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The European Experience

Abstract:

The essay is an introductory reflection on the process of shaping Europe, including Eastern Europe. Two sources, Athens and Jerusalem, are emphasized as an important element of the historical shaping of Europe. The author focuses on the role of the Athenian tradition in this process; and argues that at the roots of European culture lie reflexivity and empathy as well as an ability of self-questioning. All these features can be found already in the Ancient Greek thought.

Keywords:

Europe, Eastern Europe, European experience, reflexivity, empathy, self-questioning

Although my title is formulated in the singular, it would be more precise to speak of European experiences in the plural. This continent has been home to multiple countries and communities as well as witness to myriads of histories, wars, and alliances. Europeans are different yet live next to each other. Some of them – such as the ones gathered here – are particularly close, which carries its own special significance.¹ Still, neighbors do not have to be friends. In fact, neighborly relations are sometimes tainted by scorn, disdain, and indifference. Importantly, however, being neighbors alone does not entail hostility; actually, it facilitates both friendly and antagonistic feelings. Ultimately, we ourselves are solely responsible for the shape of our relationships.²

We are brought together not only because we are neighbors, but also because we fall under the same paradoxical umbrella term: Eastern Europe. Although this part of the continent lies in the center of Europe,³ it is symbolically pushed eastward in a gesture that ascribes it lower, marginal status.⁴ This would be allegedly rooted in the fact that Eastern Europeans have dissimilar and more intense experiences, or that they are simply different. Is that the case, however? It is possible to introspectively recall numerous examples showing that this argument is still tacitly accepted. Consider the

1) The text is a prepared version of a paper presented at the conference “Re-writing Cultural Geography: Toward a New Meaning of Eastern Europe” which took place at the University of Warsaw in December 2023.

2) For an interesting reflection on how complex cultural relations based on sedimented layers of uneasy (often traumatic) historical experiences should be dealt with through cultural diplomacy which is to be philosophically mediated, see Mažeikis, “Philosophical Mediation.”

3) For a ready classical division of Europe into Western, Central, and Eastern see Szűcs, *Three Historical Regions*. A very interesting reformulation of such a division was proposed by the Polish historian Oskar Halecki – see for example his “Role of Central-Eastern Europe,” and *Borderlands of Western Civilization*. The concise presentation of the complexities around, and controversies of, all present-day divisions, classifications, and determinations, one can find in Bursztyka, “Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe,” 76–77. The critique of these classifications leads the author of that essay to a positive, though not uncontroversial, conceptualization of Eastern Europe based on the two assumptions: 1) belonging to the European community of values; 2) being confronted for centuries with Russia – a cultural formation which, as the author argues, has never, in fact, belonged to the European cultural project.

4) For an extensive historical analysis of the processes of othering and marginalizing the peoples of the so-called Eastern Europe traced back to the Enlightenment; see Wolff *Inventing Eastern Europe*; see also Bursztyka, “Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe,” especially 69–76. For how this kind of biased perspective, based on the deep, and deeply inadequate, conviction that Eastern Europe was always the realm of inferiority and backwardness, is still present in the contemporary historical discourse see Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe*.

time when the President of France, Jacques Chirac, publicly disapproved of the Polish prime minister (and other politicians representing EU candidate countries from the region e.g., Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary), bemoaning the fact that the latter failed to take the opportunity to remain silent.⁵ It was largely understated, but the implication was that the Polish representative insolently dared to speak up.



Europe as a civilizational and cultural project has its roots in the law and administration of the Roman Empire. The Byzantine Empire played a similar role in relation to the eastern areas and peoples of Europe. These influences were superimposed on the already existing cultures of the peoples who arrived in Europe over the previous centuries, the largest ethnic groups which were the Celts, Germans, and Slavs. A cultural, civilizational, and demographic melting pot was created, which from the multitude of differences and similarities led to the development of Europe in a general and difficult to define sense. Today, the mechanisms that created the cause-effect chain that led to the formation of our continent cannot be recreated. However, in this development, two fundamental cultural trends cannot be omitted: Athens and Jerusalem.⁶

The barbarian invasions, but also local religious dogmatism, could not remain without influence on the development of European civilization. There was a powerful back swing, referred to as the Dark Ages, which happens to be wrongly, and sometimes with clearly ideological premeditation, extended to the entire Middle Ages.

At the beginning of the second millennium AD, universities began to be established in Europe, which, regardless of the theology and philosophy taught there, began to organize and develop medical knowledge, and their law faculties prepared staff for state administration.⁷ There, too, despite the difficulties related to religious beliefs, the first centers of education in the natural sciences were established. In many areas of

5) For more on that see, for example, CNN.com, “Chirac Lashes Out”; or Black, “Furious Chirac Hits Out.”

6) The terms “Athens and Jerusalem” symbolize two types of mental attitudes that shaped European culture. In this essay I focus on ancient Greece, that is, Athens.

7) For an interesting analysis of the medieval roots of the European cultural project see Le Goff, *The Birth of Europe*, and Kłoczowski, *Europa*.

Europe, guilds were established to organize the rules of trade and which control the development of crafts. Some cities developed more rapidly, forming centers of progress in crafts, which in later centuries developed into industry. The beginnings of banking systems and cashless circulation of money were also created.

This process has been slow for centuries, but in the seventeenth century, an unimaginable eruption of human genius occurred in Europe. Some of the greatest geniuses in the history of humanity: Isaac Newton, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, Blaise Pascal, Christiaan Huygens, René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and many others whose genius was manifested in literature and art. The seventeenth century put a strong foundation for the later development of rational thinking, which found its expression in the development of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a breakthrough in the development of thinking about society in terms of human equality. It was also a period of corruption and crime culminating in the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars. On the other hand, we owe Montesquieu's concept of the separation of political powers and the Napoleonic Code to this period of European history.

European imperialism was born with overseas conquests and the exploitation of colonies, but its organized form as a system of governing Europe and the world took after the Congress of Vienna. A period of decisive technological and scientific dominance of Europe followed. However, this was associated with demonstrating a sense of racial superiority, often in a criminal manner, towards conquered or subjugated ethnic groups. The most heinous actions of Europeans toward the populations of non-European countries include the genocide in Namibia (1904–1908) and the Opium Wars. The former was the first genocide of twentieth century committed by the German Empire against the Herero and Nama people in German South-West Africa (present-day Namibia).

What is today referred to as Eastern Europe concerned the partitions of the Russian Empire (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus) and the components of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and the countries of former Yugoslavia). In the area of these partitions, processes of Russification and Germanization took place. There were also ruthless reactions to any manifestations of rebellion and resistance. There were also religious persecu-

tions, especially in the Russian partition. Despite these externally imposed restrictions, the countries of the Russian partition had important academic centers: Dorpat, Riga, Vilnius, Kyiv, and Warsaw. In the Austrian partition, there were two important university centers: the University of Lviv and the Jagiellonian University, as well as the Lviv Polytechnic. These centers formed the basis for the creation of academic life in Poland after the rebirth in 1918.

Eastern Europe definitely cannot be considered a cultural desert. The most outstanding Polish writers and poets came from these areas. Also, in the field of painting, the second half of the nineteenth century and the years leading up to the First World War were a golden age (Matejko, Brand, Wyczółkowski, Wyspiański, Mehoffer, Chelmoński, and many others). This also applies to other countries of this region – Pompiliu Eliade (1869–1914) had a strong international position. In Czech culture it is worth mentioning – Dvořák and Smetana. The activities of Czech intellectuals, focused on the reconstruction of the Czech language in opposition to the processes of Germanization, deserve special emphasis. Art was perceived as a tool for shaping national identity and an educational and moralizing means.

Currently, most of the above-mentioned restrictions have ceased to exist. People have wide access to all forms of culture and also to philosophical reflection, as well as to knowledge of nature and technology. There has never been a time when the development of individual people, human groups, and regions depends to such a large extent on their attitude. However, we cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that present day Europe – including the countries of the European Union, which at the beginning of the twentieth century set the directions for the development of science and technology on a global scale – is currently lagging behind the USA and some countries of the Far East (Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan) in these areas. This is particularly important because the development of Eastern European countries cannot be unrelated to the development of the European Union. This applies primarily to technology, but fortunately not necessarily to culture and philosophy.



Europe “is undefined, even in geographical terms. Although its eastern border is considered to be the Ural Mountains, this boundary is not clearly outlined. This

becomes apparent when attempting to determine which communities living in this liminal space are European and which Asian. Such situations necessitate turning to cultural differences, a complex and challenging area in its own right.”⁸

How do we establish the characteristics of European culture and how can we recognize them? Apart from military conflicts, social relations, and economic parameters, it is possible to look for them in myth, poetry, and literature. Twenty years ago, I argued that Europe is a spiritual-hermeneutical project – one that remains dynamic and open-ended. At its heart lies the desire to comprehend. Hence, it comprises an intellectual effort of interpretation and self-interpretation, ultimately paving the way for self-understanding.⁹

An important role is played here by the figure of Socrates. According to Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, the Greek thinker “is the one man with whom all European philosophers identify, even if they reject his ideas”; therefore, “philosophers unable to identify with this archetypical figure do not belong with this civilization.”¹⁰ This is chiefly because Socrates came to symbolize another “way of life” in culture – one that was different from those developed by Hesiod and Homer.

The importance of Socrates goes beyond the field of philosophy. The cultural trends initiated by him remain the foundation of a civilized society. These are: obedience to the law, freedom of expression, emphasizing the importance of conversation and direct contacts between people. Socrates’ teachings also show the need to reflect on our own lives and the language we use in conversation. Socrates’s dialogues involved not just a game of questions and answers but also heated negotiations about ways of life. Every way of life had to be examined axiologically. Anyone who entered into conversation with Socrates would have their way of life analyzed and assessed from the perspective of the specific values it carries. For him, it is precisely the way of life, or mode of acting and reacting, that answers the question about specific values such as good, valor, or justice. According to Socrates, “to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is

8) Domański, “Europa,” 18.

9) Rosińska, “W poszukiwaniu europejskości.”

10) Kołakowski, *Cywilizacja na ławie oskarżonych*.

the greatest good to man, and ... unexamined life is not worth living.”¹¹ The Socratic model of conversation ultimately does not lead to final answers delivered by the master. He defines neither good nor any other ethical concepts. Socrates did not pursue any definitive verbal formulation because in his view every individual person’s behavior itself embodies their final definition of good, valor, and justice.

The Iliad clearly demonstrates that Greek culture was capable of empathizing with those who suffer. Although Homer was Greek, his greatest compassion is reserved for the Trojans – enemies of the Greeks. Still, this does not mean that all Greeks would feel for their adversaries. Today it seems almost impossible. Why would anyone empathize with the hardships of SS officers?

Reflexiveness and the capacity for empathy are two European qualities brought out by ancient Greeks. In *Panegyricus*, Isocrates argues that “the title Hellenes is applied rather to those who share our culture than to those who share a common blood.”¹² What would it mean, however, to share culture with the Greeks? Zygmunt Kubiak, an expert in Greek culture and its enthusiast, holds that “we share a lot with the Greeks, among other things the plight of Eastern Europe. Let us hope that we can also partake in their pride and greatness.”¹³

Nevertheless, pride and greatness can sometimes reveal a different face. In the years 1853–1855, Arthur de Gobineau attempted to formulate scientific grounds for racism. Although his position was methodologically misguided like many other incorrect anthropological theories from that period, it survived in European mentality until the mid-twentieth century despite being obviously falsified. This was mainly because Gobineau’s ideas justified colonialism and imperialism. Even today, politicians and ordinary citizens from post-imperial countries sometimes reveal an attitude of superiority. This could be dismissed as laughable if it had not been for the fact that such views enable unacceptable tendencies to limit the political and economic sovereignty of other countries through administrative or openly militaristic measures, the latter being largely unthinkable until recently.

11) Plato, *The Apology*, 133 (38A).

12) Isocrates, *Panegyricus*.

13) Kubiak, *Brewiarz Europejszyka*, 61.

It is difficult to present a complete balance of European crimes premised on racism, but it seems advisable to remember some of the worst ones as a warning for the future. The list includes the Opium Wars, the obliteration of the Herero and Namaqua tribes in Namibia, genocide in The Congo, and the Nazi extermination of Jews. For many of today's young Europeans these events feel like ancient history. However, they are not as distant as it could initially seem. In fact, until the 1950s several European countries were still waging wars in the effort to retain control over their colonies.

Eastern European countries were not colonial powers, which comprises their asset. Still, all of them were affected by foreign dominance, sometimes for centuries. Unfortunately, after the Second World War Eastern Europe was forcibly brought into a "love relationship" with the USSR, which was in many cases an openly criminal affair. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania experienced this in particularly drastic forms. What these histories teach us about is the value of sovereignty and the right to cultivate one's own cultural identity.

Essentially, the European character can be measured by the degree of participation in its scientific, cultural and administrative achievements among all countries on this continent. This naturally includes embracing the accomplishments of one's own country. Notably, however, opening up to all these areas cannot be passive and extractive. Participation in European science, culture, and technology must be active and innovatory. We owe this to the history of our cultures.

Are we different people today? Have we lost all connection with ancient Greece? Even contemporary Greeks admit they struggle to cultivate this link. Does this mean we have lost the revelations of Socrates, Hesiod, and Homer? Has our vision of neighborhood failed to support communal relations? Has individuality become egotistical and competitive, leaving no place for dialogue? Was ancient Greece itself capable of dialogue? And finally: why should we draw on antiquity in a discussion about the here and now?

And yet we live in Europe and are Europeans, firmly rooted in ancient Greece. After all, Athens and Jerusalem are the two pillars of European identity. In this area, Hesiod and especially Homer are considered to be example-setting poets. "Homer developed fundamental ethical norms and models, or assembled a collection of behavioral patterns ... quotations from his works could serve as arguments in matters pertaining

to morality, politics, and history, not to mention the fact that events described by him were regarded by the Greeks to comprise an accurate historical account.”¹⁴

Still, works by Homer cannot be limited to their example-setting dimension. His epic style is free from moralizing embellishment and contains numerous accounts of cruelty and betrayal. As a result, Homer expressed something that could be called the capacity to both sympathize with others and coexist with them. Arguably, it was his reaction to the brutality of the hard world, which had barely emerged from the barbaric chaos of warmongering tribes. War would continue to be the normal state for centuries, with peace feeling more like a state of emergency. Kubiak called this world “twilit.”

Importantly, however, Homer did not accept this twilight to be the natural state, and included his own ethical judgements in the epic poem. For instance, when Helena uses her beauty without heeding the consequences of her choices, Homer disapproves of her because her actions led to war and suffering. In Book Six of *The Iliad*, Helena says to Hector: “Brother ... to my abhorred and sinful self, would that a whirlwind had caught me up on the day my mother brought me forth, and had borne me to some mountain or to the waves of the roaring sea that should have swept me away ere this mischief had come about.”¹⁵

As for the Odyssey, later authors revealed without scruples the most despicable deed of Odysseus. Envious of the glory won in battle by Palamedes, the young hero of the Trojan War, Odysseus ordered a servant to sneak into Palamedes’s tent and plant a letter with money allegedly received from Priam, King of Troy. Then, he accused Palamedes of betrayal, which led to the young hero being sentenced to death by stoning.

Such behavior certainly does not need Greek models. Unfortunately, it seems deeply rooted and is indeed often considered to be an inherent part of human nature. Is the light side of humanity, often identified with the “Mediterranean Myth,” also inherent in humanity? Was that how it could surface?

Reading Hesiod, especially his long poem *Works and Days*, composed around 700 BC, I did not discover vast differences between his experiences and ours. He

14) Łanowski, “Wstęp,” LVI.

15) Homer, *The Iliad*, book 6.

depicts envy, violence, dishonesty, greed, but also justice. Hesiod educated his son by recounting the history of humanity and characterizing various periods. When it comes to his own times, Hesiod wishes he could live before or after. He describes his world as follows: "What *daimōn* makes you cry out this way? One who is far more powerful holds you fast. You will go wherever I take you, singer [poet] that you are. I can do what I wish with you: either make a meal out of you or let you go. Foolish is the one who is ready to stand up to those who are more powerful. Such a person is deprived of victory, suffering pains in addition to the disgrace of defeat."¹⁶

Kořakowski provocatively claimed that the power of faith and belief is the actual source of cultural fanaticism. He developed this argument on the basis of his experiences from a trip to Mexico. When his guide was showing him some of the Pre-Columbian relics, he spoke with indignation about the destruction of Aztec sculptures by Spanish soldiers. The Polish philosopher responded as follows:

You say these were barbarians. But perhaps these were true Europeans. Maybe even the last real ones. These people would take their Christian and Latin civilization very seriously. For this reason, they had no reservations when it came to destroying pagan idols, or maintaining aesthetic distance and, at best, museological curiosity with respect to objects that carried a non-Christian and thus hostile religious meaning. If their behavior seems outrageous to us, this may be because we have grown indifferent both to our own civilization and other ones.¹⁷

How is it possible then to reconcile the beauty of ideals with the cruelty of history? Zygmunt Kubiak argues that within the Mediterranean tradition this is in fact impossible and should not be attempted. History, he claims, has always been cruel, however, our tradition was formed and exists regardless of all historical disturbances. It has been formed throughout this often dramatic and brutal history and regardless of it. Apparently, it must be located in some deeper layers of life.

16) Hesiod, *Works and Days*.

17) Kořakowski, "Szukanie barbarzyńcy," 685.

A similar approach is represented by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert:

The point is to develop the kind of attitude to life where the key thing is not to win but to try to defend certain undebatable ideals or values... . This is why I hold that the so-called Central Europe (which I consider to include Poland, the Baltic states, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria) perhaps shares a common fate, one marked by wars that may have not been very similar but produced a common experience or knowledge... . Perhaps this part of Europe does share a foundation that we can build on. Perhaps something can arise from this ruination.¹⁸

The necessity to choose is also underlined by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy:

For some people the day comes
when they have to declare the great Yes
or the great No. It's clear at once who has the Yes
ready within him; and saying it,

he goes from honor to honor, strong in his conviction.
He who refuses does not repent. Asked again,
he'd still say no. Yet that no – the right no –
drags him down all his life.¹⁹

When considered in isolation, the threads I have discussed so far do not fully describe the characteristics of European culture. Its path of development has been meandering, full of fits and starts as well as twists and turns; however, it has shaped our experience of both past and present, forming its essence that contains the irreconcilable elements of good and evil.

Apart from the two properties identified by Homer – reflexivity and the capacity to empathize with those who suffer – there emerges the third quality of

18) Herbert, "Płynie się zawsze do źródeł," 34–37.

19) Cavafy, "Che Fece."

mature European character: the ability to question oneself. As Kołakowski argues, “the ability to renounce self-confidence and complacency lies at the heart of Europe understood as a spiritual force... . This ability has defined our culture and its unique value. Ultimately, we could say that the European cultural identity is premised on the refusal to assume any definitive and final form.”²⁰

This means that every European project should be considered another link in the long chain of actions, which remains perpetually open to modification and improvement.

20) Kołakowski, “Szukanie barbarzyńcy,” 687.

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