

# WE EUROPEANS: SCEPTICS AND CYNICS

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## Introduction

**E**uropean integration – very well, but of what? On the basis of what? We are surely entitled to ask.

Of course, it could be that we do not need to look too deeply for an answer. In Britain, the “European project” has usually been sold (if at times disingenuously) as a matter of economic prudence, while for its Franco-German architects it was intended, understandably enough, as a means of making unthinkable another major European war by locking the economic interests of the main powers together. Add to this the external threat posed by the Soviet Union, and it is easy to see why for a long time no *deep* rationale for European integration was really necessary.

However, the current situation is different. In Britain the belated recognition that “Europe” means something more than a common market is causing much soul-searching and has led to the implosion of one of the major political parties. Elsewhere, the very success of the original idea casts doubt on further steps: war between France and Germany is unthinkable already, so what are new integrative measures such as the introduction of the Euro for? A majority of the population in the countries undertaking the venture remains to be convinced of its value. Perhaps most significantly, the prospect to the East has changed beyond all recognition. The collapse of the Soviet Union not only removed one of the most obvious reasons for European integration, it also brought into question once more *what* should be integrated. Instead of the neat boundary line formed by the iron curtain, there is now a large space covered with question marks. People are going back to their maps and asking again, almost without irony: “what is Europe?”

I will argue in this paper that any serious answer must include the idea that we are sceptics and cynics alongside any more “positive” features, for these are among the most characteristic and distinctive European traits. However, this does not mean

that I am intent on pouring cold water on all pan-European hopes, or that I want to engage in another bout of European self-flagellation of the type that was so popular after the catastrophe of world war I. For our scepticism and cynicism constitute an ambiguous inheritance, and there is much about it that one can be proud of. There are some uncomfortable implications for the “European project” of integration, to be sure, but perhaps it is unwise (even un-European?) to associate European identity too closely with any *project*.

## I. Some traditional “ideas of Europe”.

Although the use of the term “Europe” goes back to the Greeks and attempts to contrast it with the rival terms “Africa” and “Asia” are almost as ancient, it is only in the last two hundred years or so that serious attempts have been made to give it a clearly defined meaning.<sup>1</sup> Part of the difficulty of this task lies in the fact that, uniquely among the world’s continents, Europe has no clear physical boundaries, being rather a ‘protruding little peninsula’ of Asia, as Nietzsche once unflatteringly put it.<sup>2</sup> In this situation, attempts to define Europe have inevitably relied primarily on references to alleged shared characteristics or inheritances of its peoples. Some of the most popular candidates have been: the freedom and individualism beloved of Greece, the Roman legacy of state and law, Christianity, Enlightenment, a shared and distinctive culture, a morally and technically advanced civilisation, progress, modernity.<sup>3</sup>

I do not wish to dispute the significance of any of these elements in the formation of Europe,<sup>4</sup> but so far as motifs for the present go they seem to suffer from one or both of two objections: that they are not uniquely European, and thus cannot constitute a basis for a distinctively European identity; or that they have declined in significance, and thus cannot be the basis for a European identity *today*. So far as the first point is concerned, the key problem nowadays is to distinguish what is European from what is American, which seems to me more or less automatically to rule out most of the proposed candidates from the list. Most of them were after all thought up at a time when Europe held a position of political and economic dominance in the world and was defining itself proudly in relation to “backward” Asia, and so long as America could be seen as a mere colonial or post-colonial imitator the fact that it happened to share many “European” values was in no way threatening. Now, however, the situation is very different and for Europeans somewhat uncanny: it is America that has usurped Europe’s place as the dominant political, military and economic force in the world, and Europe fears “Americanisation”, a reversal of the colonial tide; and yet at the same time America is more “European” than Europe itself in terms of many of the values that were supposed to constitute European identity – it places more emphasis on the individual, it is more freedom-loving, more Christian, more technically advanced, more convinced about progress, more modern. It has sometimes been argued that this

represents after all a European triumph, since genealogically speaking everything American is European at base,<sup>5</sup> but for many, perhaps most, Europeans, enough has been added to and subtracted from these origins for America to appear as an alien Other against which Europe must find some way of differentiating itself.

This, then, is one reason why many of the traditional ideas of Europe will no longer do. Another is that Europe itself has gone through convulsions in the twentieth century which have had a shattering effect on some of the core positive conceptions of Europe. In the century of total war and programmatic genocide: why not associate Europe with destruction rather than progress, with irrationality rather than Enlightenment, with barbarism rather than civilisation, with enslavement rather than freedom? A long dark shadow now accompanies all attempts to find a distinctly European identity.

## II. Scepticism and cynicism as ideas of Europe.

Why not look, then, at a darker possibility – namely, that we Europeans are sceptics and cynics? Such a hypothesis was first put forward by Spengler in 1918, at a time when faith in God, king, country and progress had been dramatically undermined by four years of carnage, and the visions of Europe put forward in the years that followed were characterised primarily by expressions of pessimism and uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> But if cynicism and scepticism were prominent in Europe in the years after the first world war, it can be questioned whether this constituted a persistent and fundamental feature of Europe, or merely a passing reaction to a traumatic event. And even if scepticism and cynicism have a deeper basis in the European consciousness, are they distinctively European; in particular, are they un-American?

Scepticism and cynicism both of course have their philosophical roots in Europe, in Ancient Greece. Although the original Sceptics and Cynics differed markedly from one another, they can be seen as holding in common a rejection of belief in things “higher than experience” (and thus as being fundamentally anti-Platonic and against that idealism, in both senses of the word, that has dominated Western philosophy since Plato). Where they differ is in the grounds and style of that rejection: for the Sceptics, an epistemic problem stands in the foreground – that, from the given of experience, a multiplicity of explanations and interpretations always seems possible and none seems capable of proving its correctness, so that the appropriate course seems to them a suspension of all judgement concerning the nature of experience and all “truths” that lie beyond the immediacy of experience. The Cynics, on the other hand, refuse to believe on moral grounds, rooted in materialism: “higher things” are higher swindles, distracting our attention from the underlying materiality and animality of human existence. But politically speaking the import is the same: both are usually viewed by the authorities as forms of spiritual delinquency, for they are underminers of *belief*, and thus potentially threatening to any social or moral order.

However, while there have always been sceptics and cynics in Europe, it is only relatively recently that absence of belief has become a widespread phenomenon. To some extent this is a reaction to the already-mentioned violence of the 20th century, which directly confronted millions of Europeans with the meaninglessness of many of the "higher values" in which they had previously held faith. But if that were all, one might expect belief to have returned as the second half of the century witnessed relative peace and prosperity. This, however, is not the case. Sloterdijk is, I think, quite correct to see 1914 as constituting a fundamental break in European consciousness, 'the turning point in modern cynicism' after which 'the naïveté of yesterday will never exist again.'<sup>7</sup> The accompanying picture of war volunteers in Unter den Linden on August 1st 1914, hats aloft, jubilant, is something that will not come again. This sense of *impossibility* suggests that the shift towards cynicism and scepticism has deeper roots; these must also predate the catastrophes themselves, since if the will and faith is sufficiently strong, any disaster can be interpreted as a "trial of faith": the faith is only swept away if it was already weak and unsteady. And indeed, more than thirty years before the outbreak of the first world war, Nietzsche was foretelling for Europe a 'long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm' – due to a collapse of faith in the European God.<sup>8</sup> According to the Nietzschean story it is the spread of Enlightenment which is the ultimate cause of the impending catastrophe, since its scientific insights have come to mean that 'belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable'.<sup>9</sup> If this is true, then the spread of cynicism and scepticism is a natural outcome of the triumphs of an earlier epoch and not simply the result of an unfortunate series of accidents.

Today, the process of losing trust and faith can only continue in a socio-economic system which, rather than seeking to install institutions and individuals demanding and requiring unconditional belief, is, in the name of efficiency, systematically removing the need to "believe in" anyone or anything. Never mind God, who has long been unnecessary: far more immediately doctors, teachers, lawyers, bank managers and a host of others are being transformed from authorities in whom people trust to functionaries whose relationship with their "customers" is determined by nothing more mystical than a fixed-term contract. Scepticism and cynicism thus creep forward by default, as people *lose the habit* of believing.

Are cynicism and scepticism, though, primarily European characteristics? Though evidence for such a claim is no more than anecdotal, there are some interesting pointers in some of the explicit contrasts that have been drawn between Europe and America. A hundred years ago Nietzsche was already characterising the American as frenetically, and by implication, thoughtlessly active, working to the principle: "rather do anything than nothing";<sup>10</sup> and in a recent work, Timothy Bewes has outlined a similar theme, contrasting American "energy without depth" with European "depth without energy".<sup>11</sup> The typical refusal by America to indulge in metaphysics means a refusal of the possibility of that suspicion on which cynicism and

scepticism thrive. And just as Europe's self-inflicted wounds contributed to the growth of suspicion, so conversely it is hard to see how scepticism could take hold in a country that has received so few shocks to its system, that has had so few reasons for suspending belief in its founding articles of faith. As Bewes puts it, 'in America... there is no *question* of freedom, simply because the American Revolution, as opposed to the revolutions in Europe, was successful.'<sup>12</sup>

Another interesting comment comes from Horkheimer and Adorno: 'Here in America there is no difference between a man and his economic fate... Everyone is worth what he earns and earns what he is worth. He learns what he is through the vicissitudes of his economic existence.'<sup>13</sup> One can almost see the ironic smile playing on the lips of these exiled Europeans: as if human merit could be measured so simply! Cynicism does *not* lie in thinking that money makes the world go round, unless this view is accompanied by the sense that it *should not*: if one *believes in* money as the measure of worth then one remains a believer; only the church has changed.

One final fascinating contrast can be mentioned, this time from an American in Europe:

Over there you think of nothing but becoming President of the United States some day. Potentially every man is Presidential timber. Here it's different. Here every man is potentially a zero. If you become something or somebody it is an accident, a miracle.'<sup>14</sup>

Europeans, it would seem, are not just more sceptical about the world they live in, but also about themselves. Their lives are not permeated with the belief that they are going to "make it" or "be somebody", they rather tend to the opposite view – at their best, though, with a heartfelt "so what?"

### III. Implications of European scepticism and cynicism.

If Europe, then, is a place of sceptics and cynics, is this something to be overcome or to be cherished? Even to pose the question may raise eyebrows, since it is common to regard scepticism and cynicism as negative, destructive, life-draining forces. The sceptic is, not unnaturally, associated with indecision, inaction, and conservatism *faute de mieux*. His inability to believe in anything will, it is assumed, lead to an inability to do anything, and thus he will remain stuck in whatever pattern he happens to find himself stuck in. The cynic, on the other hand, is often summarily dismissed as someone who "knows the price of everything and the value of nothing", as a miserable and embittered soul who pours scorn on everything and everyone around him that rises up any higher than his miserable condition. Moreover so far as European integration is concerned, it would appear that there could hardly be less

helpful “shared characteristics”: in Britain, indeed, self-styled “Euro-sceptics” cast doubts on any and every step towards greater European unity: they are “sceptical Europeans” who are “sceptical of Europe”.

Against this, I would argue that scepticism and cynicism are nothing like the quasi-pathological conditions they have often been made out to be: they are rather rich and complex phenomena, which have added as much as they have subtracted from Europe, and will continue to do so. Thus scepticism, as well as its associations with indecision, has also often been considered a *noble* trait when it describes those who are capable of acting without insisting on the unconditional rightness of what they are doing; for Nietzsche this is even one of *the* markers distinguishing “masters” from “slaves”.<sup>15</sup> The negative view of scepticism is, I suspect, largely predicated on its elision with what Nietzsche identified separately as an aspect of nihilism: the latter occurs when

we have sought a “meaning” in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism...is the recognition of the long waste of strength, the agony of the “in vain”, insecurity...<sup>16</sup>

Viewed in this light scepticism does indeed seem to lead to psychological crisis and paralysis, and to many the claims of Sextus Empiricus that scepticism leads to *ataraxia* (tranquillity) have seemed incomprehensible. However, Nietzsche goes on to argue that despair only arises if we continue to insist that the world must have “meaning” in order to be valuable. Once we no longer feel the necessity of those fundamental articles of faith which have become unbelievable then scepticism can pass through its shattering, nihilistic phase and lead on to a greater enjoyment of the “meaningless” phenomena of life. There is perhaps something of a “test of strength” here: the weak-spirited will be unable to bear the absence of “meaning” and collapse into nihilistic despair; the stronger ones will be able to adjust to, perhaps even affirm, a world lacking explanation.

Cynicism, too, is an ambiguous term.<sup>17</sup> Sloterdijk identifies a form of cynicism which involves an “unhappy consciousness” that fits into a system it does not believe in because it sees nothing better in prospect. But he also highlights the Diogenes tradition, which has never entirely gone away, of a more joyful *refusal* to fit comfortably into a system one does not believe in. The secret seems to be that Diogenes can passionately affirm something else, namely his simple, “animal” life, and Sloterdijk sees many of the beatniks, hippies, travellers, and *Autonomen* of our own times as carrying out that same kind of cynical affirmation and challenge. The most conspicuous feature of the cynic is his contempt for all striving after “higher things”, including career success and money, a contempt which arises from an exposure to and rejection of civilisation and the founding principles that sustain it. Despite his claims to be championing “the natural” Diogenes is unquestionably

a product of a ripe civilisation; there is no contradiction in him also being the first person recorded as saying "I am a cosmopolitan".<sup>18</sup>

What links all these strands together is the lack of belief in higher things and the value of striving towards higher things, the sense that one's immediate experience is all there is; what separates them is how this feeling affects people – whether they carry on striving as before but "without illusions", or are crushed, or reject everything and start again, or perhaps simply live ordinarily, but somehow more in the now. It is the latter kind of "hopelessness" that Miller celebrates as the counterpoint to those who would be President:

...it's just because the chances are all against you, just because there is so little hope, that life is sweet over here. Day by day. No yesterdays and no tomorrows. The barometer never changes, the flag is always at half mast...A world without hope, but no despair.<sup>19</sup>

What does this mean for Europe? For Europe as a "project" it promises little, but perhaps it was to place the cart before the horse to thematise Europe as a "project" in the first place. For the essence of the project as such is that 'it is the putting off of existence to a later point,'<sup>20</sup> precisely what Miller praises the Europeans he comes across for *refusing* to do. A paradoxical conclusion thus arises: insofar as we are united as Europeans through being sceptics and cynics, we are unlikely to be impressed by political projects to unite Europe. On the other hand we are, to the degree that we are these sceptics and cynics, cosmopolitan, not divided from one another by petty nationalistic prejudices (which are another kind of faith). And through this shared faithlessness and sense for mockery, possibilities for communication are opened up: not least, the possibility of shared laughter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> P. den Boer, "Europe to 1914: the Making of an Idea". In. K. Wilson and J. van der Dussen, eds., *The History of the Idea of Europe*, revised ed. (Milton Keynes: The Open University; London: Routledge, 1995), p13.

<sup>2</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Beyond good and evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), #52.

<sup>3</sup> See for example P. den Boer, *op. cit.*; R. Hoggart and D. Johnson, *An idea of Europe* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), 8–11; and A. Heller, "Europe: an epilogue?". In. B. Nelson, D. Roberts and W. Veit, eds., *The Idea of Europe* (New York: Berg, 1992), 12–25.

<sup>4</sup> except perhaps that of a common European culture, which seems to me highly contentious.

<sup>5</sup> this of course does not hold true for many ethnic groups in America (not least the native Americans) but the dominant forces of American society have European roots.

<sup>6</sup> See P. Bugge, "The nation supreme: the idea of Europe 1914–45", 119–22, In. Wilson and van der Dussen, *op. cit.*, 83–149.

<sup>7</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. M. Eldred (London: Verso, 1988), 121–2.

<sup>8</sup> F. Nietzsche., *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), #343.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #329.

<sup>11</sup> T. Bewes, *Cynicism and postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997), 121–152.

<sup>12</sup> Bewes, *op. cit.*, 123.

<sup>13</sup> M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1986; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 211.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, H., *Tropic of Cancer* (London: Flamingo, 1993; Paris: Obelisk, 1934), 154–5.

<sup>15</sup> 'It has always been not faith but freedom from faith, that half-stoical and smiling unconcern with the seriousness of faith, that enraged slaves in their masters...' Nietzsche, *Beyond good and evil*, #46

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), #12(a).

<sup>17</sup> Sloterdijk goes so far as to use two different words: "kynical" for the "good" cynicism of Diogenes and the tradition stemming from him; "cynicism" for the "bad", impotent type.

<sup>18</sup> See Sloterdijk, *op. cit.*, 164, for a good discussion of this point.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, 155–6.

<sup>20</sup> G. Bataille, *Inner experience*, trans. L. A. Boldt (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 46.