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EUROPE'S PLACE

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About the author

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The idea of a “Core Europe” does not seem to go away. Habermas and Derrida famously asked the question on a political-philosophical register in 2005: Should there not be a super-state Europe with its own foreign policy so that Europe could deal on its own terms with an emerging multi-polar world? The current crisis in Eurozone countries has brought the debate back: Should there be more centralization of Eurozone economies to avert future crises or should the European Union move towards a more federal structure? All talk of centralization or of a “Core Europe” ends up having to reckon with the diversity of Europe, its plural internal histories including divergent nationalisms. The unity of Europe is not a question that can be settled simply by financial, business, or even foreign policy compulsions. Europe needs other glues – of cultures, ideas, and shared institutions – to give itself a robust sense of unity. These “glues” are not produced on order; they require the patient work of cultural politics and a certain measure of historical luck.

Notwithstanding its many undesirable features, European colonial expansion once produced a global middle class that, by the middle of the twentieth century, looked on Europe as part of its own inheritance. When Richard Wright, the African-American writer resident in Paris, announced to his friends in 1955 his intention to attend the Bandung Conference of newly-liberated ex-colonial nations, his friends warned him. This would simply be a carnival of anti-Western, anti-European sentiments, they said. But Wright was surprised. He left the conference feeling that he could not have met a more Europeanized group of leaders who, for all their rejection of empires, were completely in the thrall of Europe and wanted their peoples to emulate European and Western ways of being “modern.” The point was perhaps best expressed in the twentieth century by that great anti-colonial thinker, Frantz Fanon. His revolutionary book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, a searing condemnation of European colonialism, was also a paean to Enlightenment thought. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, often thanked the British for expanding «the mental horizon of the [Indian] people.» More recently, the previous Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan

Singh, repeated the compliment in a speech given at Oxford University in 2005. Singh offered a list of India’s debt to England: the rule of law, constitutional government, modern universities, professional civil service, and, of course, cricket and the English language (with all its attendant problems of split infinitives and misplaced definite and indefinite articles).

Indeed, what set European ascendancy apart from other instances of empires in human history was the global intellectual impact of European modernization. A country or nation did not even have to be under formal European domination in order to want to copy European ways. Think of Japan and Thailand, two countries that were never formally colonized. The histories of their attempts to modernize themselves would be unthinkable without the cultural hegemony of Europe.

There is no question that this Europe of the mind was a myth, but a very powerful myth at that. This was the Europe of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, of industrial revolution, democracy, and modernity, the Europe that gave the world the competing emancipatory visions of nationalism, liberalism, and Marxism. But this “Europe” was a myth because it elided many disturbing facts of European history over the last five hundred years: the systematic destruction of indigenous societies, the deliberate creation of modern forms of racism, that oppression of New World slavery and of the “civilizing mission”, not to speak of the two world wars and the profound wounds inflicted by Nazism and Fascism. The myth was partial also in that it silently foregrounded Western Europe as the fount of modernity— mainly Britain, France, and Germany – and marginalized the rest of Europe, both in the South and the East, as somehow less modern. When I published my book *Provincializing Europe* in 2000, some of friends in Poland, Hungary, and Belarus remarked – in jest but not without a point – that *Provincializing Western Europe* would have been a more suitable title for the book.

This myth of Europe today lies exhausted. Exhausted, in part because the world that colonial masters and their nationalist disciples made died out in the 1950s

and '60s under the strains of super-power politics and then metamorphosed into the global world of today. Mao's death and the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 brought that story of anti-colonial struggles against the West to an end. The fall of the Berlin Wall and then of the Soviet Union and its satellite states further ushered in the age of globalization of the media and economies. The rise of China, India, Brazil and the ailing economies of the US, Europe, and Japan now foreshadow a coming multi-polar world that will also have to cope with some emerging crises of planetary proportions, such as climate change, food security, population increase, and the availability of cheap energy. Which only means that this multi-polar world will have to find ways of mobilizing its internal differences in order to meet the exigencies of a global calendar of crises.

Where will Europe – taking into account all its internal inequities and diversity – find its place in the world today? Or to put the question differently, and idealistically, from a post-colonial point of view: What remains – or should remain - of the European legacy that once even those opposed to colonial rule admired and valued? One welcome irony of history may very well be the fact that the end of the imperial age actually provides a war-weary Europe with an opportunity to lead the world in pursuit of the Enlightenment values that it once used – self-contradictorily - to justify its empires. Unlike the US, European powers have the good fortune of no longer needing to be the world's policemen. That actually frees them up to bring to bear on the debates on the burning global issues of today the values of Enlightenment Europe that were, and are, indeed of universal significance. On climate change and question of renewable energy, policy and public debates in many European nations are far in advance of what I see in the US, Australia, China, or India. The legacy of the welfare state in Europe, however threatened it may be in today's circumstances, produces visions of a civilized capitalism that Anglo economies abandoned many decades ago. The biggest intellectual and political challenge is in the area of immigration. European borders – both internal and external - are porous, and the world will, for good or bad, see more human movements in the coming decades.

All affluent countries will have to deal with refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal immigrants. The temptation to implement quasi-racist, shut-the-door-to-the-outsider or you-have-to-become-like-us policies will be strong. How this will work out in the long run is hard to tell. But this is an arena where Europeans will have to debate other Europeans about what it might mean to lay claim to the core ideals of the Enlightenment – as Habermas and Derrida did in their joint manifesto of 2005 – while nurturing possible conversations with formerly-colonized and marginalized peoples who bring to Europe, both from the outside and the inside, different histories and traditions. Some scholars recommend that Europe can do this best by moving closer to American-style capitalism. I am not sure. But even that transition cannot happen without a debate about what should and should not remain of Europe's pasts. This is where I see a possibility for a vibrant, civilized, and genuinely postcolonial Europe of the future. I know that there are many voices to be heard on this question but listening to some of them – Etienne Balibar in France, Sandro Mezzadra in Italy, Tobias Doering and Sebastian Conrad in Germany, to name but a few – I remain optimistic.

