



## WHAT IS A EUROPEAN? for Médium

Stanley Moss on Europe

Never in a million years will I understand the complexity of what it means to be European. Even after living in exile on these shores for a decade and a half I still feel like a provincial and unsophisticated interloper, stumbling about, unable to fathom the depth of what the term signifies. I'm like a character from *Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain, a naïve bumbler playing catch-up with two millennia of recorded history.

It was my great-grandparents who left Europe a century and a half ago, and said farewell to hostile and brutal conditions, in search of opportunity and a land of plenty across the Atlantic. Four generations later we assimilated immigrants still view ourselves as pioneers, frontiersmen taming the wilderness. We buy into the myth that we are cowboys, and cherish the mentality of Manifest Destiny. Unlike our European cousins we have no sense of history or geography, simply divine right. Of what use is heritage? How could we understand it with only 300 years on which to reflect? Henry Ford is famously remembered as saying, "History is bunk."

### Looking Backward

In our view, Europe represents the antiquated establishment which our predecessors fled. An arcane community of archetypes, bankrupt nobility, *louche* sybarites, corrupt clerics, effete philosophers, cacophonous polyglots. From our simplistic perspective, the last real unity of Europe occurred during the Roman Empire. European history can be reduced to Rome, followed by the Renaissance, followed by The Great War. And we still can't figure out what WWI was all about. It's never been clearly explained to us, what the nations were fighting over, why so many people had to die, or even why we had to step in. WWII was easier to puzzle through: we were supposed to rescue the world from Fascism, which of course couldn't ever happen here. In the face of recent history, perhaps we're not so different than our Euro-denominated cousins.

Seen from US shores in the 50's and 60's, Europe represented a group of countries living at the level of undeveloped nations. We believed everything was smaller, older, crumbling, quaint, uncomfortable, primitive. A strong dollar only enhanced our feeling of superiority. Tourists

returned to American shores with memories of limited modern indoor plumbing, the ubiquitous Turkish toilet. England had only three television channels which shut down at midnight.

How startled I was when I began to travel in Europe for business in the 1970s and discovered a more developed place: every French home seemed to have a remarkable device called the Minitel. Recognizable international brands had appeared on the high street. Roads had been improved, airports and sports stadiums modernized, every American aspired to own a Mercedes Benz manufactured in Germany. Europe had caught up with US-grade consumer culture. In the intervening decades other changes occurred, including the introduction of MTV and CNN. Neolithic monuments on Malta that I freely wandered into and crawled over ten years ago grew barriers and hi-tech canopies, big bank sponsors, entry gates and exits through the gift shop.

### **Economic mobility**

What Americans cannot understand is the meaning of traditional hierarchies in European society. Titles and hereditary status don't figure in a young nation where every child has the possibility of becoming president. The fundamental measure of merit in our society is economic status - if you have made a fortune, then you are superior to your contemporaries. The equivalent of American royalty are families like the Kennedys, the Vanderbilts, or landed gentry who have upheld their wealth since the Revolutionary War. We look upon titled Europeans as individuals who could just as easily have merit as not. A coat of arms means less than a fat bank account. In America, all citizens are aristocrats, beneficiaries of unencumbered promise.

### **Today: them vs. us**

Some broad strokes seem to hold Europe together. Europeans love ideals. Europeans abide by their treaties. Europeans still value family, food and holidays. The number of days taken off from work astounds us - we still marvel that Europe shuts down for all of August. The Italians seize any additional holidays available, and uphold mysterious store hours.

Europe has leaders, Charlemagne, Churchill, even the polarizing De Gaulle. Americans aren't sure how they operate, especially with the current condition of leadership on our shores. Diplomacy appears to survive, European presidents mostly act presidential. In Europe, when politicians lose public trust, the people go out into the streets. Americans sign online petitions and post on social media. While we understood the French Revolution, we don't quite get the notion of mass decapitation, much as it seems like a better option to us today.

Europe remains a land of cultural tradition where guardianship and preservation prevail. Europeans protect their patrimony. The Tod's brand cleaned up Rome's Colosseum; in Paris and Venezia, Arnault and Pinault compete for who can earn the title of Best Medici of the Year. Americans can't even declare Rosa Parks' house a national monument; instead we sell it at auction for \$500, and it takes an expat artist to reassemble it in Berlin, ship it back to the States, where still nobody wants to buy it or put it in the Smithsonian.

### **Family feuding**

Despite the existence of the EU, Europe remains in our view a constellation of cultures locked in constant struggle, always at each other's throats. We remember the Concorde. We recall what it took to complete the Chunnel. Ask a Brexiter why and most answer, we don't want those people in Brussels making rules for us. Ask the French, and they reply, "You can't call that cheese, and please pass the *foie gras*." Ask the Italians to form a government and more banks inevitably fail. Ask the Greeks what happened and they say excuse me I need to talk to Bonn about another loan. Query the Irish about what the deal is with taxation and they start to quote James Joyce.

In Europe, intellectual process remains a part of life. You demand it of your leaders, you expect them to write books. The European continent, rich with old culture, values its intellectuals. Americans have no equivalent for Pasolini, a respected poet, political commentator and filmmaker. Our entertainers take political positions to increase the numbers of their Instagram followers.

Americans do have a superficial appreciation of the EEC. In our minds the Common Market loosely replicates the US model, a familiar modern idea which Americans recognize as another flavor of federalism. In its own way America is as fragmented as Europe - the coastal states hate the communities of the heartland interior, and the feeling is mutual. But one currency unites our shores, and we have open borders between our states. The last Brexit-like event occurred in the USA 160 years ago when the South seceded and a bitter Civil War was fought, the memories of which are still present. A subtext of racism still taints our shores.

### **Polite prognostication**

From our perspective, the EU would remain stronger as a united whole. There are synergies to be gained from federation, not the least of which are streamlined commerce and common legislation. But can Europe survive the breakaway of its English-speaking partner and still preserve its democratic inclinations? Here could be a lesson taken from Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited our infant nation in the 1830s and feared for a democratic tyranny of the majority. He felt that traditional hierarchies exist to mediate relations with the state. We have no such heritage in America. With its ill-considered decision, has Britain failed the European Community? As a result of such magnificent folly, our continental cousins may soon confront the consequences of broken dreams, shattered economies and compromised individual rights.

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