

# Fictions of Europe\*

## **'European culture'**

It is not difficult to find a definition of 'European culture'. For instance:

What determines and characterises European culture? . . . Europe is formed by the . . . community of nations which are largely characterised by the inherited civilisation whose most important sources are: the Judaeo-Christian religion, the Greek-Hellenistic ideas in the fields of government, philosophy, arts and science, and finally, the Roman views concerning law.<sup>1</sup>

This is a definition so average that it is almost official. In fact, it is official, because it is given by the Netherlands Ambassador for International Cultural Cooperation, Mr M. Mourik. We are taken past the familiar stations of Europe: Greece – Rome – Christianity. This is a well-known entity in the United States also, where it is often referred to as 'western civilisation', which may be summed up as 'from Plato to Nato'.<sup>2</sup>

This is the usual façade of Europe, so familiar that it is boring. This is the Europe that is now being resurrected in the discourses of the official magisters of culture. The problem, however, is not just that it is boring. The problem is that, in addition to being chauvinistic, elitist, pernicious and alienating, it is wrong.

---

*Jan Nederveen Pieterse* is author of *Empire and Emancipation: power and liberation on a world scale* (London, Pluto, 1989).

\*Part of the revised text of a lecture given at the Yorkshire Arts Council in Bradford, November 1990. Part two, not included here, is called 'Scratching the Surface: multicultural Europe'.

*Race & Class*, 32(3), 1991

#### 4 *Race & Class*

It is wrong as regards the origins of European culture; it is wrong in so representing European culture that European regional cultures and subcultures are overlooked; it is wrong in representing elite culture as culture *tout court* and in denying popular culture; it is wrong in defining European culture in terms of the past ('inherited civilisation') and in totally ignoring Europe's contemporary multicultural realities.

This old culture is presently being revived in the context of the 'new Europe'. Many of the political and economic negotiations and virtually all of the debate on culture focus on *Europe and the nations*. The usual questions are whether the Europe of '1992' will be dominated by the largest national European cultures, Germany and France. What about Britain? What about the identities of the smaller European cultures? What about central Europe, Mitteleuropa? Will European cultures be steamrollered into a continent-wide pattern of uniformity, propelled by market forces and media magnates and directives from a few Europe metropolises?

The continent that pioneered nationalism pioneers the transcendence of nationalism, and in this context these questions are very meaningful. Yet, this is essentially a discussion about 'Europe and Europe'. There is another question on the horizon which is both larger and potentially more incisive in its implications, and that is *Europe and the continents*. This is infrequently talked about, except in the context of decolonisation and the critique of eurocentrism, topics which are not particularly high on the agenda.

We are living in a post-imperial Europe which still maintains an imperial culture. Official European culture, reproduced in declarations, textbooks, media programmes, continues to be the culture of imperial Europe.

Another issue is that Europe, from the point of view of the many migrants in Europe of non-European origin, is now a New World, yet its self-image, its dominant culture, is still that of an Old World – that is, a world from which people emigrate.

Certain key experiences are missing from this new old European culture: the experience of decolonisation, of migrations, post-imperial ('we are here because you were there') and otherwise, and of globalisation.

Walk in any street of any European city and ask yourself – is this 'European culture'? Is this 'Greece – Rome – and Judaeo-Christianity'? Ask contemporary citizens of Europe about their ancestors, their origins – how many of you hail from non-European worlds? Or, to use nineteenth-century racist language, how many of you are half-caste? How many of you were never represented in this elite European project in the first place – as members of the working class or living in the countryside, or in regional cultures such as the 'Celtic fringe'?

What is being recycled as 'European culture' is nineteenth-century elite imperial myth-formation. Is it not high time then to open up the imperial façade of European culture, to place it under an X-ray and ask, what here is really Europe and what is not?

### **Fortress Europe**

Europe 1992 means that, as internal borders become lower, the external borders become higher, both in terms of the 'Zollverein Europe' of the internal market and in terms of 'European identity'. Concretely, it refers to the plans for a 'European visum' and to the Schengen Accord, which is to regulate immigration and asylum on a European basis.

Each European country thereby assumes a double identity, national and as member of a United States of Europe, each a gateway towards, or a ramparts of the European world. As the physical frontier with Africa and the Middle East, Mediterranean Europe occupies a special place in this constellation. There are writings on the wall.

Spain, Portugal and Greece have recently become immigration countries – now more people come from the south than leave for the north. Italy had already held this status for some time. Thus, the Italian and French patterns of racism and racial attacks on minorities of non-European origin, mainly from North and West Africa, may be becoming a Mediterranean pattern. Spanish sociologist Alberto Moncada speaks of 'Spain functioning as a southern European police over the human mass from the Maghreb and Latin America'.<sup>3</sup> In news reports, Greece and also Bulgaria are already talked about as 'frontline states with fundamentalist Islam'.

What is developing in these areas is a European Mexico syndrome – a border-zone where economic, political, cultural, religious and demographic differences accumulate to create a gap between worlds, a zone of confrontation. Like Hong Kong, Europe will, and indeed already does, face refugees, boat people, and police hunting for illegal foreigners.<sup>4</sup>

NATO is also shifting its sights towards the south.<sup>5</sup> With the cold war past, this is where the 'new enemy' lurks. 'Islamic fundamentalism', poverty and high population growth are identified as the main problems in classified and not-so-classified documents. Over recent years, we have seen the enemy images shifting and 'new Hitlers' paraded on the front pages – Arafat, Khadafi, Khomeini, Assad, and now Saddam Hussein.

Thus, Fortress Europe is becoming a reality. The situation is primarily identified as a security problem, although it is also, secondarily, acknowledged as an economic and humanitarian problem.

Europe's historic frontier of confrontation with the world of Islam is being reactivated. The question of Europe and the south, Africa, Asia and Latin America, is acquiring new dimensions. We may sum up this set of problems as: *Europe and the continents*.

These problems also reflect on migrants of non-European origin within Europe, so they also run *through* Europe. We may sum up this question as: *Europe and the minorities*. Thus, the problems of Europe and the continents are reproduced locally throughout Europe, interacting with the problem of Europe and the minorities. Local frontiers, of status and neighbourhood, colour and education, intersect with global frontiers. How minorities of non-European origin are viewed is affected by how Europe views itself in relation to the continents.

The prospect is that of Europe as a fort, with the Straits of Gibraltar and the Bosphorus for moats, and parts of the Third World as hinterlands, optional labour reserves. Gradually, a discreet neo-Malthusianism is becoming a way of thinking about Africa in particular: famine and starvation as the means of re-establishing equilibrium between population and resources.

The inauguration of 'Europe 1992' will coincide with the 1992 Columbus celebrations in Spain and Portugal and the Americas – 500 years since the Old World spawned the New World, 500 years of modernisation, 500 years to contemplate the paradoxes of progress . . . In Spain and Portugal, this will be an occasion to erect monuments to commemorate the 'Discoveries' and to celebrate the Conquista, thereby reaffirming and reproducing in their claim to fame the very dualism of the Americas, where Columbus Day is a day of celebration for Europeans and a day of mourning for native Americans.

European identity is no longer an imperial, expansionist identity in the old sense. The era of imperialism is past. The era of decolonisation is past and Third Worldism is no longer à la mode. European chauvinism now is prosperous, complacent, aloof. Fortress Europe, in its cultural uniform, is not expansionist but critical.

Many 'progressives', intellectuals and left-wing people included, share this kind of definition of the situation. Europe is their castle. Europe is the fortress of their mind. As much as they identify with the Europe of the Enlightenment, they abhor 'Islamic fundamentalism', and, since 'Third Worldism' is out of fashion, they look down, if they look at all, on the poor in the Third World, and find shelter in a self-image of Europe as a world of modernity. The discourse of post-modernism, busy critiquing modernity, turns its back on the 'pre-modern' world.

This situation is an open door to the European Right, culture-baiting minorities as 'aliens'. This creates the danger of a new European consensus of exclusion, a right-to-centre political and

cultural coalition that may turn Europe into a complacent shelter of conservatism – in the name of Enlightenment.

One of the European projects waiting in the wings is that of a Europe-wide coalition of right-wing parties, a continental chain of 'national fronts'. It is ironical to realise that, for all their 'national' posturing, several of these organisations are being funded and supported from foreign sources, ranging from American right-wing foundations to the Unification Church of Rev Moon.

### **The deconstruction of Europe**

Rather than recycling the illusions of imperial Europe, we should address and welcome the multicultural realities and opportunities of post-imperial Europe. Re-creating Europe in '1992' means to relocate Europe's place in world history, in terms of the real relationship between Europe and the continents and not according to the great walls of empire.

The familiar stations of Europe are: Greece – Rome – Christendom – Renaissance – Enlightenment – industrialisation – colonialism. The two main definitions of European identity derived from this are, in shorthand, Christianity and the Enlightenment.

From Santiago de Compostella, Pope John Paul II calls out to a 'Christian Europe'. This historical field mattered to Catholic statesmen Schuman, Adenauer, de Gasperi, who came together for the Treaty of Rome in 1956. The notion of Christian Europe matters to Christian Democrats and to many on the Right, from Otto von Habsburg to Jean Marie le Pen.<sup>6</sup>

There is no question that the histories of Europe and Christianity are interwoven. Yet, indeed, there are many problems with defining European identity in terms of Christianity. What about the Renaissance, the humanists, the anticlericals, the Enlightenment? And what about the great schisms in Christianity – between Greek and Latin Christianity, between Constantinople and Rome, between Europe east and west, and between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, between Europe south and north? Indeed, Christianity is Asian in origin, and on many medieval maps we find Jerusalem depicted as the centre of the world, an Asian site as the centre of the Christian world – this is the dominant depiction on *mappae mundi* from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries and occurs frequently on maps from 1200 to 1500.

Much more pervasive and more formidable as a definition of Europe is the legacy of the Renaissance/Enlightenment. The characteristic feature of the Europe of the Enlightenment, as Jack Liveley has argued, is the Enlightenment itself: European identity was

## 8 *Race & Class*

discovered 'in the modernity of Europe'.

The European personality was distinct and its role was unique, not because its traditionally rooted society marked it out from other cultures, but because it had moved sufficiently far along a path of development to serve as an example for the rest of humanity. The emphasis was now on time rather than space, promise rather than achievement, the future rather than the past . . . Moreover . . . the modernity of Europe consisted in the Enlightenment itself.<sup>7</sup>

Europe equals modernity, or the critical spirit, its attitude of self-criticism, its tolerance and openness to other views. From Kant to Raymond Aron, this is a recurrent theme.

It relates closely to another European topos: the 'autonomy of the spirit' as a European characteristic, the tension and friction between faith and reason, the aversion to dogma. This is Nietzsche's tradition of the free thinkers, the *libres penseurs*.

This, in turn, overlaps with a discourse which finds the specificity of Europe in the autonomy of its cities, hence the development of its burghers, its citizens and, over time, civil society.

Again we hear the echo of a classic theme: Europe as the land of liberty, as against Asia, the land of despotism and oppression – in a word, oriental despotism and occidental liberty. This is a thesis that harks back to the Greeks: to the east in Persia, despotism; to the north in Europe, the free barbarians; and in the middle, Greece, that is civilisation.

These overtones – autonomy, liberty – still play a part in Europe's self-definition but drawn into the background since the experiences with Nazism, fascism, European totalitarianism. The keynote in the self-assessments of Europe remains that of modernity. That is essentially the Europe of the Enlightenment, also as the dapper antidote to totalitarian Europe.

This is the most prominent rhetoric of difference between Europe and non-European worlds, in particular, between Europe and the world of Islam – the common European interpretation of 'fundamentalist Islam' is as a revolt against modernity (that is, against Europe), a countermodernisation and the International of '*Unvernunft*'.<sup>8</sup>

'Identity' implies a relationship to what is different and thus a statement of boundaries. Both these European identities – Christianity and the Enlightenment – are such statements of boundaries, border flags which serve as internal as much as external boundaries – protection from the 'barbarians' both within and outside the gates. They are projects rather than realities, mirrors of power and rhetorics of control.

## European paradoxes

Why deconstruct Europe? It's not fair. It's hardly been constructed. Americans would say the same thing, why deconstruct Europe? We like Europe, it means a lot to us, it is the prototype of Disneyland.

It is true that European identity is weak. First, because Europeanism is recent. It dates, by and large, from after 1700. Before that, Christendom was the predominant identity. The humanists of the Renaissance looked towards Greece and Rome as the centres of culture. Moreover, until 1683 when the Turks stood before Vienna, Europe was still under threat from the east.

Second, European development has not known a single centre. There has been a continual shift of centres, and with the centre also the peripheries shifted. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment and French Revolution, industrialisation and colonial expansion, unfolded in different parts of Europe and spread in different directions. There was never a centre which embodied European identity.

Third, from 1700, European development has taken place by means of single rival states. Already, from the sixteenth century, Europe existed in the form of a 'European balance of power', that is as a polycentric world. From 1700, the keynote of political development were the different monarchies, while from 1800, the keynote of development was *national* development.

Also, outward expansion was undertaken by single rival states. Europe's 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century and the scramble for Africa was a preemptive imperialism – both in concert with European competitors and aiming to outmanoeuvre them. This is one of the paradoxes of European imperialism: it implied and brought forth both European unity (as in the Berlin Conference on the division of Africa) and European divisions.

Another paradox. The backdrop to nineteenth-century European expansion in Asia and Africa was a concept of 'European civilisation'. This was implied in the *'mission civilisatrice'*, even if this was executed primarily by means of national missions. It correlated with racial thinking. 'European civilisation' made for a certain affinity among Europeans of different countries even while they were rivals for overseas territory and influence. This European civilisation, the bedrock of European superiority and arrogance, received a deadly blow with the First World War. The long conflict from 1914 to 1945 shook the foundations of Europe's overseas imperialism and ushered in the era of decolonisation.

Then 'Europe' was born – born out of the contraction of empire: thrown back upon themselves the European nations began to discover each other. 'Europe' was born in the shadow of the superpowers, not as the world's Queen, as she had been in eurocentric iconography

## 10 Race & Class

since the sixteenth century, but merely as a buffer zone between the superpowers. Now, the superpowers themselves are waning and new centres are emerging.

### References

- 1 M. Mourik, 'European cultural co-operation', in A. Rijksbaron, W.H. Roobol, M. Weisglas (eds), *Europe from a cultural perspective*. *historiography and perceptions* (The Hague, 1987), p. 19.
- 2 Elissa McBride, 'Western Civilisation: From Plato to Nato', *The Activist* (No. 21, summer 1988), p. 7.
- 3 Information Bulletin XIIth World Congress of Sociology, Madrid, July 1990, No 1.
- 4 Plans are underway to 'manage' and control this problem zone. Spain, France, Italy and Portugal seek the establishment of a Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean, a 'Mediterranean Helsinki', modelled on the European Conference for Security and Cooperation. Already they have established a Forum for Regional Cooperation in the Mediterranean, together with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauretania – five countries united in the Arab Maghreb Union. *Volkskrant* (4 August 1990).
- 5 Mariano Aguirre, 'Looking Southwards', in Dan Smith (ed.) *European security in the 1990s* (London, 1989).
- 6 Although another section of the Right, notably GRECE in France, rather identifies with 'pagan Europe'.
- 7 Jack Lively, 'The Europe of the Enlightenment', *History of European Ideas* (Vol. I, no. 2, 1981), p. 93. 'Europe's distinction lay in its possession of truths which, while applicable to all humanity, were not presently available to all humanity', (p. 98).
- 8 T. Meyer, (ed.) *Fundamentalismus in der modernen Welt* (Frankfurt, 1989).