



## Identikit Europe

The idea of 'Europe' is a comparatively recent one. John Keane argues that European identity is contested to this day, a fact which ought to temper the new-found enthusiasm and optimism about European unity

Europhoria is here. To many people's surprise, the ideal of European unity seems to be blossoming. The contrast with 50 years ago, when Europe was a dirty or suspect word, soiled by Mussolini's talk of 'European civilisation' and Nazi propaganda against Asiatic and Jewish Bolshevism', is breathtaking. Today, most observers openly welcome the Single European (1992) Act. There is even a tide of British enthusiasm towards Paris, Brussels, Strasbourg and Bonn.

This spirited drive for European unity prompts some vital questions. What or who is this 'Europe' which is on everybody's lips? Is there such a thing as a uniquely European

identity? Such questions require answers which are sensitive to the historical development of the European ideal and mindful of the dangers of attempts to mask its plurality of meanings.

The idea of Europe is a child of the modern world. Spawned by disillusionment with religious wars and persecution, it ousted Christendom from the 15th century onwards, becoming a name for a continent and a symbol of a whole way of life. During the 18th century, despite the fact that the region was constantly at war with itself, Europe was generally accepted as a symbol of cultural unity and moral, political and technological superior-

ity. Europe represented progress and liberty, Asia and the rest of the world stagnation, barbarism and despotism. This idealisation survived into the 19th century, but the 20th century brought it crashing to the ground.

The European spirit which had once decorated the fashionable spas of Baden-Baden and Karlsbad and the *belle époque grandeur* of Palermo dissolved into nightmares of muddy trenches, mustard gas and corpses. Europe was destroyed twice by war, then partitioned by barbed wire, border guards and concrete walls. By partitioning Europe between them, the Americans and the Russians tried to guarantee that it would cause them no further headaches. They failed. Central and Eastern Europe is now the most extensive crisis zone on the earth.

This crisis is the legacy of decades of turmoil, of an epic struggle to define the traditions according to which a new Europe might be forged. It is the expression of a crisis of identity on a continental scale, of a period of trauma

and coming to terms with the fact that an era of cultural and political dominance has ended. Europe has been forced to abandon the imperialist assumption that the European spirit should rule the world.

Among the legacies of this trauma are Europe's bruised nationalisms which are dangerously sensitive to the emergence of cultural traditions and identities associated with the post-1945 wave of migration into Europe of nearly 20m people, many of them from former European colonies. These new Europeans represent the largest single recorded movement of people in history and contribute to the rich and complex web of identities which stretch across the continent.

The present push for European economic and political unity is an attempt to refurbish the old image of princess Europa as wealthy, free and powerful. But the contemporary bases of European unity are highly complicated and unpredictable. Like it or not, the cultural identity of Europeans is older and more di-



verse than the present division of Europe into a few dozen states and far more complicated than the image of a single integrated market.

There have been many Europes and their presence is still felt today: agrarian Europe and industrial Europe; the Europe of Byzantium; the Europe of the Carolingian empire and its successor, the EC; the Europe of nationalism, patriotic cultures and disaffected national minorities; Christian Europe and the Europe of the Romans, Jews and Muslims. Such historical differences can be felt to this day in the Perpignan foothills, in Nowa Huta and Titograd, in the church squares and market places of Venezia and Kiev, and in the Turkish communities in Berlin and Frankfurt. They ensure that 'Europe' will remain an awkward rallying cry in the future.

Divided by religion, national identity and custom, and kept apart by 50 different languages. Europe contains a variety of regions with uneven traditions of active citizenship which are

strongest in the west and weakest in the east. Even the geographic frontiers of Europe are disputed. Is Turkey in Europe or in Asia? And why should Russian civilisation be considered, by Milan Kundera and others, as the radical negation of Europe when it clearly lies within its cultural and geographic limits?

Historical factors have intensified disputes about the ultimate value of European culture. For some, Europe means Greece or Rome, or Christianity, or unique poetry, music and philosophy. Others continue to defend the 18th-century belief that Europe is the home of liberty. Those sympathetic to 19th-century ideas of technocracy, such as Jacques Delors, hail the formation of a new 'European Village' as a pathbreaking 'human venture' in economics and government. Others repeat Sartre's harsh dismissal of post-colonial Europe as a fat, pale, murderous region, whose fingers on every corner of the globe must be slashed until she lets go.

These disagreements about

the meaning of Europe ensure that attempts to persuade its inhabitants to regard themselves as homogenised 'Europeans' are bound to fail. Europe cannot exist as such unless it reaches explicit agreement with itself that it is riddled with diversity and (potential) conflicts.

To be a European involves recognising and valuing the existence of a collectivity which protects and encourages diversity. That is why nationalism, Christian and Islamic fundamentalism - forms of life which demand the exclusion of every other form of life - remain the biggest threat to the diversities of European identities.

Napoleon and Hitler both attempted to impose one version of the idea of Europe upon its populations. A third attempt would undoubtedly also end in disaster. That outcome can be prevented only by blocking the advance of exclusive ideologies by developing a federal system of democratic institutions which ensure a dynamic equilibrium between various individuals, groups, regions and movements.

Proposals for a federated, democratic Europe especially irritate the nationalists of this region. In France, Yugoslavia, Britain and elsewhere they are already polishing their well-worn argument about the ancient contrasts which prevent European union. They tell us that the differences between the French and the Germans, Serbs and Slovenes, and the British and the continent undermine any ideal of European unity.

This decadent prejudice feeds upon historic fears and popular anxieties but it is anti-democratic, dangerous and unconvincing. Differences of language, gender, class, religion, skin colour, sexual preference and national identity among the inhabitants of Bavaria, Languedoc and Sicily do not threaten the national unity of Germany, France and Italy. There is no reason why they should do so in a federation of free European states. A Pole, Turk, Scot and Czech reading Heinrich Boll, Edna O'Brien or Marguerite Duras in transla-

tion can experience similar passions, hopes and fears.

Above all, heart-felt nationalists overlook the point that a federated Europe is the only way of preserving the concrete facts of national identities. They can be protected only by securing the freedom of citizens from arbitrary government. This involves the elimination of the sovereignty of the nation-state.

The 'Europeanisation' of Europe requires the development of a snared sentiment of belonging to a collectivity larger, older, more diverse and henceforth indispensable for the preservation of particular identities within it. This *mentalite* remains too weak within a Europe still full of jealously-guarded national identities. It can be built only on respect for old democratic traditions.

A European public spirit also requires an understanding of the long-term impact of imperialism on Europe itself. It calls for deep respect for those cultural traditions and identities - of Bengalis, Moroccans, Chileans, Afro-Caribbeans and others - which now contribute to the diversity that is contemporary Europe.

The technocrats of Brussels tend to focus solely on the forging of political and economic institutions. They fail to take into account the cultural diversity of Europe. There is a danger that the one-dimensional definition of Europe peddled by Nato and the EC will shut out the Poles, Russians and Czechs, marginalise those groups which have settled in Europe over the last decades and extinguish their right to history.

The development of a federated, democratic Europe containing a genuine plurality of identities would undoubtedly spell trouble for the vision of Europe as a monolithic market place which is embraced by Thatcherism. This limited vision refuses to face up to the cultural implications of a new phase in the struggle over the definition of European identity. Europhoria is here indeed, but the long-term cultural implications of European integration have yet to be grasped. •