

Is Britain European?

Why can't we agree that Britain is a European country? Because it is not so simple, says Timothy Garton Ash - our ties with the English-speaking peoples remain very strong. Britain is a country of multiple identities or it is nothing. But a deeper European identity is there for the making - if we want it.

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In recent years, we have experienced a sprawling, almost German-style debate about British identity and Europe. What is Britain? When was Britain? Does Britain still exist? Will Britain survive?

Britain has been declared "dead" by Andrew Marr and "abolished" by Peter Hitchens. For decades, people have thought of Britain as a classic nation state. Now Norman Davies tells us that Britain was never a nation state. Anthony Barnett says that Britain was never a nation, although England was. But Roger Scruton, in his extraordinary book on England, informs us that England - which he thinks is also dead - was not a nation either, just a country, a land, home.

One begins to long for the pellucid simplicities of the German debate about identity, with its elementary distinctions between Staatsvolk and Kulturvolk, and so on.

More prosaically, the answer to the question, "Is Britain European?" may be very different if given from what are now sometimes curiously called "the devolved territories," of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Indeed, Anthony Barnett argues in his book *This Time* that British opposition to Europe is really English opposition to Europe.

For some, Britain can only be saved if we have more Europe; for others, England can only be saved if we have less. For both, though, the question is central. Hugo Young, in *This Blessed Plot*, says that the underlying question for the last 50 years has been "Could Britain... truly accept that her modern destiny was to be a European country?" But what does that mean? If the noun "Britain" is elusive, the adjective "European" is even more so. This is true in all European languages, but particularly in English.

With little difficulty we can identify six possible meanings of European. Two are archaic and buried, but have a significant afterlife: to be European means to be Christian and to be European means to be white. Then there are three interlocking meanings which are more familiar. The first is geographical: Europe is the second

smallest continent, a western extension of Eurasia. Are we part of it? The geographers say yes. Many Britons doubt it, for the second of those three interlocking meanings is, as Collins English Dictionary tells us, "the continent of Europe, except for the British Isles." (One wonders where that leaves Ireland.) This is a familiar usage. We say "Jim's off to Europe" or "Fred's back from Europe." Europe is elsewhere. Thirdly, Europe means the EU.

In contemporary British usage, these three meanings are very often elided, but in political debate the third is predominant. In this sense, the question "is Britain European?" comes down to asking: is Britain fully participating in the EU? Is it supporting some version of what people in continental Europe would recognise as the European project?

Yet there is, finally, a sixth sense of European, more exalted and mysterious. This sixth sense was captured in a recent headline in the International Herald Tribune: "End sanctions on 'European' Austria, panel advises the EU." A panel of three "wise men" had just concluded, after long deliberation, that Austria was European. Put thus, the statement sounds ridiculous. What else did they think Austria was? African? But we know what they meant. They had a catalogue of what are called "European standards" or "European values," and they were measuring Austria against it.

In other words, against not a descriptive but a normative, prescriptive, idealistic version of Europe - or what Gonzague de Reynold called, *L'Europe europeenne*. A *Europe europeenne* in which somehow Hitler and Haider were not European - or at least, were un-European. This was, so to speak, a House Committee on Un-European Activities.

Is Britain European in this sense? You could go down the list of European values and put a tick or a cross or a question mark against each entry. But that would only mean something if we think it matters to ask the question in this idealistic way.

Keeping in mind these competing meanings of European, I want to pose the question in a more pedestrian, empirical - dare I say, British or English? - way. In what respects is Britain more different from continental European countries than they are from each other? In what respects is Britain more like other countries - the US, Canada or Australia - than it is like those European ones?

The first answer conventionally given is "history." Our history has long been told as a story of British - or is it English? - exceptionalism. A story of separateness, starting with the separation of the offshore island from the mainland, but then, following the end of the Hundred Years war, of political separation. GM Trevelyan, in his *English Social History*, says that Britain thereafter became "a strange island, anchored off the continent." And a story of continuity, by contrast with the fickle mutability of the continent, constantly changing regimes and borders and monarchs and constitutions. A heart-warming story of the slow steady organic growth of institutions, of common law, parliament, and a unique concept of sovereignty, vested in the crown in parliament.

Here were the "1,000 years of history" that Hugh Gaitskell saw threatened if Britain joined France and Germany in a continental European community. The story was told

in purple prose by GM Trevelyan, Arthur Bryant, Winston Churchill and HAL Fisher. The original historiography can be traced back to late Victorian Britain, but it was still the dominant version of our history well into the 1950s and 1960s. Certainly it was the version with which I grew up, and with which most people who are British and over 40 grew up.

Partly this is because of what you might call textbook lag. The original historiography itself inevitably comes after the events, and tries to explain them or rationalise them. But textbooks, schoolbooks and children's books are usually a further ten, 20 or even 30 years behind. This means that the exceptionalist vision, though late-Victorian in origin, was hugely influential right into our own time.

You find traces of this self-image in the most unlikely places. I found one even in Tony Blair's Warsaw speech of October 2000. In the middle of a very clear-eyed passage about Britain and Europe, he suddenly describes Britain as "a proud and independent-minded island race (though with much European blood flowing in our veins)." Arthur Bryant, thou shouldst be living at this hour!

To give a couple of much more demotic examples, in a letter in the Daily Mail in January 1997, we read, "we appear to be one tick of the clock away from losing our sovereignty, our independence, and not just 1,000 years of history, but history from when the first man sought to protect this country from an invader." Or listen to Asian Briton Tom Patel, twentysomething, gay, just back from a holiday in Corfu with his lover John Smith, and talking to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: "It is so difficult for us English, you know. They are not like us. When John and I were snogging quietly, nothing like we'd do in England, there was all this poison in the air around us. We are an island people; we are not like these peasants."

So the belief in British or English exceptionalism is deep and wide. Now the historian's question must be: how exceptional is British exceptionalism?

Actually, if you look at the historiography of other European nations, you realise that exceptionalism is the norm. Every national historiography is concerned with what is distinctive about that nation. And most European nations contrast their exceptionalism with some idealised "western" or "European" normality - for which the examples given are usually France and Britain. The literature on Germany's "special way" in modern history, the *Sonderweg*, is all about why Germany did not become a "normal" democratic nation-state like Britain. Every east European national historiography has these elements too.

It also depends which Europe you compare us with. If you compare Britain simply with the original six members of the EEC, countries with a large body of shared Roman and Holy Roman - ie Carolingian -heritage, Britain indeed looks exceptional. But if you compare Britain with the other 14 current member states of the EU, or the 20 who will soon be members, or the 30 who may be members in ten to 15 years time, then Britain hardly looks exceptional at all, because the histories of these countries are themselves enormously diverse. Furthermore, in the last decade there has been a massive deconstruction of this grand narrative of British or English exceptionalism by historians such as Hugh Kearney, Jeremy Black, Linda Colley and Norman Davies.

Most of this deconstruction has not consisted in discovering anything new about the past, but simply in effecting a double shift of focus. Firstly, it has changed the focus to look at the whole history of the British Isles. Secondly, it has looked at our national history in the larger European framework. The work of Jeremy Black has been particularly helpful in making systematic comparison with continental European experiences. We are reminded, for example, that some other people in Europe also embraced Protestantism - indeed one or two of them actually invented it. We are reminded that, over long stretches of British history, Britain - or large parts of it - belonged to a trans-Channel polity.

Above all, this deconstruction shows us that there is far less continuity than the grand narrative suggested, especially if you look at the history of Wales, Scotland or Ireland. In *The Isles*, Norman Davies has a list of the 16 different states in the history of these islands, ten of them in the last 500 years. Jeremy Black observes that the British have "a genius for the appearance of continuity." Ferdinand Mount, in his book on the British constitution, calls this "the continuity myth." We invented *The Invention of Tradition* - not just the book, but the thing. Peter Scott has rightly observed that "Britain is an invented nation, not so much older than the US."

For all this comparative deconstruction, there is no question that Britain in 1939 was still an exceptional place. That exceptionalism is memorably evoked by George Orwell on the last page of *Homage to Catalonia*, when he returns from the Spanish civil war and travels by train to London through southern England, observing "the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policeman - all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England" - of course, he specifies England - "from which I sometimes fear we will never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs."

We are now told a new story, a companion to the deconstruction or reconstruction of our national history. It is that over the 60 years since Britain was rudely awakened by the roar of bombs the country has become much more European, and both less insular and less transatlantic and post-imperial. Yet only half this story seems to me to be true. Yes, Britain has become much less insular, less separate. But has the transoceanic or post-imperial component of our identity, especially in relation to what Churchill called the English-speaking peoples, really become weaker?

We have seen the de-insularisation of Britain. But it is not clear whether what has replaced it is Europeanisation, or Americanisation, or just globalisation. If we start at the very top, with sovereignty, law and government, it is obvious that Britain has become much more European. From the treaties of Rome to the treaty of Amsterdam - and now, Nice - British sovereignty has been shared and qualified. Our English common law is often subordinated to European law, as is Scottish law.

We even have that strange continental thing, codified rights, with the European Convention on Human Rights written into British law. In the practice of government, the intimacy of co-operation with partners in the EU has no parallel anywhere else. On the other hand, if you look at the content of policy and ask what is the largest single foreign inspiration for British policy over the last 20 years, the answer has to be

the US. This is something that both the Thatcher and the Blair governments have had in common: a fascination with US policy and US solutions.

Yes, in defence policy, after an interval of nearly four centuries since the loss of Calais in 1558, we have again made what the historian Michael Howard has called "the continental commitment." British troops are stationed permanently on the continent of Europe. But in what context? In the context of Nato: the transatlantic organisation. The planned European rapid reaction force will change that, if at all, only slowly. Yes, in foreign policy, we have very close co-operation with European partners. But look at the Balkans: the biggest European foreign policy challenge of the last ten years. Where have the key policies been made? Not in the EU, but in the Contact Group of four leading EU powers plus Russia and the US, and then in the so-called Quint, the same group without Russia. Who is the key partner, to whom the first telephone call would usually be made? The US.

What about our version of capitalism? In his book *Capitalism Against Capitalism*, Michel Albert identifies us as part of an Anglo-American model, as opposed to a Rhine-Alpine model. Will Hutton, in his *The State We're In*, puts us somewhere in between. The strengths of our economy, like those of the US, are in areas such as financial services or media. We don't have so many of the small farmers and large manufacturers characteristic of France and Germany, and benefiting structurally from the EU. Yes, most of our trade is with the EU, but the largest single part of our investment is in or from the US.

And society? The 2000 edition of the compendium *Social Trends* has a preface by AH Halsey in which he quotes another of George Orwell's famous descriptions of the distinctiveness of Britain, this time from *The Lion and the Unicorn*: "the crowds in the big towns with the mild knobby faces, their bad teeth and gentle manners, are different from the European crowd." Halsey says that this would not be true today. Looking at the whole range of data on social realities, he concludes that what has happened is "the assimilation of life in Britain to that in the other advanced industrial countries, in Europe, and North America." Indeed, in the test of social reality, London is surely closer to Toronto than it is to Kiev. So the "set" to which Britain belongs is not Europe as such, but rather what is often called the west.

Again, many British "pro-Europeans" like to cite lifestyle evidence of the Europeanisation of Britain: "look at all that Chianti and cappuccino we drink, the holidays spent in Spain or Italy, the homes owned in France." The names now "familiar on our lips as household words" are no longer Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter, but Arsene Wenger, PY Gerbeau and Sven Goran Eriksson, the new manager of the England football team. But for each of these examples of Europeanisation you could give at least an equal and opposite example of Americanisation. For every cappuccino bar there is at last one McDonald's or Starbucks. American films, American television programmes and American English are a main, even a dominant part of our popular culture.

You may say that this is just part of what it means to be European at the beginning of the 21st century. Such Americanisation is, so to speak, a European phenomenon. In many ways that is right. But in Britain it is especially intense; we are part of it in a way

continental Europeans are not. Nor is this just about our relationship with the US. In a Harris poll, in 1990, Britons were asked in which other country they would like to live. More than 50 per cent mentioned Australia, Canada, the US or New Zealand. France, Germany and Spain scored just 3 per cent each. Evidence of an attitude, surely.

Add a small semantic indicator. There is a phrase many people in Britain use when talking about America: "across the pond." "Across the pond" - as if the Atlantic were but a duck pond, and America was just the other side of the village green. In one semantic bound, the Channel becomes wider than the Atlantic.

Hugo Young insists that this is all anachronistic: the lived identification with what Churchill called "the English-speaking peoples" is fading, and after all, America is becoming more Hispanic and less Anglo-oriented. "Anglo-Americanism," he writes, "must cease to impede the emergence of a European consciousness, in this European country." This strikes me as a false opposition, unrealistic, and probably undesirable. I agree with Robert Conquest when he writes, "within the west, it is above all the English-speaking community which has over the centuries pioneered and maintained the middle way between anarchy and despotism." The statement sounds a little self-congratulatory, but as an historical generalisation it seems to me substantially true. This is an important and positive part of our identity.

So, back to the question "Is Britain European?" in the most familiar - but also most superficial - sense of "is Britain fully committed to the EU and some version of the European project?" Well, again, what do we mean by Britain? If we mean the current elected government, then the answer is clearly a resounding yes. If we mean public opinion, the answer is a resounding no.

The October 2000 Eurobarometer had the usual questions about identification with the EU. Britain is bottom of the table. Is membership good for your country? Only 25 per cent of Britons say yes. Has membership brought benefits to your country? 25 per cent. Trust in the European commission? 24 per cent. Support for the euro? 22 per cent. Only in support for a common security policy, and for enlargement, is Britain not at the bottom (although support for priority for enlargement is just 26 per cent).

You can say a couple of things to qualify this picture - gloomy or encouraging, depending on your view. The first is that these British answers are extremely volatile. If you take that first question as to whether membership is a good thing, the figures are: 1973, 31 per cent; 1975, 50 per cent; 1981, 21 per cent; 1991, 57 per cent; 1997, 36 per cent. Wildly up and down. Robert Worcester insists that British views on the EU are strong but not deeply held. Worcester distinguishes between "opinions," "attitudes," and "values." He argues that these are just opinions, influenced by the latest coverage in a press generally unsympathetic to the EU. Attitudes, in the sense of more settled views, Worcester finds especially among "middle-class, older men."

Yet the evidence I have been amassing in a piecemeal way, and everyday experience of talking to so-called "ordinary people," points to the fact that there are also deeper attitudes involved - and by no means just among the middle-class older men who still dominate the political and media debate. Thus, to cite one more poll, a BBC Mori poll in 1995 asked: "How European do you feel?" Only 8 per cent of

respondents said "a great deal," 15 per cent "a fair amount," but 49 per cent said "not at all."

It is often said that talking about Europe as somewhere else is peculiar to Britain. That is not true. There are several countries in Europe where people talk about Europe as somewhere else - at least part of the time. Spaniards, Portuguese, Poles, Greeks, Hungarians all do it. The difference is that for them, Europe may be somewhere else, but it's somewhere else they would like to be. There are, I think, only two countries in Europe which not only talk about Europe as somewhere else but are still not at all sure if they want to be there. These are Britain and Russia.

Edward Heath famously said in the House of Commons in October 1971, "we are approaching the point where, if this House so decides tonight, it will become just as much our Community as their Community." Thirty years on, we are little closer to that point.

Of course we all know that our elites are deeply divided on this issue. But even the most pro-integration British "Europeans" don't talk about Europe as continental elites do, as a matter of course. We don't talk about Europe simply as Europeans engaged in a common enterprise. This is partly because we smell hypocrisy. We suspect the national instrumentalisation of the European idea. Remember Harold Macmillan's comment about de Gaulle: "he talks of Europe and means France." Probably every British prime minister since Macmillan has been tempted to say that, privately, about the current French president (with the possible exception of Heath about Pompidou). For it is partly true - and not just of France. I wrote a whole book describing how Germany has pursued its national interests In Europe's Name. But it is only partly true.

There is also - and very much so in the German case - a genuine, emotional identification with a larger common project of Europe. Emotion in politics always lies somewhere close to the frontier between the genuine and the phoney, between sincerity and hypocrisy, but there is a component of genuine emotion here.

This connects to my final, sixth sense of being European: the normative sense of l'Europe europeenne. Europe as an ideal, a myth, the stuff of which political identities are made. It is this sixth sense which seems to me almost entirely lacking even among British "Europeans." I have seen only one hint of it in recent years. That was when Charter 88, and others on the centre-left, made the case for constitutional reform in terms of the "Europeanisation" of Britain. "European" in that context meant more democratic, more modern, just, open - a distilled essence of the best contemporary European practice. But then Jonathan Freedland came along and said, no, what we really need is the Americanisation of Britain; we need, as his book title declares, to Bring Home the Revolution. The American revolution, that is. And - for this is Britain - idealised America trumps idealised Europe.

My conclusion? There is no conclusion, because of the very nature of "identity studies," which rarely arrive at any clear finding, but also because of the particular nature of British identity. Arguably the statement "no conclusion" is in fact a conclusion - even an important and positive one. There is no doubt that a European identity is an available one for Britain.

There is plenty of material here from which to build a European identity if we so choose; to make an "us" rather than a "them." But it cannot be the identity. We cannot make the statement which Hugo Young seems to want to make: "Britain is a European country, full stop." Or as we say in our Americanised way, period.

The other identities are simply too strong - not so much the insular identity, but the western and transoceanic identity, the identification not just with the US but with all the English-speaking peoples. And then there are all the internal identities, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, English. The answer to the question "Is Britain European?" has to be "yes, but not only." Britain's European identity can only ever be a partial one, for Britain has always been and will remain - so long as there is a Britain - a country of multiple, overlapping identities.

Yet to say "partial identity" need not mean shallow identity, which is what Britain's European identity presently is. After all, in our own history we have had the example of partial identities which are very deep: English identity, Scottish identity. If Britain is to be a full and effective participant in the European project centred on the EU, and whatever it becomes with enlargement, this identity has to be deeper. There has to be some more emotional identification with the common cause; just a tinge perhaps of idealism, even of my sixth sense.

This matters not simply to our own position in Europe; it matters to the project itself. For the British know better than anyone else that artificial, invented political structures cannot survive without a bond of emotional identification, without some shared myth, some mystique, or what Bagehot, writing about the British constitution, called simply "magic." Of course "Europe," in the sense of the EU, is currently an artificial, invented and fragile political structure - but so was Britain once, and perhaps is now again.

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