

Charlemagne

Toy story

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What European toys say about European views



Illustration by Peter Schrank

LEADERS of the European project spend much time searching for icons of a single European identity. They name "Europeans of the Year" and give awards to books—and even to journalists. There is a Charlemagne prize, a German bauble for which this column takes no credit. Instead, it offers a humbler suggestion. In the hunt for a distinctive European identity, consider toy brands, such as Denmark's Lego or Germany's Playmobil.

These firms may be dwarfed in America by titans like Mattel, but in Europe they are cultural giants, vying for top spots in markets such as France and Germany. In their designs, business models and philosophies, they offer a striking snapshot of European aspirations, anxieties and foibles. (Tellingly, toy bosses see Britain as a case apart, closer to the American market in taste, and showing what they call an "Anglo-Saxon" fondness for heavily marketed novelties tied to films or television.)

This column offers as its European of the Year Playmobil man, a short, stiff-legged, eternally smiling, plastic figure first created three decades ago, and today churned out at a rate of 80m a year. Study these little people, and you learn much about European views of globalisation, violence, creativity, America, race, gender equality and what makes a good job. For example, says Playmobil's chief executive, Andrea Schauer, "the dream of every German mother" used to be to have an engineer for a son. Parents liked to see boys assembling elaborate structures in their bedrooms; Lego is the top toy brand in Germany. In contrast, the French shun construction toys, preferring the world of the imagination. Playmobil is their leading toy brand.

Visit Playmobil headquarters in Bavaria, and you will hear a surprisingly nuanced message about globalisation. Unlike the rest of the industry, Playmobil and Lego have largely avoided China as a place to manufacture. That helped last Christmas, when American press articles advised parents in a funk about Chinese safety standards to buy Playmobil, Lego and the like, because they were made in Europe. (Most Playmobil figures are made in Malta and their accessories made in Germany; most Lego bricks are made in Denmark.)

The head of the family that owns Playmobil, Horst Brandstätter, has been known to drift into Euro-populism when explaining the decision to invest in new German production lines during the past five years. "If everything is produced in China, who in Germany will be left to afford high-value toys?" he once asked. In fact, Playmobil plants are highly automated—its main factory in Bavaria is strikingly empty, with tiny dinosaur arms or car parts falling from unmanned injection moulds as a few blue-dungareed staff trundle about on large tricycles. Its young customers are fickle and unpredictable, meaning that production volumes often need swift tweaking. Like many "fast fashion" chains, Playmobil suspects the lead times demanded by factories in China are too long for it.

Mrs Schauer will say only that Playmobil has decided against China for the next five to ten years. She does not criticise rivals who make toys there. Chinese factories can make items of "any quality", she says. But when the firm experimented with making toys in China four years ago, the costs of moulds and raw materials were no lower than in Europe. And it took too much time and effort to prod suppliers to set standards high and keep them up.

What of Europe's cultural identity? Examination of Playmobil figures reveals interesting things. Europeans are squeamish about warfare and armies. American shelves groan under tanks and muscle-bound action heroes; European parents are less keen. Playmobil tanks and warplanes "could certainly make big money," says Mrs Schauer, since children write in demanding such things. But Playmobil will not make them. Europe's history, especially Germany's, rules it out. The firm also avoids links with

violent licensed brands, such as Spiderman, saying it prefers older stories that leave children's imagination free to roam.

From Venus to Mars

On the other hand, Europeans are not as pacifist as they are sometimes portrayed, nor even as anti-gun. Playmobil policemen are armed to the teeth, and have big dogs for chasing Playmobil bank-robbers (who sport stubbly chins beneath their smiles). In the adult world, many Europeans are duly happy to send armed paramilitary police to be peacekeepers, but are fretful about sending their troops into combat.

Yet go farther back in history and violence triggers little concern. There are Playmobil knights and barbarians, pirates and Roman legionaries, all wielding lethal weapons. Europeans can even live with American military toys, if they are old enough: there are Playmobil cowboys from the Wild West, and soldiers from both sides in the American civil war.

The difference is philosophical, says Mrs Schauer. There are no more knights and pirates, so their combat is a "resolved story". Modern war is "really horror". That is echoed by Gabi Neubauer, a librarian buying toys in Nuremberg. She suggests that "it is more honourable to fight with a sword, somehow." Not all explanations are as high-faluting. Asked why Playmobil makes any tiny toy guns at all, Mrs Schauer admits "otherwise, we probably wouldn't be accepted by boys."

Girls are well catered for by Playmobil: women role models vary from pilots to policewomen. But when it comes to race, Playmobil figures are almost all white. European children have never asked for anything else, and Europe accounts for 90% of turnover (two ethnic families, the Costas and the Wongs, are on the way). American customers are different. Some have asked for black pilots, Playmobil bosses say, and the firm may yet produce them. The all-important American market is one that Playmobil yearns to break into in a big way—if it can do so without betraying its calm German vision of toyland. That is a tricky conflict to resolve: and a very European one.