

Exit strategy

SIMON GLENDINNING

What can philosophy contribute to an understanding of Europe today? Denis Guénoun is not, by profession, a philosopher: he is a professor of French literature and theatre at the Sorbonne, and a published playwright. However, he is both completely at home in post-Kantian philosophy and a remarkable reader of historical texts, making him an ideal candidate to stage the conceptual drama in play in the “philosophy of Europe”. Just as a philosopher of mind might chart the territory of our psychological lives by placing conceptual markers over its terrain, so Guénoun charts the historical becoming of a European world in terms of certain conceptual transitions: from mythical Europe as seen from the point of view of maritime life in and around the Mediterranean, to developing empires, kingdoms and Europe’s modern nations. It is a breathtaking undertaking: brilliantly conceived, thoroughly engrossing, and thought-provoking from first to last.

Europe as a theme for philosophical investigation is not the virgin territory one might think it is. Indeed, until relatively recently Europe was not merely a recurrent theme for philosophy: it was central to the traditional discourse of “philosophy of the history of the world”. For thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Edmund Husserl and Paul Valéry the philosophy of the history of the world was always a discourse of Europe’s modernity. The idea was that the history of the human world can be told in terms of the development from an original savage condition to a final fully human civilization. This construal of world history was not only European in origin, but also Eurocentric: it was the idea that history is a teleological process with modern European humanity at the head.

The philosopher impossible to ignore in this context is Kant, and his brief but difficult texts on the idea of universal history from the 1780s and 1790s. In these texts Kant explicitly asks what “a philosophical mind” might be able to say about history. His answer is that a philosophically informed history of the development of an “inherently rational creature” should see it as an unfolding movement towards a fully rational form of human life for all humanity: a cosmopolitan life lived in peace with others. Kant thus attempted to present world history as a movement of moral progress towards a worldwide community of nations, nations existing together in a perhaps fragile but nevertheless lasting peace. He appealed to what he regarded as the actual development of a distinctively European world as evidence for its reality, tracing a line of development that starts from “Greek history”, influencing next “the body politic of Rome” which “engulfed the Greek state”, influencing next the “Barbarians” who “in turn destroyed Rome”.

This golden thread of history in our part of the world would provide not only the guardrails of universal history, but also the model for its global unfolding. Astonishingly, Kant thought he could see a movement towards European political union among the bellicose European nations. As a result of more or less constant wars, attempts at inter-national peace-brokering by affected nations will “prepare the

way for a great political body of the future, without precedence in the past”. Likely to be replicated elsewhere, these developments on our continent would then supply a cosmopolitan example for the whole world; in the end Europe “will probably legislate eventually for all other continents”.

The idea of the global spreading of the Greek-then-Roman-then-Germanic world has been the mainstay of the philosophy of world history, and provides a point of departure for Guénoun’s philosophy of Europe. However, as he acknowledges – in taking up the Kantian challenge to explore Europe philosophically – our time is not one in which the idea of a teleology of universal history can be so confidently affirmed. While Guénoun maintains a studied “faithfulness to Kant” (which means also to Hegel, and especially to Marx) in seeing history as the “movement of the universal”, he is also faithful to Jacques Derrida in wanting to see this in terms of “a non-teleological historicity” without assigned origins or ends. Like Kant, Guénoun traces Europe’s becoming as a layering of the Roman and the German, but the movement he traces is regarded as radically open. By the end of the book, it becomes clear that there is only the slimmest of chances that the future will be shaped significantly by an explicitly European contribution.

According to Guénoun, Europe becomes a relatively stable and identifiable figure in world history only when confronted by the unfolding Islamic world and its own claims to planetary unification. One could say that Europe owes its identity to this collision of worlds – perhaps increasingly so since Guénoun published the French text of this book in 2000. But Guénoun does not want to see this as an external relation or clash of entirely autonomous civilizations: the Islamic world is close to Europe’s. Europe’s de-limitation as an identifiable figure is as much spiritual as it is geographical, and it is a spirit that is constituted, above all, Guénoun argues, in its resistance to the Islamic alternative, setting up Europe with Islam as its “other”: Islam bordering it by attempting always to board it.

But this production of European limits has not stopped the march of a certain imperial universality of European origin. In the interwar period Paul Valéry was struck by the fact that the world had stopped growing: looking at modern maps of the world it was clear that there was now “not a rock without a flag”. Guénoun too embraces this thought, though he sees it through a more classically Marxist lens: spreading out from a European base, this completed globalization is the terrifying worldwide imperialism of capital, a movement in which the whole world has become a commodity world. Valéry had a somewhat less classi-

Denis Guénoun

ABOUT EUROPE

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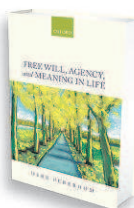


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cally Marxist take on this. Europe's greatness, which Guénoun too sees in terms of the power of its productive inventiveness, has itself been bottled and made available as a commodity to everyone everywhere, and old Europe can barely hope to maintain any sort of world-leading position in this situation. Indeed, its own finitude becomes suddenly visible. Nevertheless, both Valéry and Guénoun tell this as a story of Europe's disappearance in a movement of its own spreading out. Spreading out is what Europe does, and what Guénoun calls its "continental continence", formed historically in relationship to Islam, masks its continued productive power on a global scale: the production and completion of the global domination by capital which Lenin called simply "imperialism". Within this, Guénoun identifies Europe's greatest production, "the production of America".

There is – if one can speak in the national terms that structure Guénoun's own analysis – something decidedly French about his vision of our contemporary condition and our future. Guénoun keeps a distance from what he sometimes calls "vulgar" Marxists, and he is willing to decry the "authoritarian and imperialist socialism of the USSR". But this distance is ambiguous: the "misery" of this socialism was the misery only of "so-called 'communism'", and contrasted with this Eastern Europe is a Western Europe that Guénoun considers as only "supposedly democratic". Indeed, his view of "the tragedy of the [twentieth] century" is not that Bolshevism produced the very opposite of a regime without evil but that Stalinism was the upshot of "the failed world revolution" sought by Lenin. Guénoun may have given up on Marxist teleology, but he holds on to a recognizably Marxist messianism that seeks "an insurrection that does not turn into its monstrous form".

The ambivalent relationship of French intellectuals to Marxism is, however, only one (and not the most interesting) aspect of Guénoun's distinctively French vision. Guénoun's understanding of Europe as being fundamentally post-Roman is elaborated in terms of the new form of sovereignty that rises in the space of its imperial decline: the kingdom. But kingdoms were only the stepping stone to the truly modern European political form: the nation state. And here Guénoun gives pride of place to France and its Revolution made in the name of "the rights of man and of the citizen – not those of the French". Guénoun places himself "unhesitatingly" in the revolutionary camp, but again ambiguously. The French Revolution, like the Bolshevik Revolution in its turn, failed to the extent that it turned away from world revolution and became national. Guénoun declares himself "grudgingly" convinced that this was not something that could have been avoided. Indeed, he concludes that "the very idea of 'revolution'", insofar as it aims at the overthrow of a regime within a territory, only exchanges sovereign power within a place, "making the people into the new king", and does not call into question sovereign power over a territory as such. Nevertheless, for Guénoun it is the French revolutionary tradition that gives Europe its most salient modern aspect. The break-up of the Roman Empire led to the formation of kingdoms, and the idea of the nation is "the concept built by the revolutionary enterprise to overthrow the kingdom". "Europe", Guénoun declares, is the "common appellation" for this process of "becoming-a-

nation", and hence is always something somewhat French. Even Germany, which had no single kingdom to become a nation from, is given a French origin: the birth of patriotic sentiment among the German people within the Holy Roman Empire is provoked by the imperialist attitude of French occupiers and from deep hostility to France's willingness to execute its king.

Despite the privilege accorded to France in this story, we have not yet reached the point when Guénoun seems to me most French. The collision of (French) revolutionary imperialism and the (German) Holy Roman Empire are the centrepieces of his narrative of Europe's post-Roman internal development as it faces Islam. France and Germany thus appear as the "mingled" outcomes of the revolutionary and national traditions that France bequeaths to Europe, and are at the heart of the "identificatory face-off" that has marked Europe's recent political history in the confrontation between (French) socialist national revolution and (German) revolutionary national socialism.

Reflecting on these "twinned" nations, Guénoun recalls Lenin's conjecture on the sources of Marxist revolutionary thinking: the "three national sources: political economy (the English theory of capital), (French) socialism, and idealism (philosophical romanticism, which is German)". Guénoun focuses only on French and German contributions to the intertwining revolutionary and national problematics in modern Europe, and his "intellectual resistance" to the "world economy" allows him to declare that the "tragedy" of the twentieth century was not the horror of Stalinism and Nazism, but "a stopped world revolution".

Guénoun takes the "point of view" of this triumphant "heir to Rome" to be "the point of view of political economy" – and hence, according to the Leninist formula, it is the "English" point of view. "World domination by capital" is world domination by an Anglo-Saxon spirit. Guénoun has clearly had his fill of this world, and is committed to some kind of radical "exit" from it, concluding the book with the claim that the world that has grown completely worldwide has also become utterly worn out, and must be left behind. We need to see that our globalized (and implicitly "English") world "is now exhausted . . . and that one has to come out of this".

Guénoun's reflections on Europe's emerging cultural identity are rich and fascinating, and English-speaking readers can be extremely grateful to Christine Irizarry for her fluent and elegant translation. However, while it may be a general fault of the book that it is quite so Franco-German-centred, it seems extraordinary to omit Britain ("England") from the story altogether. Guénoun simply sticks with his Europe of two countries, and identifies Germany alone as "the hub" of Europe's developing "industrialization and proletarianization". His neglect of any discussion of the becoming of Britain (its revolution, its reformation, its Church and Parliament, its Empire, its industry, its legacy in an increasingly English-speaking world, and so on) within the horizon of an analysis of the movement that brings European modernity into being is all the more surprising, given his conception of global capitalism as a European imperialism. But if Lenin is right, the world of European origin from which Denis Guénoun calls us to "exit" is to a considerable extent an "English" world.

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PETER SIMONS

Tim Crane

THE OBJECTS OF THOUGHT
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How can we think about something when there is nothing there for us to think about? This is the paradox that Tim Crane aims to resolve: it is what J. N. Findlay called "the puzzling character of thought about the non-existent". It concerns the nature of mental representation and in particular its inevitable side-effect: that we can think not just about what exists, like my cat, but about what does not, like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.

The problem came to the fore when in 1874 Franz Brentano reintroduced the Aristotelian-Scholastic notion of intentionality, "being-about", as the distinguishing mark of the mental. It is one thing to think of something; it is another for that which is thought of to exist. Often it does. But sometimes it does not, because we are mistaken, confused, dreaming, imagining, or engaging in the appreciation of certain kinds of representational art, especially, but not exclusively, literary. Further, there is no secure internal or phenomenal marker of when we do and when we do not have something existent as our object of thought. This lack of a guarantee of veracity was made much of by Brentano and his students, notably Alexis Meinong, Edmund Husserl and Kazimierz Twardowski. Neither phenomenology nor Meinong's theory of objects is thinkable with-

out it. Crane's study of the objects of thought continues this tradition, benefiting from intensive discussion of this and related issues in more recent analytic philosophy of mind and language, and indeed contributing to bringing those once antagonistic directions in philosophy closer together.

Crane, like Brentano, takes mental representation to be basic, not to be explained in terms of anything else. It leads him to stress the inherent psychology of our mental goings-on rather than the semantics of the language we use to talk about them, a position he calls "psychologism", where this term is not to be understood in the pejorative sense used by Husserl and others to criticize the idea of logic as embodying the laws of thought, which is an independent question. Crane's stance pays off in various places. One concerns the question of how we can think of specific non-existent things. Normally when we think about a specific thing, such as the Eiffel Tower, the thing



William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes