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3. What is Europe? Place, Idea, Action

Paul Stock

What is Europe? Nearly two-and-a-half-thousand years ago, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (*c*.484–*c*.425 BCE) pondered precisely this question, remarking on the elusive meaning of the term. 'As for Europe,' he wrote, 'no men have any knowledge whether it is bounded by seas or not, or where it got its name, nor is it clear who gave the name.' Herodotus adds that the term might have derived from Europa, a mythological Phoenician princess, though he glosses over this theory as vague and poorly-evidenced – a surprising conclusion given his notorious predilection for fanciful or exaggerated accounts. Today, the same core issue – what is Europe? – has lost none of its immediacy. In fact, related questions are among the most urgent in contemporary politics: what does 'Europe' mean, and to whom; where are its borders; who is European and who is not; what is Europe's future? Importantly, these are also historical enquiries: if we are to understand the trajectory of contemporary discussions about Europe, we need to analyse the histories of those debates as well as the concepts which underpin them. Here I want briefly to consider Europe as a place, as an idea, and, crucially, as a set of actions. In common usage the word typically refers to a continent, but it would be a mistake to assume that it refers strictly to a material location. Instead, we need to think of 'Europe' as an idea: a set of changing and historically-specific beliefs which shape our understanding of places and peoples. But neither is it enough to reduce 'Europe' to an abstraction: ideas about Europe have concrete effects as individuals and other social actors justify their activities and policies in terms of those ideas.

For many people, the question 'what is Europe?' has an obvious answer: it is a continent, specifically the western part of the Eurasian

land mass. 'Europe', in other words, is a place: a demarcated area of the Earth's surface. It is therefore a real, material entity detectable by the senses: one can live within Europe's boundaries, stand on its soil; or leave it for another separate place such as Africa or America. But it would be a misleading to assume that 'Europe' is an objective product of the Earth's physical features. This can be appreciated if we consider the continuous historical debates about Europe's geographical extent.

As Herodotus's remarks illustrate, the dimensions of Europe were unclear even to the earliest users of the term. In some classical texts it seems to have referred only to the coastal mainland distinct from the Greek islands and the Peloponnese, while in others Europe and Libya were conflated as the same large land mass. Similar problems have continued right through the modern period and into the present day, often focused on the placement of Europe's eastern boundary at the point it meets Asia. Early modern cartographers proposed a bewildering variety of potential borders. For example, the French geographer Nicholas Sanson (1600–67) suggested a line connecting the White Sea to the River Dnieper in modern-day Ukraine, thus making Moscow a city in Asia. At the other extreme, the Dutch map-maker Gerard Valck (1652–1726) traced the Europe-Asia boundary from the River Ob in Siberia to the Caspian Sea.

By the later 18th century, one particular border had become especially widely reproduced, though it owed its success to a specific ideological agenda, and not simply to the dispassionate observation of natural truths. Beginning with the Ural mountains near the Arctic Circle, this boundary followed the lines of the Rivers Volga and Don southwards before terminating in the Black Sea. Proponents of this line often justified it on the grounds of ancient precedent: according to both Strabo (*c.*64 BCE–*c.*24 CE) and Ptolemy (*c.*100–170 CE) the River Don or Tanais marked the eastern limit of Europe. But in fact its popularity emerged from very specific political circumstances. The Urals-Don border was championed by Philip Johann von Strahlenberg (1676–1747), a Swedish military officer held prisoner by Peter the Great of Russia (1672–1725) and forced to undertake cartographic work for the Russian state. Strahlenberg argued that other proposed boundaries were 'fictitious' and that these mountains and rivers formed an unmistakable dividing line. Significantly, his argument placed Russia securely in Europe, and it therefore cohered fully with Peter's wider political and cultural agenda to promote his country as an unambiguously European state. The demarcation of European space is therefore directed by ideological priorities rather than by observation

of the natural environment. One might even argue that socio-political purposes can structure how the terrain is perceived and interpreted.

Another perennial problem concerns Europe's south-eastern border: specifically, whether the Ottoman Empire (and later Turkey) is part of Europe. Certainly there is a long tradition, traceable from at least the medieval period, which views Turks as alien invaders and thus as non-Europeans. For instance, the future Pope Pius II (1405–64) fulminated against Muslim incursions westwards: 'now that the city of Constantinople has fallen and been transferred into enemy hands […] now truly we have been stricken and felled in Europe, that is to say in our own fatherland, in our own house, in our seat'. But the presence of Greece within the Ottoman Empire complicated the situation, especially for the majority of post-Renaissance thinkers who considered classical civilisation fundamental to European history and culture. Greece and the Ottoman Empire were thus seen as simultaneously within and outside of Europe, and the precise location of any boundary is obscured by competing interpretations of history and identity.

Given the practical challenge of locating Europe and its borders, it is not surprising that one early 19th century mass-market reference book defined 'Europe' as 'the name given to one of the four great divisions into which geographers have divided the world'. 'Europe', in other words, is not a natural feature of the Earth; it is a concept invented and imposed by geographers. This suggests that a different approach is required: perhaps we need to think of Europe not as a physical place, but rather as an idea. According to this approach, 'Europe' is a set of beliefs or principles which can be used to interpret the world and to define spaces and peoples. By investigating the idea of 'Europe' we are not searching for its essential meaning – a conclusive explanation of what it 'is'. Instead, as Peter Rietbergen argues in his recent history of the continent, we are thinking of Europe as 'a series of world-views, of peoples' perspectives on their reality, sometimes only dreamt or desired, sometimes experiences and realised'. Such ideas about Europe are always historical in the sense that they emerge at specific moments and according to particular ideological agendas, but they can also be long-lasting and reconceived in new contexts. We have already encountered the medieval idea that Europe and Christendom are commensurate, and that only Christians can be Europeans – an association which has continued to exert great influence despite the supposed secularisation of post-Enlightenment culture. Other familiar ideas from early modernity include the belief that Europe is the sole legitimate successor to the traditions of classical

Greece and Rome; that Europe is a region uniquely free from tyranny and thus the home of 'liberty'; or that Europe is a uniquely 'advanced' culture which is destined to lead the world by influence or conquest.

In all of these cases, it would be a serious error to take these ideas at face value; to treat them as straightforward descriptions of fact, rather than as these interpretations of the world. The belief that Europe is a Christian continent, for example, ignores the presence of other faiths in European culture, Christianity's global (not just continental) reach, and the long history of denominational conflict in the region. Just as we would recognise the racist and imperialist assumptions which underpin late 19th century notions of a European 'master race', so we must be similarly aware that all statements which purport to define or describe 'Europe' and 'Europeans' emerge from specific ideological and historical contexts. The historian's task is to recognise that 'Europe' is a form of discourse: a way of organising, communicating and legitimising ideas about people and space. Importantly too, the history of the idea of Europe encompasses ideas about European fragmentation and not just unity. After all, some of the most potent and enduring concepts of Europe are premised on firm distinctions between different nations or political systems, races or stages of societal 'development'. The assumption that Europe is irretrievably disunited needs to be interrogated alongside claims of, or plans for, European unity.

It is not enough, however, to imply that Europe is merely an abstract concept to be analysed on a theoretical level. Ideas about Europe have material consequences because they inspire practical action. There are many examples throughout history of individuals, governments and other social actors using ideas about Europe to enact policy, to justify activity, or to delineate identities. Pope Urban II (*c.*1042–99) defined 'Europe' as the 'part of [the world that] we Christians live in', and portrayed it as collectively humiliated by Muslim possession of the Holy Land. Urban's speeches evoked and encouraged a trans-European culture and a Christian military alliance: they are now often seen as both a theoretical justification and a practical impetus for the First Crusade. Later, by the 17th century, politicians and political theorists in various Western European countries came to think of 'Europe' as a finely-balanced network of separate states, each with independent, though occasionally overlapping, interests. A key foreign policy objective based on this idea was to prevent a single state from achieving hegemonic power over the continent. Certainly, one can see this principle behind British involvement in several 18th century conflicts, as

well as the agreed treaty settlements which followed them. The Congress of Vienna which followed Napoleon's defeat declined to weaken France unduly and thus create opportunities for a new hegemon in its place. Related ideas about European equilibrium continued to underpin British foreign policy into the later 19th and 20th centuries, especially as the consolidated German states altered the balance of power.

Today, different ideas about Europe sustain policy-making. In 2005, the Heads of State and Government at the Council of Europe set out a joint vision for 'a united Europe, based on our common values and on shared interests'. Fundamental to this is the 'core objective of preserving and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law', facilitated by a detailed action plan covering numerous practical issues from ensuring compliance with common legal standards to the joint promotion of sport. Likewise, the European Union has tried to re-cast and realise centuries-old ideas about 'European liberty' with its policies on the so-called 'four freedoms': the free movement of goods, people, services and capital across the states of the Union. By contrast, critics of the EU propose, and increasingly enact, alternative measures based on different conceptions of the idea of Europe. Eurosceptics often stress the irreconcilable independence of European nation-states, and advocate practical measures – like heightened migration controls – to achieve their distinct version of the 'ideal' Europe.

To sum up, 'Europe' is not a natural fact of geography. It does not possess essential and unchanging characteristics which can be discovered if we look hard enough for empirical evidence of its true nature. Instead, 'Europe' is a concept fashioned by humans, established and reinvented according to historically-specific belief systems and ideological principles. Crucially though, these ideas about Europe are also real, precisely because people *believe* that they are and because they *act* on those beliefs. Europe is always more than just an abstract idea: it has tangible applications and can structure our understanding of the real world. The task of the historian is to trace the emergence, trajectory and consequences of those ideas. This is a crucial responsibility given the continuing prevalence of ideas about Europe in contemporary societies, cultures and politics. We need historians to analyse and contextualise those notions, especially when they are used and abused for concrete ends. For those of us living inside the continent – as well as for a great many elsewhere – conceptions of Europe are everywhere, deeply woven in the histories we tell, in the identities we employ, and in the places we inhabit. This means that it is misleading and simplistic to

claim that we can either be 'in' or 'out' of Europe. Instead, the key questions for policymakers – and Europeans – are 'what kind of Europe do we want to create?' and 'what kind of Europeans do we want to be?'

These questions were largely neglected in the recent referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the EU. The proffered options were poorly defined, and there was almost no attempt to evoke an idea of 'Europe' – within or outside of the EU – which could realise a clearly-articulated social, cultural or economic vision. In the aftermath of the referendum, there needs to be more open debate about what 'Europe' means for us today, and the extent to which the EU in its present form can realise those ends. In arguing, as I have done, that Europe has no essential definitive qualities, it does not follow that it is both every-thing and nothing and is thus an empty conceit. It means instead that 'Europe' can be shaped to new purposes and that, in doing so, we are not obliged to equate existing conventions with the limits of our aspirations. Do we want Europe to be a supra-national umbrella organisation, equipped with the trappings of nation-states on a grander scale? Do we want it to be the legal guarantor of distinctive and independent states, of commonly-agreed values, or both? Do we want 'Europe' to be an alternative form of identity to the nationalist rivalry so prevalent in the recent past? At this moment of reassessment for Britain and the EU, these discussions are now needed more than ever. What is Europe now? What can we make it? Who shall we be? These are the real questions for public intellectuals, policymakers and voters.