

Looking for Europe From the Outside

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I was asked to give my "Perceptions of Europe from 'Outside'". I will do my best, but let me assure you that "Europe" is very, very hard to see, from the outside, certainly; but I am discovering that it seems equally as hard to see from the inside.

Europe does not yet clearly exist. It is an idea, a fantasy, a threat, a fear.

Presently, it seems that the looming emergence of "Europe" into view is following simultaneously two major trajectories. Whether it will continue to follow both at the same time; whether one will dominate over the other; or whether a third (or more) way or ways will emerge instead is unclear. That is why Europe is so hard to perceive at the present.

I imagine that many of you know the early American story of Rip van Winkle. He was a Dutch settler who went to sleep in the Catskill Mountains for twenty years and had a hard time adjusting to the modern times of the early 1800s when he awoke to find all his family and friends dead and gone, and he himself forgotten.

Well, I imagine a Dutch Rip van Winkle going to sleep in Amsterdam in 1911 and waking up in 1991. Our Rip looks around and observes what is happening: war in the Balkans; chaos and confusion in Russia; meetings on "Europe's role in world politics" at the same time nationalism and ethnic hatred--racism--is rampant; Germany geographically big, and economically and technologically powerful; eastern and southern countries yearning to be accepted as "real" parts of Europe.

Being told about the two World Wars which happened while he was asleep, while our Rip van Winkle is horrified at the magnitude of the wars' deaths and destruction, he is not really surprised that the wars had occurred.

Seeing all this, our Rip feels right at home. "In the 80 years I was asleep, nothing much seems to have changed," he concludes.

But when people try to tell Rip van Winkle about the Communist revolution in Russia and the creation of the Soviet Union, and the inclusion of Eastern Europe into the Soviet Sphere, and the Cold War between East and West, he is incredulous. The near total allocation of resources and talent for the Cold War between the US and the USSR, and the near total neglect of all other aspects of internal and international life, completely astound him. He finds it all thoroughly unbelievable--especially when told of the events in this part of the world from the late 80s until now.

It is as if the period from 1945 to 1989 had never existed for Europe. Perhaps it is not Rip who slept for eighty years. Perhaps it is Europe which has been sleepwalking for forty-five, and which unexplainably woke up.

Maybe the whole period is nothing but a dream--a horrible, very real nightmare for some, surely; a failed utopia for others; but still only a dream. It didn't really happen.

That is to say, if it is not yet possible to see "Europe" from outside this continent, it is equally difficult to see "socialism" from inside it. Rip sees little evidence of its existence here. There is precious little concern now with fairness, equity, working people, human rights. Rather, Rip sees instead the glorification of something called the "marketplace" and the worship of the almighty dollar--I mean Mark. Or do I mean Yen?

Now, "Europe" from this perspective means the success of economic, technological, political, and I suppose it should be added, ecological forces towards regional unification and eventual globalization. Those of us from outside view this Europe with somewhat mixed emotions. In some ways it is admirable, or at least merely a regional manifestation of what is an irresistible universal process.

To this extent, "Europe" looks somewhat like "North America" where the borders between first Canada and the US, and then Mexico and the US are crumbling, while the borders currently delineating the various states and provinces within the three nation-states in North America are themselves melting.

The same processes of regionalization towards globalization are operating elsewhere in the world in approximately the following chronological order: South East Asia; South Asia; the Pacific Oceania; East Asia; South America; and finally Africa (as you can see, the Middle East, and indeed the so-called Arab World, is more difficult to place in this continuum from regionalization towards globalization, but according to the logic here, it must fit somewhere, at some time, and probably will do so between the regionalization of South America and Africa).

Of course, because Europe seems to be leading this process of regionalization, and becoming economically, politically, culturally, and eventually militarily strong, we "on the outside" view this with a mixture of envy and caution. For one example, good Americans don't like to admit that they are no longer Number One. But if they are not, they don't mind as much if it is a new, unified, prosperous, and peaceful Europe which takes their place. In fact, there is something to be said for Americans actually encouraging this process in Europe: anything to prevent the Japanese from being Number One. Also, Americans always feel inferior to Europeans anyway, so why not let their elders and betters resume their rightful place of global leadership, and let the tired and maligned old American Policeman retire from world affairs?

Others from the outside view this "Europe" with less enthusiasm. There was something to be said for Cold War rivalry: the communist and capitalist states actively competed in aiding the Third World. While the results, let alone the actual intentions, of such aid are dubious to say the least, at least the North paid some attention to the South. At least some money trickled down, even if

only a few North-fawning elites appropriated it, and little of it ever was used for its alleged development purposes.

Now, with the New Europe, and the weakened United States, no one seems to care--except Japan whose motives seem even more suspect in the eyes of some people. The North seems much more concerned with using its resources to integrate the former communist areas into its sphere than in addressing the continuing and growing problems of the South.

So our views of this "Europe" from the outside are mixed: concern in the short-run, but cautiously optimistic in the longer run, though of course those who favor a green, decentralized, and low-tech world are horrified by all the alternatives they see before them. They would prefer the entire capitalist lot to go to hell, were it not for the fear that they will be dragged into the inferno in the process.

But at the same time, "Europe" is increasingly coming to mean something very, very different, and that is the world which our Rip van Winkle most especially notices--and understands: the Europe leading towards World War Three, with its causes, combatants, and perpetrators being essentially the same as they were in the other two World Wars.

Mr. van Winkle also sees a continuation of the Eurocentrism and colonialism that characterised the world when he went to sleep 80 years ago. He has learned that now Europe's colonies are called--or until recently were called--The Third World, or the Developing Nations, but he knows a euphemism when he hears one: he wasn't born yesterday, you know.

And he hears a lot of Yellow-Peril Japan bashing these days, as he did 80 years ago, but there seems to be a difference to it now that he did not hear then. While the Japanese are still maligned as being incomprehensible, as well as nasty, cruel, brutish, and short, there is also an edge of fear which seems to come out of some kind of awareness of Japanese superiority. They are no longer just cunningly imitating us. They are beating us at our own game, and inventing a new one which we do not yet understand. And we are afraid we never will.

I believe it is this "Europe" which we outside more clearly see and most clearly fear. It is a return to something ugly, self-centered, self-righteous, and thoroughly frightening. The re-emergence on this continent of all sorts of racist vendettas in the name of nationalism is not quite the Europe we had hoped would emerge from the sleep of the past forty-five years. Indeed, as this belligerent, racist Europe emerges, some of us are becoming quite nostalgic about the good old days of the Cold War when Europe was neatly divided in two between East and West, instead of splintered into hosts of marauding clans consumed with hatreds centuries old. The Cold War policy of "deterrence" is now being seen valuable from a completely new perspective.

For a while we thought the unifying, economically-powerful Europe was going to neglect and ignore the outside world and luxuriate mindlessly in its own wealth and strength. Now, many of us "from the outside" are afraid that we will once again be dragged wholly against our wills and interests into yet another petty European conflict called the Third World War.

So which will it be? Will the real Europe please stand up so we can perceive it more clearly? Is it the boorish, unified, capitalist pig, or is it the whirling, sucking black hole of warring tribes?

Or is there a kinder, gentler Europe emerging which we from the outside cannot yet see. Perhaps it is here already, yearning to be seen. I certainly hope so. I hope that somewhere there is a Europe struggling to be born which I, and Rip, can come to admire..

Let me add one more point in conclusion.

I hope that everyone understands that America's time is over. The economic, educational, infrastructural, ecological, cultural, and internal political problems facing America are so vast and complex and officially unacknowledged, while the will and resources of the American people so frail, that "Europe's Role in World Politics" must be understood in the light of this new, and very different, context. It is no longer necessary, indeed, no longer possible, to take America seriously as a positive force in world politics. That is why it is so desperately important for Europe, and Japan, to rise to the opportunity responsibly, and not to wallow in the slough of the past, as both are currently doing.

I do not mean to say that America is no longer a force in world politics. That, unfortunately, it still is, and only is--a force. The old cliché says that to a child with a hammer all the world is a nail. Well, to a militarized nation with only obscenely huge military forces and military industrial or technological capabilities, every problem is a war. A well-behaved child with a hammer is dangerous enough. Imagine what a spoiled and frustrated brat is like.

Norman Mailer recently said that most Americans are exhibiting a "battered wife" syndrome: They are clinging to the military and its tattered symbols because it is all they have left, and they are too frightened to go it on their own, knowing full well that the next time their "husband" gets angry with them, they may be beaten to death.

And in the struggle between bullying husband and battered wife, Americans may try bring down the rest of the world with them.

Wake up, Europe. Stand up, Europe. Somebody's got to act like a responsible adult around here. Why not you--for a change?