Chapter Three: Europe's narrative arc

The second chapter emphasised how important it was to have a 'narrative arc' through which to put the history of a country into perspective. It suggested that when this was done in the case of what became the UK, it was clear that it never perceived itself as able to survive in isolation from the rest of Europe, even when it had a global empire. But what did it think that it was part of? What was always drawing it towards the mainland across the Channel? Was it simply a case of military necessity and the need to protect itself from enemies? Or was there something else drawing it to belong to a wider community? The first chapter mentioned the controversial break with Rome in the sixteenth century, whose effects within the Isles themselves were felt throughout the succeeding centuries. Was that religious separation part of a wider cultural disengagement that meant a loss of something more difficult to define that is sometimes discussed in terms of 'European values?'

Here we must be careful. Like the Isles, Europe also has a 'narrative arc', and though the lessons are in certain respects different, it is useful to consider this arc too. For if there are deficiencies in the way the history of the Isles has been presented, the same can be said of the history of Europe.

At the end of the last century Cris Shore published a book entitled *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration*. It highlighted ways in which that integration had proceeded more as a coming together of elites than a meeting of peoples – a theme taken up elsewhere in this book. It also contained interesting observations on Europe, whose development, Shore believed, was often seen in a way that didn't do justice to the complexity of its roots and development – an observation that might just as easily be made about the UK.

Shore takes issue with an approach to European Studies which, while by no means unique, is common enough to be more than an aunt sally. He cites Jean-Baptiste Duroselle's *Europe: A History of its Peoples* (1990), suggesting that

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the chapter entitled 'Greek Wisdom, Roman Grandeur' puts a very positive spin on the ancient world, the gateway through which Christianity becomes the dominant force in Europe before Charlemagne cements its identity and the Roman Empire turns into the Holy Roman Empire. As with the Roman Empire itself there are 'barbarians at the gates' of the Holy Roman Empire, and the 'new Rome' may fall to them. Chapter 8 is entitled 'Europe under Siege', opening with banner-waving Saracens on horseback being held at bay by the forces of Christendom. Shore points out that Europe becomes equated with Christian civilisation defending itself against Islamic 'barbarians', a view that submerges all the important ways in which Islam has contributed to European civilisation. It is an approach that parallels the imperial histories of the nineteenth century in which the 'Christian' powers of Europe brought civilisation to other parts of the world which supposedly had none.

Such an account of European history is highly questionable. For one thing, it presents Europe as a united whole facing external threats, whether it is Greek 'civilisation' against the 'oriental despotism' of the Persians or Christian 'civilisation' fighting Islam. It was understandable that Paschalis Kitromilides, in reviewing Duroselle's book, wrote that 'although this is the creation of a distinguished historian, it is not a work of critical scholarship but the product of faith in an idea, the idea of European unity.'[1] The reality is that there were always significant divisions within Europe itself. Mediaeval Christendom, as confirmed by the Great Schism of 1054, was divided between the Latin-speaking West and the Greek-speaking East (a division which arguably began during the Roman Empire itself, when Diocletian divided the Empire into western and eastern halves in the late 3rd Century). There were theological differences between the two parts of Christendom, for instance over the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet however significant the theological differences were, underlying them was powerplay.

Thus, when the Western Patriarch (the Pope) backed the Normans in driving the Saracens out of Southern Italy in the 11th Century, the Eastern Christians based in Constantinople saw this as an attempt to increase the power of the West and believed that the Normans themselves were 'barbarians' no less than the Saracens. From a Western perspective the crowning of Charlemagne in 800 in Rome is commonly regarded as the beginnings of a Holy Roman Empire which is to supplant its unholy pagan forebear, and even as the beginnings of what might eventually become a united Europe. Did not Alcuin

1 See *European History Quarterly*, Volume 24, Issue 1 (1994), pp. 123–127, here p. 123.

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hail the new emperor as presiding over *regnum Europae*, the kingdom of Europe? And yet the crowning was viewed by the imperial court in Constantinople as an upstart Frankish King challenging European unity, not creating it. It is noteworthy that the Byzantines disliked the crusades, since they saw them as part of efforts by Western Christians to dominate the rest of Christendom rather than as part of a campaign against Islam. And well they might, given that the first warriors to sack Constantinople itself were Christian crusaders who in 1204 took the city over, spoke of establishing a 'Latin' empire there and told the Byzantine emperor that he would be in exile for fifty years. The crusades indicate something far more complex than Christians uniting against the forces of Islam.[2] They were often more a question of Christians fighting one another or (as in the case of the Albigensian crusade in the early thirteenth century) fighting against supposed heretics. Taking on the 'forces of Islam without' also led to persecution and expulsions of Jews, who were always liable to be viewed as 'the enemy within'.

A connected reason for challenging the understanding of Europe as a cohesive whole definable against the other is that such an approach presents those against whom Europe was supposedly united as if they were 'barbarians' rather than the bearers of a civilisation of their own, one that had a considerable influence on Europe itself. Large regions of modern-day Italy and Spain were once part of the Islamic world, and that world helped to bring civilisation to the West. The Caliphate of Cordoba was a conduit for Greek, Persian and Indian science reaching Europe. Nor is this simply a matter of intellectual and cultural progress. There was arguably more tolerance and respect for diversity within Islam than within Christianity during crucial periods of European history. In the fifteenth century Constantinople fell (in 1453) to the Ottoman Empire and in the same century the Spanish *Reconquista* succeeded in 'rechristianising' Spain. But the fate of Jews and Christians under Moslem rule in the East

2 'The Franks did not see Byzantium as part of their civilisation and some of their churchmen hardly even saw it as a part of Christendom, given a century and a half of schism between the churches.' Roberts, J.M. *A History of Europe*, p. 183. See also Davies, Norman. *Europe: A History*, p. 360. '…the city of Constantinople was comprehensively ransacked, the churches pillaged, the citizens butchered, the icons smashed. Baldwin, count of Flanders, was crowned "Basileus" in St. Sophia by a Venetian patriarch' From the Byzantine point of view, what happened in 1453 was no worse than this, and the turning of St Sophia into a mosque was no worse than the crowning of the 'infidel' Count of Flanders by Christians two centuries earlier.

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was much less harsh than that of Jews and Moslems in Christian Spain after the *Reconquista*.[3]

The millennium during which much of the European mainland was united under the 'Holy Roman Empire' was not, therefore, one in which 'fortress Europe' battled to resist the 'Saracens at the gate.' It was one in which Christian leaders persecuted their enemies within as well as those 'at the gates'. They vied for power and fought against one another, using the ideal of 'Christendom' to serve their purposes when necessary. Europe's history can never be adequately addressed as a prolonged campaign to defend itself against its enemies, since conflicts against external enemies have been inextricably linked to its own internal conflicts – as the history of the crusades shows.

This was made even clearer by the bitter European conflicts which turned into global warfare at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly the Second World War which produced the circumstances in which a sovereignty-sharing body could emerge. If earlier crusades had led to the sacking of Constantinople by fellow Christians, a new crusade in the twentieth century would lead to the destruction of much of Eastern Europe by fellow Europeans. Hitler's attack on Russia in June 1941 not only took the name 'Operation Barbarossa', adopting the name of the emperor who drowned during the 3rd Crusade in the late twelfth century, but claimed to be defending Europe itself. In a radio broadcast on 30th January 1945, marking his twelve years as Chancellor, Adolf Hitler declared (at a time when he was three months from final defeat):

> However grave the crisis may be at the moment…we shall all overcome this calamity, too, and this fight too will not be won by Central Asia but by Europe; and at its head will be the nation that has represented Europe against the East for 1,500 years and shall represent it for all times: our Greater German Reich.[4]

Defending Europe became a cover for national aggression. Even during the last months of the Hitler regime, he was still appealing to Europe's historic role against its enemies, presumably Slavs at the gate rather than Saracens at the gate.

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3 The Turkish record with Jew and Christian was to prove better than that of Christian Spain towards Jew and Moslem' Roberts, J.M. *A History of Europe*, p. 188.

4 You can read the whole speech on https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/adolf-hitler-broadcast-on-the-12th-anniversary-of-the-national-socialist-regime-january-1945

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It is to counter this that after the Second World War European countries managed, through the sharing of sovereignty, to make the reconstruction and development of Europe something realisable only through their jointly building up the individual member states. In a famous image the nation-states were forced into an embrace not because they were lovers but because if they were holding on to each other in that way they would be unable to achieve the distance from which they could lash out and strike. And though this is often under-played inside Europe, they did so under considerable pressure from the USA, which wanted to ensure a united front against what it perceived to be the threat from the East. However great the threat was from the new 'barbarians' at the gates, by now communists as opposed to Slavs and Saracens, it was primarily to deal with conflicts between European nations themselves that the European Coal and Steel Community and its successors emerged.

Hence, we have to be careful about thinking of Europe as a united continent determined to preserve its values and traditions against the enemy without. Fortress Europe, like Fortress Britain, hardly makes sense of what has happened in European history. External threats were often mere cover for jostlings for power between various groups inside the continent who officially shared the same outlook. Moreover, the values they claimed to have were often values taken from those they now presented as their foes, supposedly storming the gates of the fortress from beyond.

Where is Europe?

The European narrative arc reveals something else apart from a continent regularly at war with itself. There is an inherent fluidity about Europe and its boundaries which makes the attempt to see it as a coherent whole very difficult. This is partly because of expulsions and wars within the continent but is also a product of the constant churn produced by migration, which is certainly not a new phenomenon. It is arguably implicit in the story of Europe's origin, when Europa the Phoenician princess is abducted by Zeus, the head of the gods on Mount Olympus, who transforms himself into a bull and takes her away to Crete. Europe (it is not alone in this, of course) has always faced movements of people that have both been enriching and at times overwhelming. The nature of the sack of Rome in 410 is not recognised if it is thought that this was a defeat by a foreign enemy. Alaric sacked Rome because they refused to make him a Roman citizen. Thousands of so-called barbarians

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were used for work in the Roman Empire, many of them as slaves but some of whom acquired Roman citizenship and learned to read, write and speak in Latin. It did not spoil Theodosius' chances of becoming emperor that he was descended from Visigoths. Many so-called barbarians were absorbed into the imperial armies and settled inside imperial provinces – just as many of the Welsh were absorbed into the English armies that fought at Crécy and elsewhere.[5] It was a form of managed migration that became too much when large numbers of people driven by economic necessity moved westwards in the fourth and fifth centuries. This is just as true in a British context when it comes to constructions like Hadrian's Wall. The wall was less a defence against the enemies of Rome than a control point for managing the number of 'barbarians' who came in. It was more sentry post and customs barrier than fortress protecting a line that could never be crossed.

In the present day that fluidity is evident in the continuing migration flows that are as much a feature of the present as the past. It is also evident in the sense that the boundaries of Europe remain undefined. It is not an island (or near-island) continent like Oceania, Africa or North and South America. It might be seen as the Western peninsula of Asia, a subcontinent like India. But even India has a natural barrier in the form of the Himalayas which is not exactly replicated in Europe's case, despite the Urals. As a consequence, people talk of 'Eurasia' as if one part of the world shades into another or, as J.G.A. Pocock put it, 'a continental heartland in which all frontiers are indeterminate.'[6]

The geographical indeterminacy of Europe is reflected in the European Union's attitude towards who might be a member. In principle, a candidate country must be from Europe, but the EU has been careful to produce no list of the countries it believes to be in Europe and therefore potential candidates for membership. Geographical indeterminacy is matched by a similar indeterminacy over values. Talk of 'European values' needs to be treated with circumspection. It is not as if such values become immediately evident upon

5 See the discussion in J.M. Roberts' *A History of Europe*, pp. 72–73. Roberts points out that from 406 the Empire was employing barbarian tribes as 'confederates' (foederati). As late as 451 the Huns were defeated at Troyes but, writes Roberts, 'the victorious 'Roman' army was made up of Visigoths, Franks, Celts and Burgundians – all barbarians – commanded by a Visigothic king' (p. 73).

6 J. G. A. Pocock was a New Zealander, able to view Europe from a distance as well as from close-up through his connections to the U.K. See his 'What do we mean by Europe?' published in *The Wilson Quarterly*, Volume 21 No. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 12–29.

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crossing some kind of border – Europe has no clear border. Nor are they somehow created by geographical location.

Geography has occasionally been pressed into the service of explaining cultural and social difference at the continental level – or the lack of it. Those 'oriental' Persian despots facing Greek civilisation were rationalised by the French writer Montesquieu in terms of the idea that the geography of Asia favours empires because those immense plains, uninterrupted by mountains or rivers, were somehow susceptible to the despotic rule appropriate to large spaces. One wonders how this might apply to the rulers of Australia or a future Emperor of the Antarctic, but the view has sometimes had resonance with those who see the complex groupings of small nations in Europe as a mark of respect for diversity or what the Czech writer (now living in France) Milan Kundera called 'the greatest variety in the smallest space'.[7] An earlier Czech writer, Karel Čapek, had suggested that 'the creator of Europe made her small and even split her up into little parts so that our hearts could find joy not in size but in plurality.'[8] Such sentiments are not perhaps surprising given the way in which their own country emerged from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and then the 'velvet divorce' that produced two separate nation-states, The Czech Republic and Slovakia, out of Czechoslovakia as recently as 1993.

The suggestion seems to be that these small European countries emerged out of respect for diversity, a sort of LGBT+ of nations where those despots in the East simply thought everyone was the same. But it is a mistake to identify such variety with toleration and mutual acceptance. Hobsbawm had a point in his criticism of what he called the 'Wilsonian system', named after American President Woodrow Wilson, who after World War One sought to create a number of smaller states out of the collapsing Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, not least as buffer states to resist the 'infection' of bolshevism from Russia:

7 Kundera's 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' was an essay published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1984, some five years before the collapse of communism in Central Europe.

8 Čapek wrote this in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1926. It has been quoted many times since. It is used as an epigraph at the start of 'Varieties of Europe', chapter 23 of Tony Judt's classic *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*.

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> …it demonstrated to no great surprise that the nationalism of small nations was just as impatient of minorities as what Lenin called 'great-nation chauvinism.'[9]

In reality, the 'little' nations of Europe have often been the source of bitter wars, pitting them against each other with many casualties. The former Yugoslavia, for instance, created in 1918 as a country of 'Southern Slavs' as opposed to the 'Western Slavs' in Czechoslovakia, imploded in the 1990s and the result was a series of five wars in which hundreds of thousands died and many more went into exile. Such conflicts have to be set against the idea that Europe has somehow been at peace since 1945, a view which is hardly heard any more following the long-drawn-out invasion of Ukraine by Russia. They also serve as a warning for those who think that nothing but good can come from breaking up the UK into its constituent parts.

The conclusion is that the difficulty of defining *where* Europe is reflects the difficulties in defining *what* it is. It is hardly credible to see it as fifty or so small nations who have managed to trim their size down to a point where they can manifest a huge variety of different cultural and social perspectives. 'European values', whether or not laced with religious language about a 'Christian' culture, have too often been a cover for national aggression. It would be better to think in terms of such values emerging from what bodies like the European Union have tried to do in order to deal with problems between nation-states, than to see them as somehow pre-existing the efforts to create a community of nations on what has proved itself time and time again to be a warlike continent. In his autobiography *Interesting Times*, published in 2002, Hobsbawm referred to '…the almost total failure, largely for institutional and linguistic reasons, of history to emancipate itself from the framework of the nation-state.'[10] But it was not just an institutional and linguistic failure but a failure of imagination on the part of historians, not least Hobsbawm himself whose writings paid little attention to the European Union.

9 Hobsbawm, Eric *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 134.

10 Hobsbawm, Eric. *Interesting Times*, p. 293.

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Creating European Values

At the time of the formation of Italy only 2% of the population actually spoke Italian and D'Azeglio remarked that having created Italy (following Italian Unification in 1860) it would now be necessary to make Italians.[11] Perhaps the same remark could be made of Europe. In other words, rather than trying to claim that the European Union arose out of the inspiration provided by European values, would it not be better to say that European values can be created out of the European Union? What nation-states can do now is develop the values that correspond to the sovereignty-sharing system that they have adopted. Europeans in the twenty-first century, like Italians in the nineteenth, have yet to be created.

There were profound social changes in nineteenth-century Europe, when people's lives ceased to be largely determined by their local communities and the trappings of a modern state began to emerge, with mass involvement in national education and a national bureaucracy, in some cases with national conscription. Cohesive nation-states emerged, whose citizens realised that their lives were profoundly affected by the country they lived in. This was to make the often intense and uncontrolled rivalry between nation-states a potent force, one into which the overwhelming majority of citizens in these states were drawn. The world wars of the early twentieth century drew whole peoples into conflicts which produced millions of deaths and injuries among both soldiers and civilians. At the end of a half-century of slaughter the planet remained divided into two hundred or so nation-states returning to their old rivalries or devising new ones. New conflicts and outbreaks of warfare were bound to break out – and have done so. Though there are international bodies like the United Nations which try to prevent or mitigate the effects of such conflicts, their success has been limited. What has been done in part of Europe through the sharing of sovereignty is an attempt to create a structural mechanism whereby the intense attachment to the nation-state created in the nineteenth century can be managed in such a way that outbreaks of violent conflict are made much less likely. This mechanism involves nation-states

11 See Hobsbawm, Eric *The Age of Capital*, p. 111. It is worth reading the whole chapter, entitled 'Building Nations,' pp. 103–122 of the book. See also 'The Nation as Novelty', chapter 1 of Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, pp. 14–45. d'Azeglio's remark about making Italians comes from the first meeting of the parliament of the newly united Italian kingdom.

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agreeing to be bound by decisions that they jointly reach but which may be against the wishes of some individual members – in effect they give up the veto they have at the national level. They therefore create rules and an enforcement mechanism (European Law) which is binding upon them. This mechanism has facilitated the creation of many programmes that are now organised through the European Union, such as the regional funds which are made possible by the existence of an EU budget, the Erasmus and Solidarity programmes, scientific and research projects and the infamous (but defensible) Common Agricultural Policy. From this perspective, it is through the effective management of social, educational and technological developments at the European level that European 'values' will emerge, just as it was through the development of national administrations, (such as postal systems, taxation systems and conscription), news outlets and educational systems (based on the national language) that a heightened national consciousness emerged in the nineteenth century.[12] It is not European values which has made it possible for the European Union to be created; it is the European Union that has the chance to create European values – if, that is, it is able to survive.

Conclusion

Where the UK was concerned, the narrative arc stressed its continuous involvement with the rest of Europe and the dangers of seeing English and, later, British history in terms of 'Britain alone.' There is also a narrative arc where the development of the different nations making up the UK is concerned. Here the danger was seeing the nations outside England as no more than a shield, a northern and western equivalent to the Channel as (in Shakespeare's famous image) a moat to protect England from its enemies. Where Europe is concerned, some of the lessons are similar. Europe's history has sometimes been presented as if it is a case of a Christian fortress defending itself against its foes, whereas closer inspection showed that these so-called 'foes', and Islam in particular, contributed through their culture and scholarship to making Europe what it is, as they still do. The Islamic influence on Europe is as clear as

12 See 'Building Nations', chapter 5 of Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Capital*, pp. 103–121. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* is particularly helpful on the impact of language and the development of the written word through books and later newspapers upon the growth of national feeling.

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the Celtic influence on England. External threats were often used as cover for power bids by rival Christian groups in Europe, just as the threat from outside England was used to advance the power of various groups within it.

However, there are some differences too in the case of Europe's arc. Unlike the Isles, Europe (the Western peninsula of Asia?) remains an ill-defined land mass, whose borders have been drawn in various ways over the centuries. Partly because of its lack of clear borders, it has been subject to constant churn as people have migrated in and out.

Europe's history presents a continent riven by divisions, divisions that have often led to conflict. Small countries have shown themselves to be just as capable of fragmentation and civil war as larger ones. The collapse of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s led to over 100,000 deaths. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will lead to even more. The conclusion is that there is little in Europe's political history to suggest the sort of preparedness to tolerate diversity that is so emphasised today. The respect for diversity is deeply welcome, but it has hardly been a characteristic trait of European history. To Davies' *Vanished Kingdoms* could be added a vanished social mix as countries have pursued so-called 'ethnic cleansing'. Tony Judt made the point is his magisterial *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*:

> The continent of Europe was once an intricate, interwoven tapestry of overlapping languages, religions, communities and nations. Many of its cities-particularly the smaller ones at the intersection of old and new imperial boundaries, such as Trieste, Sarajevo, Salonika, Cernovitz, Odessa or Vilna-were truly multicultural societies avant le mot, where Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, Jews and others lived in familiar juxtaposition. We should not idealise this old Europe. What the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski called 'the incredible, almost comical melting-pot of people and nationalities sizzling dangerously in the very heart of Europe' was periodically rent with riots, massacres and progroms-but it was real, and it survived into living memory.
>
> Between 1914 and 1945, however, that Europe was smashed into the dust.[13]

This is the context within which we should judge Čapek's idea that 'the creator of Europe made her small and even split her up into little parts so that

13 Judt, Tony *Postwar*, pp. 8–9.

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our hearts could find joy not in size but in plurality.'[14] Čapek's words may have some romantic appeal, but they hardly reflect the violent history of Europe. European values are less likely to be a reflection of Europe's past than of its determination to have a different future after two world wars that nearly destroyed a continent. This arguably strengthens the case for the structures which have been put in place with the European Economic Community and later the European Union. It is why the sharing of sovereignty must be the vital ingredient in the European values which have to be developed now rather than imagined from a largely mythical reading of the past. Indeed, they may be developed and even created precisely through the institutions that are sometimes portrayed as merely being their consequence. This is what Habermas, among others, suggests.[15] Rather than the institutions springing out of the values, it may be that the institutions themselves can help to embed those values in a democratic European landscape.

14 Čapek wrote this in a letter to the New York Times from 1926. It is discussed in Wilson, Kevin and van der Dussen, Jan *The History of the Idea of Europe*, p. 124.

15 See Habermas, Jürgen 'The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy'.

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