bishops of Wurzburg, a princely family in no way associated with transoceanic navigation, the great eighteenth-century Venetian artist Giambattista Tiepolo depicted in lavish detail each of the four continents. They are so arranged that no matter where the viewer stands, *Asia*, *Africa*, and *America* can only be seen in relation to *Europe*. The allegorical figure of *Asia* is shown seated on an elephant, *Africa* on a camel, and *America* on a crocodile—menacing, languid, and amphibious. Only *Europe* sits on a throne instead of an animal, and only *Europe* is surrounded, not by the natural produce of the continent she represents, but by what its peoples have created, by the attributes of the arts, of music and painting, the sciences, and the technology of warfare. Furthermore, *Europe* is the point from which all the other figures must be viewed. As Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall wrote, to look at *Europe* “one should look *from Europe*” for “*Asia*, *Africa* and *America* are depicted in their relation to *Europe*. *Europe* is the rubric, the initial code.”⁴⁴ This is why in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1603, a work that provided artists with a easy set of iconographic rules, readers were instructed to depict Europe wearing a crown “to show that Europe has always been the leader and queen of the whole.”⁴⁵ Thus an abducted Asian princess had become, as she appears in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* of 1588, a Queen.

The shrinking of the frontiers in this way gradually forced upon the European consciousness a greater sense of the boundaries that lay between them and the rest of the world. But this did not, except for the very few, result in any greater sense that the assumed superiority of the continent over all others might be unwarranted. Montaigne's skepticism—which drew some of its inspiration from his awareness of non-European cultures as well as from the diversity of cultural practices within Europe—led to a form of cultural pluralism. In the hands of the natural law theorists of the seventeenth century, Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf in

⁴⁴ Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 154.

⁴⁵ *Iconologia ovvero Decrittione d'imagini delle virtù, vitij, Afetti; Passione humane, Corpi celesti, Mondo e sue parti* (Padua, 1611), 356.

particular, the awareness of the diversity of the world beyond Europe did much to shatter the idea that that law of nature was more or less identical with the customs practiced by the peoples of Europe. Even the information that was available by the end of the seventeenth century on such an “advanced” and complex civilization as China did little to shake the belief that, taken as a whole, European civilization was not doing very much better than any of the available alternatives. To believe otherwise is to mistake the force of Montaigne’s irony for approval. Similarly, the uses to which Voltaire put the Chinese sacred histories—which seemed to demonstrate that there were centuries that the biblical narrative of the creation could not account for—were largely directed against the absurd claims of the Christian Church rather than at the broader cultural worlds that have always sustained it.

What Burke called “the great vicinage of Europe” might no longer be the source of nature’s laws, but for most Europeans it remained the only place of true civility, of free men living in secure urban communities under the rule of law. The rest of humanity served out its days under tyrannies governed according to the caprice of individual rulers, or in nomadic or seminomadic groups never far from the primordial “state of nature.” By the late seventeenth century this sense of exceptionality had found expression in a stadial theory of history. In this universal narrative all human societies begin as hunter-gatherers. They then become pastoralists, less mobile than their predecessors but still, as Montesquieu phrased it, “unable to unite.”⁴⁶ Finally, they invent agriculture, and this in time transforms them into city dwellers and traders, into modern, civilized, social beings. For all the great social theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—which in this volume James Tully subjects to such searching criticism—the final stage (“commercial society”) represented the highest possible human attainment on a trajectory through which all the peoples on the globe were bound to pass. The commercial society was one that had forsaken ancient violence (or so it was hoped) for benevolent, enlightened communication, for the transaction not only of goods but also of beliefs, habits, and ideas. The commercial society was one, or so its proponents believed, that could finally dispense with colonization in favor of harmonious transnational cooperation, one in which the less civilized peoples of the world would welcome the “civilizers”—not as conquerors and despoilers but as intellectual and moral liberators. The peoples of America, Africa, Asia, and other “distant countries seem to be waiting

⁴⁶ Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, XVIII, 11, *Oeuvres Complètes de Montesquieu*, II, 537.

only to be civilized and to receive from us the means to be so, and find brothers among the Europeans to become their friends and disciples,” enthused the Marquis de Condorcet in 1793, at the very moment that the order he was celebrating was about to vanish.⁴⁷

The ability, whether the consequence of environment or divine will, to control the resources of the natural world, to make them work for the greater good of humankind, had given Europe its assumed superiority among the peoples of the world. This is the origin of the belief, which is still shared by many, that Europe or “The West” or “The North” is somehow exceptional. As much as we all may regret it, for long periods of its recent history, the West has exercised technological and political mastery over much of the rest of the world. Just as the ability to do this derived substantially from a specific set of convictions embedded in particular ways of life—from a specific culture—so the record of those achievements has served to define that culture.

Europeans are, I suspect, unusual in sharing in this way a sense that it might be possible to belong to something larger than the family, the tribe, the community, or the nation yet smaller and more culturally specific than “humanity.” If the Chinese, the Japanese, the Koreans, or the Singhalese now sometimes choose to identify themselves as Asians, this is because European notions of ethnicity, and the domination of the world economy by European concepts of exchange, have compelled them to do so. Similarly, the peoples of, say, Uganda and Congo—themselves the products of European impositions—are highly conscious of belonging to a continent called “Africa” largely because European colonization, and the marks of European racism, have obliged them, for motives of economic and political survival, to speak of Africa, from Libya to the Transvaal, as if it were the bearer of a common cultural identity. Yet being African in Africa or Asian in Asia provides only the loosest cultural or political cohesion and at most levels no cohesion at all.

I am not endorsing any kind of European exceptionalism. All the peoples of the world are the outcome of the combination, dispersal, and recombination, through warfare and the pursuit of subsistence, of myriad diverse groups of peoples. China, which is larger than Europe, was not inhabited by one ethnic group either. Nor was Assyria, Elam, Urartu, Persia, ancient Mexico, or Inka Peru. But these were ethnic states. They invited (or compelled) the outsiders whom they conquered into their homelands

⁴⁷ Marquis de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progres de l'esprit humain*, ed. Alain Pons (Paris, 1988), 269.

and absorbed them into the dominant ethnic community. What is unusual about “Europe” is that it has for long possessed an identity as a cultural space where there have been and continue to be frequent political unions. It has never, however, constituted a single state, much less a single ethnic group.

The modern European Union has, in one sense, changed all that. The notion that “Europe” might become not merely a loose association of communities sharing an indeterminate common culture, but instead a political union of states is hardly new. From the Duc de Sully’s Grand Design of 1620 to the fitful projects, which begin to appear after the 1840s, for a United States of Europe, there has existed a continuous objective to create a European federation that would finally put an end to intracontinental warfare and enhance the welfare of all the peoples of the region. Only since 1945, after what the Spanish writer and statesman Salvador de Madariaga once described as Europe’s two great “civil wars,” has this project had any chance of being realized.⁴⁸ Despite the single market and the single currency, despite ever-increasing convergent political and legal institutions, the vagaries and uncertainties that once hung over the notion of a single European identity hang there still. Europe will never be an ethnic community, nor even the “mega-state” that the opponents of the Union so fear it might become. But the European Union and—should it ever come about—the “United States of Europe” will surely come closer than any political order has ever done before to establishing just what it means to be a “European.” When it does it will be the embodiment of a vision that reaches back nearly three millennia.

⁴⁸ *Portrait of Europe* [*Bosquejo de Europa*] (New York: Roy Publishers, 1955), 23.