

Piotr Jaroszyński

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
Poland

WHAT IS EUROPE? THE GREEK BEGINNINGS

The discussion on what Europe is, what determines its identity, how to assess Europe, started in the era of classical Greece and continues up to now. Different aspects of this conversation invariably emerge: etymological, geographical, political, historical, cultural, religious, civilizational and ideological. For these reasons, the question of Europe's identity becomes extremely complicated and even controversial. While discoursing on Europe, one should recognize the indicated aspects in order to avoid simplifications or even manipulation, which is nowadays frequently based on the unilateral and ahistorical concept of Europe, a concept put forward to satisfy media or ideological aims (especially when it comes to the European Union).

It is certain that Europe is not a ready category which can be indisputably referenced.

Nor is it a completely fluid category which may be arbitrarily shaped. Europe has distinctive features, which have to be uncovered, appreciated, and saved. This is so not only because they enrich the spectrum of cultures and civilizations of the world, but also because they have a universal, trans-European value.

It turns out that throughout history it is possible to find at least three different concepts of Europe. They appear in the context of

clashes grounded in civilization; sometimes the clashes seek dominion in culture and, at other times, in religion or science. The impact of such clashes is variable and hard to measure. The nations involved are not exactly the same.

The first concept of Europe emerges out of the context of the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians; the second one is induced by Christianity and Islam meeting head-on; whereas the third concept results from European civilization confronting the cultures of the newly discovered peoples inhabiting other continents. It is just in the context of these indicated clashes that the concept of Europe is shaped as a phenomenon diversified not only geographically but also in terms of a civilization distinct from other cultures or civilizations.

As a result of the meeting of the three aforementioned historical concepts, three new ideas of Europe emerge. In this case, however, they take the form of an internal conflict, an opposition against, what may be called, Greek Europe, followed by Christian Europe and eventually the Europe of the Enlightenment.

The three new notions of Europe contradict these old concepts of Europe, and that opposition is their hallmark. These new notions are the rationale for a project which is implemented centrally via the tools available primarily to the state and international organizations. The European heritage and the classical idea of Europe are considered selectively, if at all, for the purpose of advancing the project. The project itself is what counts most of all, not the history or reality. The indicated project is designed in opposition to the Greek and Roman heritage, to Christianity (especially Catholicism), and even to the Enlightenment. Nowadays it is called the European Union.

The concept of Europeanism in the cultural sense is crystallized in Greece at the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ. It emerges on the background of the opposition between the Greeks and Asians as well as other peoples, which were referred to as barbarians by

the Greeks. Remarks made by Hippocrates and Aristotle are especially expressive.

Hippocrates (about 400 B.C.) points to the organic and mental differences between the Greeks and Asians which primarily result from the climate. Asians are weak in spirit and lack courage, whereas the Greeks are full of spiritual vitality and courage. Why is it so? Hippocrates believed that it was the effect of the climate: there is one season of the year in Asia, while in Greece, the seasons are varied, and the temperature is variable.¹ Herodotus infers that the monotonous climate and temperature in conditions favourable for humans generates individuals that are passive and lack initiative, whereas changing climate and temperature contribute to increased inventiveness and activeness.

On the other hand, when Aristotle characterized Asians, he insisted that they lack the love of freedom. He admitted that they were creative, however, not very brave, and in consequence easily succumb to despotism. Additionally, while describing the peoples inhabiting northern Europe (i.e., geographic Europeans), Aristotle regarded them as bold but not clever. According to Aristotle, the barbarians are neither smart nor brave. However, the Greeks, Aristotle boasts, possess both the aforementioned qualities to the highest degree.²

A more detailed description of Greek culture, as distinct from other peoples' cultures, can be found in the famous funeral oration of Pericles (499–429 B.C.), which was delivered in honour of soldiers killed in the First Peloponnesian War. It is worth quoting:

Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighbouring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favours the many instead of the few; this is why it

¹ Hippocrates, *Influences of Atmosphere, Water and Situation*, trans. A. J. Toynbee, in *Greek Historical Thought from Homer to the Age of Heraclius* (Boston 1950), 165. *The History of the Idea of Europe*, 16.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 1.

is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if no social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbour for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no positive penalty. But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens. Against this fear is our chief safeguard, teaching us to obey the magistrates and the laws, particularly such as regard the protection of the injured, whether they are actually on the statute book, or belong to that code which, although unwritten, yet cannot be broken without acknowledged disgrace.³

Pericles presents the type of culture developed by the Greeks. It is focused on the individual and his fundamental rights as a life in a community organized into a state. Moreover, the individual is protected by divine law, which is above state law. The individual has the right to liberty, to develop one's talents, to protect ones privacy, to live according to his own preferences, in personal relationships to justice, understanding, and kindness. At the same time, the individual feels responsible for the country, is obliged to obey the legal authority, and loves the fatherland, which can be served by all citizens, not just the privileged or "chosen ones." In other words, patriotism is a virtue for every citizen.

This characteristic manifesto showing what it means to be a Greek emerged not in a clash with Persia, but with Sparta, and this is

³ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. R. Crawley, Book II, 37–38 (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm#link2H_4_0007, accessed on March 20, 2016).

because Sparta created statehood, which today is called totalitarianism (as opposed to despotism characteristic of the Persian state).⁴ The Spartan *statolatry* subjugated all people to the state, leaving no room for the rights of the individual or for private life. Meanwhile, the value of the individual was discovered in Athens. The Greeks considered it an achievement of their culture, as something unique, and as something that has endured as a characteristic feature of European and Western culture. Because of this, the heritage of Athens, with its culture of written literacy, even after nearly two-and-a-half-thousand years, is embraced by Western man as his distinctive worldview, while Sparta located next to Athens (and in Europe!) represents a completely different spirit.

On account of multiple confrontations with the Persians, the Greeks could observe what the spirit of Asia, the spirit of the Orient, consists in, how it differs significantly from the Greek ideals. Aeschylus, who fought in two wars, first in the battle of Marathon, later in the battle of Salamis, gave it artistic expression. In his play, *The Persians*, Aeschylus presents the enemies of Greece as people who above all value luxury, unbridled sensuality, insatiable cruelty, and pride.⁵

Having said this, the aforementioned authors, such as Hippocrates, Aristotle and Pericles, who clearly notice the peculiarity of Greek culture, do not identify Greece with Europe or the Greeks with the Europeans. Such identification occurred only in times difficult for Athens, when the voice of the rhetoricians rose up. Their presence and

⁴ However, the difference between totalitarianism, despotism and tyranny should be kept in mind. Totalitarianism is a modern form of statolatry, i.e., such a form of organisation of the state in which the state is the ultimate aim. Tyranny is the reign of an entity, which has absolute power, but it is transferred by the people. Despotism is also the reign of an individual, but the source of this power has a religious character, and it involves the theological identification of the ruler with a deity. In the latter case, the prototype of despotism can be found not in Persia, but in ancient Egypt. In connection with the latter problem, see R. N. Frye, *La herencia de Persia* (Madrid 1965), 127.

⁵ M. García Sánchez, *El gran rey de Persia. Formas de representación de la alteridad persa en el imaginario griego* (Barcelona 2009), 42–43.

opinions were crucial for democracy. Perhaps surprisingly, they were the first to identify Greek values with Europeanism, in self-conscious opposition to what they regarded as Asian values.

Isocrates (436–338 B.C.) and Lysias (450–378 B.C.) move to the foreground among the major speakers. Inasmuch as in the texts of other authors the word “Europe” appears as a mythological name or as the name of the continent (Hesiod, Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Euripides, Ksenfont), it is Isocrates and Lysias who ascribe a crucial meaning to Europe in terms of civilization. The Europe they speak of is Greece itself.

Isocrates believed that the key point in the history of Greece was the Trojan War, as it unveiled the differences which separated Europe from Asia. The Trojans represented Asia whereas the Greeks represented Europe.⁶ The famous rhetorician explained:

Apart from art, philosophy and other benefits attributed to her [Helen] and the Trojan War, we should be excused for admitting that we owe it to Helen that we are not slaves to barbarians. We will see that she should be given credit for the unification of the Greeks in a harmonious accord and for the fact that they organized a joint expedition against the barbarians, and it was then that Europe raised the banner of victory over Asia for the first time . . .⁷

Isocrates treats the act of kidnapping Helen as a peculiar “blessed guilt,” due to which admittedly Greece had to face a more powerful Persia. However, as a result of their victory, the Greeks better realized who they were and why, being culturally superior to Persia, they could define themselves as Europe.

Isocrates claimed that it was necessary to Hellenize geographical Europe (the ambition of panhellenism). Therefore, he critically looked

⁶ Isocrates, *Helen*, 51, in *Isocrates*, ed. G. Norlin (London 1991), Vol. 3, 97. This speech was written in 370 B.C.

⁷ *Id.*, 67, in *Isocrates*, 97.

at the conflict between Athens and Macedonia, claiming that an agreement was required to facilitate the Hellenization of the barbarian, the unHellenized peoples of Europe, so to speak. He addressed King Philip of Macedonia (346 B.C.) with such a message.⁸ He grumbled that “Asia is more flourishing than Europe, and the barbarians enjoy greater affluence than the Greeks.”⁹ While speaking of Asia, he meant Persia, and while talking about Europe, he referred to Greece.

Isocrates stressed that Europe-Greece should be judged by its high culture and not its wealth. Persia was very rich, but it still remained barbaric. For generations, the Greeks and Persians waged a life-or-death struggle for dominion of Europe. In a way, their conflict echoed the earlier struggle for Greece between the Amazons and the Thracians.¹⁰

In the opinion of Isocrates the essence of Europe is Hellenism which aims to be universal. In this respect, it is based not on ethnicity but on the cultural assimilation. In one of his speeches, Isocrates explains:

Moreover, philosophy, which facilitated the discovery and the establishment of so many institutions, which educated us to deal with public matters and taught us how to relate to one another in a gentle manner, which helped us distinguish between the misery resulting from ignorance and the one that was necessary and

⁸ Isocrates, *To Philip*, 152, in *Isocrates*, Vol. 1, 337.

⁹ *Id.*, 132, in *Isocrates*, 325.

¹⁰ Isocrates, *Panegyricus*, 68–71, in *Isocrates*, 159–161. Isocrates states, by referring partly to the history and partly to the mythology, that when ancient Greece in ancient times was still weak, its territories were invaded by Thrace, led by Eumolpus, son of Poseidon, and also by the Scythians, led by Amazons, daughters of Ares. The invaders tried to extend their reign over Europe. Isocrates underlines that they hated the whole Hellenic race (ton Hellenongenos), especially the Athenians. According to Isocrates they thought that if they conquer one country, it will be easy to expand the reign over other Hellenic countries. But they did not succeed. In addition, Isocrates indicates that the invaders were punished: none of the Amazons returned home and those who stayed in their homes lost their power because of disasters; Thracians moved significantly to the north and their country did not border with the Greek countries any more.

which taught us how to protect ourselves against the first type of misery and bravely endure the second one. Philosophy, I say, was given to the world through our city. It was Athens that honoured the art of speech, which all men desire and envy its holders; as it let people realize that this was the only emolument of our nature which distinguishes us from all the living creatures and by making use of the advantage we became superior to them in all respects; philosophy has proved that in other activities fortune can be so capricious that frequently a clever one falls and the stupid one is successful, whereas the beautiful and artistic speech never involves crude men but it is the work of an intelligent mind, and in this respect the contrast between the wise and the ignorant is best seen; it also revealed that the free education of man since early childhood depends neither on courage nor on wealth or other benefits of that type but it is most visibly seen in speech, which is the most certain sign of culture in all of us, and those who are the highly skilled speakers are not only the people of power in their own cities, but are also honoured in other cities. Our city, however, has distanced the rest of mankind so much in thought and word that its students became the teachers of the rest of the world; consequently, the name “Hellen” is used with reference to those who are part of common culture rather than origin.¹¹

So Isocrates draws attention to the universality of Greek culture on grounds that it has discovered the qualities which make a human being human: a mind that communicates by means of the word. However, the mind and the word need to be developed and educated through philosophy and rhetoric, special achievements of the Greeks. Since the indicated culture has a universal dimension, and Hellenism is not determined purely biologically (by, say, racism or nationalism), Athens must remain open to all who wish to acquire its culture. The dream of Isocrates came true. Even though the empires changed and Greece lost its independence quickly, Athens remained the capital of world culture.

¹¹ Id., 47–50, in *Isocrates*, 146–149.

Lysias, the second of the aforementioned orators, understands Europeanism similarly to Isocrates; however, he introduces a new idea: freedom. In his funeral oration, honoring the soldiers killed in the Corinthian war, Lysias uses the name “Europe” four times, evoking memories of the heroic Greeks who faced up to the Persians.

For indeed, being of noble stock and having minds as noble, the ancestors of those who lie here achieved many noble and admirable things; but ever memorable and mighty are the trophies that their descendants have everywhere left behind them owing to their valor. For they alone risked their all in defending the whole of Greece against many myriads of the barbarians. For the King of Asia, not content with the wealth that he had already, but hoping to enslave Europe [EUROPEN DOULOSESTHAI] as well, dispatched an army of five hundred thousand. These, supposing that, if they obtained the willing friendship of this city or overwhelmed its resistance, they would easily dominate the rest of the Greeks . . .¹²

The speech presents the Greeks as people of manifold nobility, capable of performing beautiful deeds, who are courageous and are not afraid of the overwhelming superiority of the enemy. Moreover, they realize that their fight will determine who will control not only Greece but the whole of Europe as well. Should Greece lose, the consequence would be enslavement, nothing less than taking freedom and independence away from the countries and nations of Europe. At this point, the clash between Greece and Persia means the struggle for the very survival of European freedom.

The latter topic appears additionally in connection with the victorious Battle of Plataea (479 B.C.). Lysias stressed: “On that day they brought the ventures of the past to a most glorious consummation; for not only did they secure a permanence of freedom for Europe

¹² *Lysias*, with an English translation by W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1930), 20–21.

[ELEUTHERIAN TEI EUROPEI].”¹³ It is noteworthy that Isocrates puts emphasis on culture, while Lysias focuses on freedom.¹⁴

Culture and freedom constitute two arms of European identity, noticed by both eminent Greeks, who as rhetors and teachers of speech exerted impact on the elite of their country.

Special importance was attached to the school founded by Isocrates in which a programme of education included so-called general education. The value of such education Latin writers later would express by the term *artes liberales*, on grounds that such education makes men free. This programme was assimilated in all places where Greek cultural ideals were appreciated. In Europe alone it lasted until the second half of the nineteenth century. The canon of classical subjects, such as Greek, Latin, Philosophy, Rhetoric was compulsory in classical gymnasiums in the Interwar period (also in Poland), and today they are present where such gymnasiums still operate, e.g., in Germany.¹⁵

The first concept of Europe bears very clear signs of Greek culture and is of Greek authorship. The concept may be seen by paying attention to other aspects of Greek culture, which turn out to be influential and not necessarily related to Europe in the geographic sense.

¹³ Id., 47.

¹⁴ This love of freedom manifested itself in very specific situations which sometimes required a lot of courage. In the case of the Greek the mentality of a free man emerged and it did not waver even in the face of death, which is not characteristic of subjects in a despotic system. It is suggestively expressed by a Roman historian who cites the conversation of the kind of the Persians, Darius, with a Greek, Charidemus, and writes that the advice of the Greek angered the king so much that he ordered his execution. Then “The Greek, not even then forgetful of his free birth, said: ‘I have at hand an avenger of my death; that very man against whom I have warned You will exact punishment for the scorning of my advice’. Charidemus joined the side of Darius but until the end retained the characteristics of a free man and at that time only a Greek was capable of it.” Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, trans. John C. Rolfe (London 1971), III, ii, 18.

¹⁵ In Bavaria there are about 59 gymnasiums of the classical profile. One of them is Maximiliansgymnasium: <http://www.maxgym.musin.de/wordpress3/humanistisches-gymnasium-warum/>, accessed on March 19, 2016.

**WHAT IS EUROPE?
THE GREEK BEGINNINGS****SUMMARY**

The article begins with the statement that there are three concepts of Europe historically significant. The first concept of Europe looms out in the context of the clash between the ancient Greeks and the Persians, the second one is induced by Christianity and Islam meeting head-on whereas the third concept results from the European civilization confronting the cultures of the newly discovered peoples inhabiting other continents. It is just in the context of the indicated clashes that the concept of Europe is shaped as a phenomenon diversified not only geographically but also in terms of civilization as regards other cultures or civilizations. The article then concerns with the concept of Europeanism which in the cultural sense was crystallized in Greece at the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ. It emerged on the background of the opposition between the Greeks and Asians as well as other peoples, which were referred to as barbarians by the Greeks. The article concludes that it was culture and freedom which constituted two arms of Europeanness shaped by the ancient Greeks.

KEYWORDS: Europe, Greece, Persia, culture, civilization, freedom, barbarian.