

Editorial: What is Europe?

This journal is called *European Review* and the Academy that publishes it is called the *Academia Europaea*. Such words, like *Europe* and *European*, are used daily by millions of people in a completely routine-like way, rather more unconsciously than consciously, thus suggesting that everybody knows what they mean, that we all know what is European and what is not, where Europe begins and where it ends. But this is not the case at all. On the contrary, these concepts are unclear and ill-defined. Indeed they might well be indefinable. This is, of course, a curious situation, but it was not seen as a problem before 1989 when the world was simple and Europe was conveniently divided into a free, democratic and prosperous Western Europe and a subjugated, totalitarian and stagnating Eastern part. Now, however, things are no longer so simple and the question of what Europe actually is has become a problem and will increasingly continue to be a problem in the future.

Therefore, we should now ask ourselves the question of whether the old and rather vague notions about Europe and the Europeans, notions with which we have lived for the past half century or so, are still valid. The basic assumptions of the last 50 years were that Europe in fact meant Western Europe, including only the western half of Germany, and that this 'little Europe' would, as it were, automatically become ever more united so that eventually we would all become Europeans rather than Germans, Italians etc. These two basic assumptions are now in question. Europe will not be the federal Europe dreamt of in the philosophy of the European federalists. Whatever the future of the European Union might be, it will be very different from the idea of a United States of Europe. What is also clear is that, however small or big it becomes, it will certainly be – and indeed already is – considerably more extensive than the Europe of the Six, the Nine or the Twelve. The question 'What is Europe?' is therefore of great importance. When we use the word Europe, are we then referring to a geographical, a social, an economic or a cultural entity? What are its borders? Is our civilization a European civilization or rather a Western one, incorporating also America in its fold?

Obviously Europe is primarily a geographical expression denoting one of the five continents. But here there is an important difference from continents like America, Africa, and Australia, which are surrounded by oceans and seas that define their boundaries; between Europe and Asia there is no clear geographical boundary. The Germans have an expression: 'Asia begins at Vienna' (*Asien fängt an in Wien*). The famous Dutch historian Huizinga went even further when he declared that Asia begins east of the line that can be drawn from Groningen to Maastricht (Groningen is known for its natural gas and Maastricht for its treaty). Surely we cross a border there, if only from the world of blankets and sheets to the world of eiderdowns, but whether this is the border between Europe and Asia is open to debate. Anyway, eiderdowns have now become fashionable in Western Europe too.

It was General de Gaulle who coined the expression 'Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals'. But what he had in mind when using this phrase remains a mystery. Certainly the Urals have

never functioned as a border between Europe and Asia. Nor for that matter has the Aegean Sea. The Greeks have lived on both sides of that sea from time immemorial, as the Turks later came to do. For centuries Asian peoples have invaded Europe, as we remember from our schooldays, when we learnt about Attila and the Huns, and we must not forget the reverse, in that the Russians subsequently colonized across Asia, ending up in Vladivostok on the Pacific.

So, what we understand by the word Europe is not a geographical unity. Nor is it a political or economic one. In fact Europe has never been a unity – neither politically nor economically. On the contrary, Europe has always been, if anything, a continent of political divisions and economic rivalry between nation-states. Thus, the words ‘Europe’ and ‘European’ can only refer to something cultural. Here, however, we enter into a very difficult field where the possibilities for myths and mystifications are legion. Let us therefore try to agree on some basic facts.

What we typically understand when we talk of European civilization is essentially the civilization of Western and Central Europe. And the common denominator for these parts of Europe is that they were once part of the Latin Christian Church and shared the experience of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment – that is, the Scientific Revolution and Rationalism. They thus developed a new type of society and civilization, one that we might call modern civilization. This new order of things was strongly influenced and greatly changed by the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century. But its foundations were laid down much earlier, in the 16th century in fact, by what an American economic historian with the very Dutch name of Jan de Vries has ingeniously called ‘the industrious revolution’. This brought about a new social pattern which systematically aimed at maintaining and improving the standard of living and the quality of life of the community.

If this analysis is correct, it has two consequences. First, that European civilization is not limited just to Europe, because it was exported to the new worlds of America and Australia. Secondly, that not the whole of Europe is European in this sense of the term. It is not clear where exactly the dividing line lies, but roughly speaking it would run from Kaliningrad to Sofia. East of that line we enter a different world, a world that has not shared in the above-mentioned experiences.

Clearly, then, it is not only as a consequence of World War II and the Cold War that the western part of Europe has entered into a process of creating an economic and political union. There is a more fundamental basis for this in the historical background described above. It is also for that very reason that the entry of countries like Poland, Hungary and Czechia into the European Union is a logical development. To be sure, there are many practical problems involved in this process and it will slow down the further integration of the European Union. But to give priority to the deepening of the European Community rather than to the enlargement of it – to put the options in Eurojargon – would be like giving priority to the demands of the rich suburbs rather than improving the conditions in the poor neighbourhoods. It would not only be unfair but also unwise to do so, if only because we have anyway to rethink our traditional ideas about the future of the European Union and the growth of a European identity.

Many historians are actively involved in discussing these issues. Some of them, like Tony Judt, have argued that the idea of admitting the countries of Central Europe is a ‘grand illusion’, because it will dramatically change the future of the European Union and is based on a false

interpretation of European history. Others go in a very different direction and consider not only Central but also Eastern Europe as an integral part of a future European Union. Others again would like this Europe also to include Turkey. They accept that the conditions in that country would have to change considerably and that there are great economic difficulties connected to its entry into the European Union. But they also argue that essentially Turkey is part of Europe and thus belongs to the European Union. The argument that there exists an unbridgeable gap between the Islamic culture of Turkey and the classical and Christian one of Europe, as the leaders of the Christian-Democratic parties argued some time ago, is considered unrealistic. Both civilizations, it is said, stem from the same tree.

Following this line of argument one could also plead for the entry of North Africa and the Middle East into the European Union, and indeed some intellectuals have done so. That is another answer to the question of 'What is Europe?', but it is certainly not the answer the founding fathers of Europe had in mind when they asked themselves the same question. And it is probably also not what the political leaders of France and Germany have in mind now. A Europe that would extend to Vladivostok and Pakistan in the East and to the Sahel and Sudan in the South is hardly European at all. So, it seems about time to ask ourselves the question what Europe really is or should be. The issue is too important for it to be left to politicians only. The following article by Pim den Boer analyses some of these questions about the definition of the idea of Europe as they have evolved in history.

H.L.Wesseling