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Often when we talk about Europe we are referring to something that is confusing in its nature:

“There is Europe and there is “Europe.” There is the place, the continent, the political and economic reality, and there is Europe as an idea and an ideal, as a dream, as a project, process, progress towards some visionary goal. No other continent is so obsessed with its own meaning and direction.”⁶

From a geographical point of view, Europe isn't a continent at all without the (far greater) Asian part and all too often the question arises: where does Europe start and where does it end? Its northern, western and southern borders are formed by seas and oceans, while the eastern border is unclearly marked by the Ural Mountains and the Caucasus, including Asian countries whose culture is inclined towards the European (including Cyprus, Turkey and countries of the Caucasus).

“This most ill-defined of continents has, after all, been open for long stretches of its history not just on one but on three sides: to the south across the Mediterranean, throughout most of what we call “ancient history” and in some ways again today; to the east, where Europe does not end but merely fades away, into Asia; and to the west, across the Atlantic, especially in our post-1945 “West.””⁷

As a space open towards all inhabited areas of the world, Europe was the place where for centuries the most different cultures met each other, mixed, and waged wars. A society characterised by peaceful co-existence and harsh conflicts was forged, where religion, culture, ethnic groups, ideology, race and mentality created differences between the peoples. Does this mean that affection and understanding are traits of the peoples of Europe? Never! Europeans do not like each other but they are never the less coupled together by constraint. The history of Europe is a history of wars and conflicts, unimaginable crimes, and human tragedy, but at the same time a history of constant cultural, scientific and economical progress.

“In short, no continent is externally more ill-defined, internally more diverse, or historically more disorderly. Yet no continent has produced more schemes for its own orderly unification. The paradox is only apparent. The former cries out for the latter.”⁸

The word “Europe” comes from the Semitic word for west, dark, and dusk; in other words “the land of the setting sun.” Phoenicians and other Semitic people of the Middle East used the word *ereb/erob* when referring to the unknown lands in the west. The Greek took up the word and used it as a synonym for the “non-Greek” lands and other areas of the mainland north and west.

⁶ Timothy Garton Ash, *History of the Present*, page 279

⁷ same as above, page 153

⁸ Timothy Garton Ash, *Is Europe becoming Europe?*

For the Greeks and Romans, Europe was the “foreign” and “other” towards which they established themselves as tribes/communities/peoples. Europe was the continental uncharted wilderness of the Ancient World, and even though it was inhabited from very early human history, its people did not make a significant impact on history even during the decline of the Roman Empire.

The notion of Europe was created through the relations Centre – Periphery, and West – East. The Centre symbolizes the focal point – that is the focal point for government, economy, power, knowledge, celestial spirit, noble race... – while the Periphery is remote, inferior, dependant and in envy of the Centre. In this case East and West are not just geographical terms but cultural as well. The West acquires the appearance of the well structured, clear, light and Christian, while the East embodies everything dark, mystical, Islamic and Christian-Orthodox (not to mention Buddhist and Hindu). A need arises to define the being of ones enlightened self through the existence, and especially difference, to the other, the inferior.

In the Ancient World Europe was a synonym of the Periphery for Greeks and Romans alike, which they constructed against their Mediterranean Centres. The Greek word “barbaros”, used to describe every foreigner, now acquires the meaning for a crude and wild human whom only the enlightened Greeks and Romans could emancipate. After the unification of Europe under Charlemagne it becomes the Centre while the Atlantic Ocean, the Sahara, the unknown vastness of Asia and especially Islam create the Periphery. The relation West – East is added to the existing relation Centre – Periphery and strengthens it. The West becomes the enlightened Centre, the East a dark Periphery, hence the historic role of the West to illuminate the dark.

It is obvious that West and East are complex metaphors that describe and explain the mental structure of the “Old Continent” and these historically inspired ideas sometimes represent a positive, but more frequently a negative influence on the history of humankind. This European mindset will reach its culmination with the peak of Colonialism and weaken with its decline, but is in some forms present even today – especially since the “Light of the World” moved to the other side of the Atlantic during the first half of the 20th Century. It is only with the emergence of independent and self-conscious states and nations that a new approach on how to think about Europe develops. Gradually, and especially in the aftermath of great wars and uproars, the idea of European federalism is born, along with supra-state structures and peacekeeping mechanisms to support it. These ideas gained impetus during and after the Thirty-Years-War but will make an impact only after the World Wars of the 20th Century.

Referring to post-1945 Europe, Edgar Morin says that Europe and Europeans are connected through a mutual fate and that the new European conscience is the conscience about this shared destiny.⁹ Only through joint efforts can the centennial dream of all Europeans for lasting peace become reality. It is therefore appropriate to say that we do not ask ourselves anymore if we want Europe, but what kind of Europe we want! Denis de Rougemont’s famous sentence, “Europe’s will to live means her will to unite”, is confirmed by European history from 1955 onward. The European Union has transformed itself from a visionary post-World War II creation to a necessary and even indispensable force, a European answer to globalisation.

“Enlargement is a pretty dull word as a goal for Europe. Enlargement is a means to an end; what is the end? The end is to ensure that we don't start fighting each other again, because that is what a great deal of European history has consisted of. This continent is extraordinarily diverse,

⁹ Edgar Morin, *Kako misliti Evropu*, page 131

extraordinarily rich in culture, in invention, but also extraordinarily disorderly.”¹⁰

Contemporary Europe – through the European Union that by expanding re-defines itself periodically – is developing culturally and historically, and aspires towards the creation of a “European Identity.” A system of interwoven values, this identity maintains as many interpretations as there are people discussing it. Walter Schwimmer, the General Secretary of the Council of Europe said in a speech before this body that “in the Council of Europe we define "Europe" as a community of shared values in a given geographical area”¹¹

One can say that a huge variety of different approaches on how to think of Europe exist throughout the continent. Probably the most important European idea is would be to that such an idea does not exist and that it has to be constructed as a dialogue of all European ideas. This can be summed up in the motto of the European Union “United in Diversity”. Such a Europe would be a composition that connects without unifying, creating itself through its differences. Quoting Morin: “Europe is Europe only because Europe does not exist”.¹²

¹⁰ Timothy Garton Ash, *Conversations with History*

¹¹ www.wikipedia.com

¹² Edgar Morin, *Kako misliti Evropu*, page 37