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Celebrating Europe

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Celebrating Europe

An Asian Journey

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*For
Calcutta Boys' School,
Presidency College, Calcutta
and
Cambridge University*

*all as old
as
youth itself*

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Foreword

Although there is a tendency among some analysts to dismiss Europe as a “has-been”, the world in which we live is still shaped by ideas emanating from Europe. This is why it is important for us to augment our knowledge of Europe’s contribution to civilization. This effort will enable us to borrow and use facets of the European experience and transform them into building blocks around the world. Perhaps even the Europeans could take heart and gain courage by looking at their own past!

The European Union is today buffeted by a financial storm never seen in its history. However, Europe’s past tells Europeans that, even though they are struggling to overcome a calamitous economic situation, there is no reason for despair. The “old continent” has overcome worse challenges and has come out stronger and more mature. Indeed, it has been purified by threats that were directed at the plinth of what Europe stands for. Well-wishers of Europe hope that its union will endure and prove to be a permanent contribution to world peace.

Seen from the outside, Europe is vast collection of nation-states, regions, some reminiscences from the past, and, of course, the European Union, which encompasses 27 countries. However, Europe is more than the European Union. European ideals, cultivated over centuries, have benefited from diversity, the continent’s great strength.

The European Union has tried to define what it stands for. I quote from its proposed Constitution: “The Union

is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

These principles are a valuable contribution to the making of a better world. Europe today offers a mixture of political freedom, respect for human rights, and a genuine wish to find solutions to global problems such as global warming and poverty. These are values that transcend time and space, although their application outside Europe depends on time and place.

It is that Europe which Asad-ul Iqbal Latif celebrates in this book. He has been a prolific writer since he joined ISEAS in 2005. His books have focused on several international and historical issues: Singapore’s position between China and India; the possible formation of a triangle linking Singapore to India and the United States; and India’s role in the making of Singapore. He has written on domestic issues as well in his biography of first-generation Singapore leader Lim Kim San and his book on Singapore’s Community Engagement Programme.

In this study, Asad draws on his intellectual encounters with Europe as a student, a traveller and a Europhile. He combines his personal experiences with a keen cultural insight into the idea of Europe and what makes it worthy of celebration.

He does not gloss over terrible episodes in Europe’s interaction with other countries and even its own people.

Colonialism and the Holocaust are discussed vividly in the book. However, on balance, the European project remains an integral contribution to the evolution of universal humanism.

It is that European project which Asad celebrates movingly in this bittersweet book — a little bitter but far more sweet.

K. Kesavapany

Director

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

Acknowledgements

The sections in this book on my visit to France are drawn from an article, “French heaven on earth”, that was originally published in *The Sunday Times* on 8 August 2004. *Source: The Sunday Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*

Introduction: Europe

The world is in large part a European invention. Europe has created, named, and shaped every historical era, from the classical world and the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and their culmination in the modern age of the nation-state, and now to the postmodern lease of life promised by the supranationalism of the European Union.¹ It is instructive that Europeans — and only Europeans — have succeeded in travelling beyond the nation-state into a quasi-federal union.² It took two world wars — Europe’s two great “civil wars”³ — to set that process of integration in motion through the transnational control of coal and steel, two commodities that are crucial to the conduct of modern warfare. Certainly, the collective idea of Europe as an inherited political and cultural domain is marked by great contention and contest, but this disagreement is natural because, like all identities, the identity of Europe is constructed around “shifting discursive practices” that emerge from a rich register of political, cultural, and economic languages.⁴

The chapters that follow constitute a modest attempt to relate an Asian’s encounters with Europe. My understanding of Europe was mediated by my family’s experience of the contradictory British impulses of colonialism and liberalism; that understanding was nuanced later by

my student life at Cambridge, to which I went, following in my father's footsteps. Two chapters in the book are about Britain. Europe's colonial depredations were echoed in the horrors of the Holocaust, which form the subject of an early chapter. The chapter, "Gentiles", is a defence of the intellectual basis of European secularism in the face of the international assault mounted by confessional societies and their states. It examines how secularism was crucial to the very evolution of Europe as a civilization; how the secular impulse is related to the struggle between Hebraism and Hellenism for the European imagination; how that struggle has evolved into the ironic sense of life (compared with the tragic sense of life); and what some implications of the ironic life might be for Europe's role as a sanctuary for dissidence and heresy today. In this context, the Swiss vote in favour of banning the construction of mosque minarets grates on the secular sensibility, as it should. However, why are the reflexes of societies such as those of the Swiss, the Dutch, and the French, societies that are disposed liberally towards both belief and disbelief, hardening against members of an immigrant religion? In posing this question, a commentator argues that the point is not to wonder how liberal societies could behave in this way, but to understand that they behave in this way precisely because they are liberal.⁵ That is a disturbing thought, but one that cannot be dismissed.

The agency of secularism cannot be detached from that of liberty as a governing principle in the life of nations. The recognition inherent in secularism — that the state is not mandated to impose religious beliefs on its citizens even if most of them treat those beliefs as absolute truths — finds

its political expression in the essence of liberty, which is that nothing is inevitable, let alone permanent, in history — because, just as men have made their history, they are free to change it. Hence there is no perfect or final form of government or society. Instead, history is the graveyard of absolutes. The chapter on *The Leopard* analyses the mood of political mortality present in a great Italian historical novel based on the confrontation between feudal nobility in decay and the bourgeoisie that seeks to replace it. The chapters on the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Fall of the Soviet Union derive fundamentally from questions about the nature of history. The first fall released around the world an exhilarating sense of peoples' liberation from a totalitarian system. That liberation was followed soon, however, by a palpable sense of loss over the second fall, with which the greatest attempt in history to liberate man from exploitation by man disappeared.

That story has not ended. When the Soviet Union disappeared, so did the Soviet empire, in an implosion that freed Marxism-Leninism to resume its theoretical journey towards being an international rendezvous again. Thus, in a review of Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, Gopal Balakrishnan writes of "a world overflowing with insurgent energies" that has embarked on "a Long March against the new scheme of things".⁶ Hardt and Negri find ancient genealogies at work in this scheme of things: American nuclear superiority embodies the monarchical reality; the economic wealth of the Group of Seven industrialized states and transnational corporations represents the aristocratic element; and the Internet brings tidings of the democratic principle. Today's world is the

allegorical inheritor of the later Roman Empire, where Christians witnessed the “inexorable hollowing out of the terrestrial order of things and the beginnings of a new, rejuvenating era of barbarian migrations”.⁷ In that unfolding context, my Bengali Greeks are two young lovers in Calcutta whose politics hark back to a tradition that is much older than the Roman Empire, a tradition produced by the Athenian quest for an erotic *polis* where the love of two mortals for each other would form the pathway for love between citizens and the state.

The last chapter is an impressionistic view of the prospects of postmodern Europe. The idea of Europe is shaped by the cafés that dot its geography, George Steiner remarks elliptically, by way of capturing the spirit of a continent mapped by Pessoa’s favourite Lisbon cafeteria, and Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen cafés. Europe will exist so long as its cafés do.⁸ Indeed, these veritable “clubs of the mind” have set the scene for some of the founding moments of contemporary Europe, moments such as Casanova’s erotic trysts in the Venetian Florian, Sartre’s rendezvous with existentialism at the lucky Café Flore, or Byron’s high tea at Rome’s Antico Caffè Greco, which drew also Schopenhauer, Wagner, Henry James, and Leopardi.⁹ Europe owes a great deal to the café.

This, too, is a café kind of book. It germinated in the *adda*, that quintessentially Bengali art of conversation between consenting adults which takes place at coffee houses, street corners and street-corner tea houses. The book came of age in late-night trysts with books at home, insomniacs like me. It took shape in the tea houses and coffee shops of Calcutta and Cambridge and Singapore,

and in cafés that I have visited only in the Europes of my mind.

What draws me to Europe is not just the quality of its intellectual life: That quality is present elsewhere as well. It is that the European intellectual displays a normative disquiet, born of a deep and stubborn refusal to be happy at others' expense, that keeps the Old Continent at the forefront of the newest existential agendas. Rob Riemen writes gracefully about the permanence of this European legacy in his *Nobility of Spirit: A Forgotten Ideal*, a book that should become a celebrated text of what Europe can stand for if it reaches up for its legacy.¹⁰ Needless to say, there also are European realities that fall far short of the ideals. That is true particularly of culture. Walter Benjamin noted that the cultural treasures which man surveys share, without exception, a horrible origin. "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."¹¹ It took twentieth-century Europe's most civilized and filial son to say that. The best indictments of Europe continue to be European. The secular parables of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*¹² parody the almost shamanistic bewitchment and bewilderment of the European amidst the signs, signals, symbols, gestures, and messages through which society legitimates and sustains its myths and beliefs by obscuring its realities to itself.¹³ However, there would have been no point to his delightfully abrasive mockery without a serious belief in a humane European universe that is recoverable from the excesses of universalized European history. The Indian poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore put this succinctly when, in lectures delivered during World War I that warned against

the East copying the fratricidal nationalism of colonial Europe, he said nevertheless:

There is one safety for us upon which we hope we may count, and that is that we can claim Europe herself as our ally in our resistance to her temptations and to her violent encroachments; for she has ever carried her own standard of perfection, by which we can measure her falls and gauge her degrees of failure, by which we can call her before her own tribunal and put her to shame — the shame which is the sign of the true pride of nobleness.¹⁴

It is interesting that for both Tagore and Rieman, it is nobility/nobleness that is the characteristic quality of Europe. That nobility is best revealed under the most intense questioning.

Unfortunately, the radical scepticism without which Europe would be nothing is being hollowed out by a kind of comfortable, boutique nihilism because of which, one day, Europe will be nothing. My humble work is an attempt to plead otherwise, to suggest that there is much in the European experience that is of enduring value to Europeans and others alike, and that the undermining of Europe does not contribute to a healthy universalism.

This book is a statement of an Asian's hope for, and stake in, a humane universe informed by the best in European civilization.

Notes

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