





# Identikit Europe

**A state of mind?  
A place?  
A people?  
Who is Europe?**

*Paris, France: life on the Euro-go-round.  
Credit: © Richard Kalvar / Magnum*

**NORMAN STONE**

# **Eurokid and Colonel Blimp**

**National identity goes far deeper than a European one and, if we want to avoid a nationalist backlash as in Austria, it would be better for us to live with that reality**

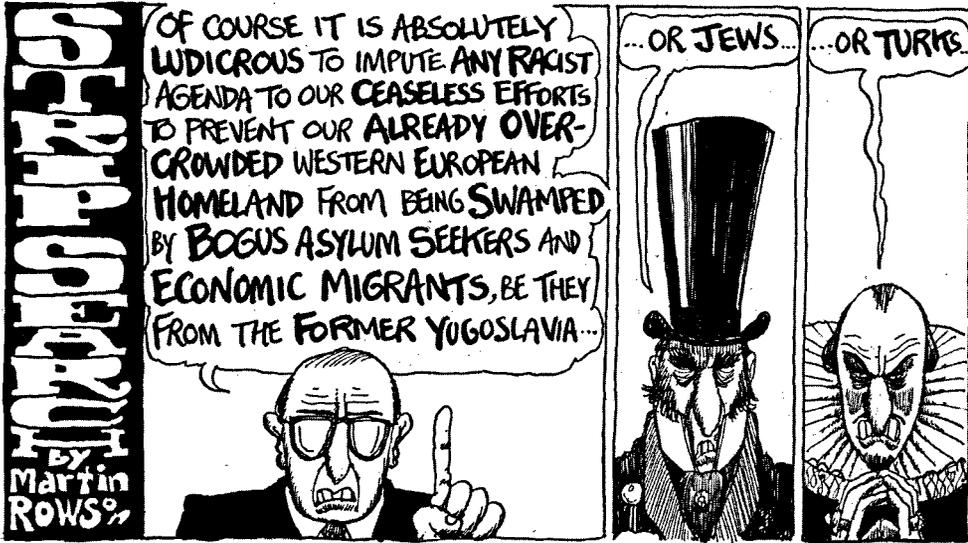
When Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945, Berlin was, famously, an enormous ruin – a moonscape. Within two days, the first underground trains ran again. At the same moment, the buses in victorious London were on strike. It was a parable of the entire post-war era. The low point was reached in the later 1970s when, by most measurements, the British were about half as prosperous as the Germans; even well-intentioned German students spending time in Edinburgh were rather shocked at the level of poverty they experienced.

Wandering around Stirling as the dusk gathered, and shutting your ears to the language, you might have thought you were in some Iron Curtain wasteland – a Kielce in Poland, a Zaporzhiye in Ukraine. The West Germans had also experienced a problem of heavy industrial run-down, in their case in the Ruhr, which had once been the coal and steel powerhouse of the continent. By agreement of all parties concerned – government, unions, bosses – they had seen the problem and headed off its nastiest manifestations. Essen, with new educational institutions, museums, parks and an impressive set of new roads, was a decent place to live, in huge contrast, say, to Sheffield in contemporary England, let alone Liverpool. You went into a pub, and saw there much the same proletarian faces as you did in northern England at the time: tipsy, frizzy-haired women whose faces showed that they had been through the mill. The difference from England was that the faces had hope. Life was not just ghastly concrete estates, ‘benefits’ and vandalism.



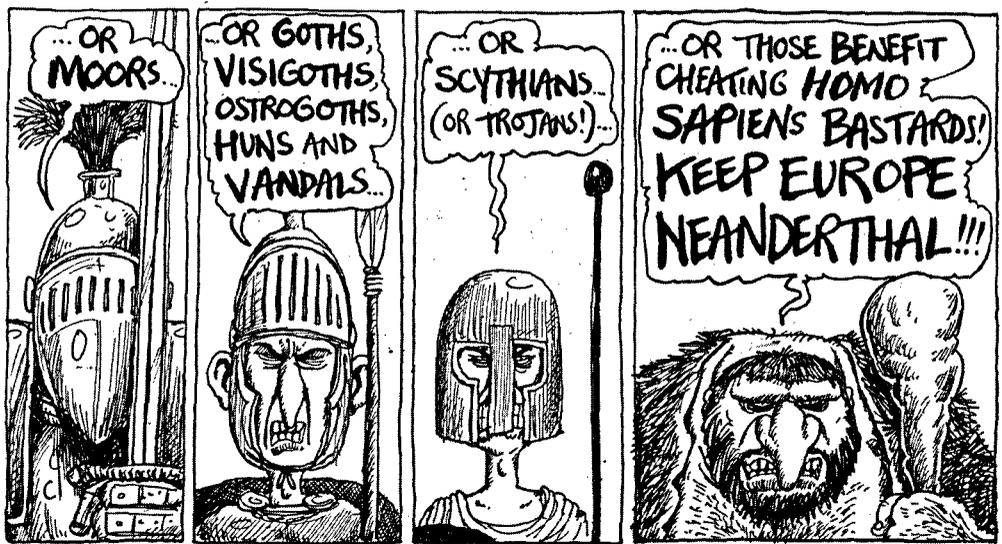
*London 1940s: café society in the ghost of a bar. Credit: © Philip Jones Griffiths / Magnum*

What made for the Germans' post-war recovery? One thing does stand out: Europe. In 1950, the French proposed a Coal and Steel Community, which had the initial advantage that the Ruhr powerhouse would be under international, rather than German, control. A subsidiary advantage was that French steel-makers, who were backward and fearful of competition, could be persuaded, by the nationalist argument, to submit to competition. It did them a world of good – it was in fact a chief factor in the French recovery that followed so spectacularly. For the Germans, the advantage lay in respectability; they could work their passage, through 'Europe', and it also meant a much larger market. To



this day – or at any rate until two or three years ago – Germans were clamantly ‘European’: ‘a European Germany, not a German Europe’, as Chancellor Kohl, quoting Thomas Mann, used to say. Take a critical stance towards the European Union in modern German politics and you get nowhere. It was in vain that the 40 senior economists in the Federal Republic protested against the introduction of a European currency without proper safeguards, just as in 1990 they had protested against the one-for-one exchange of the almost valueless East German mark for the hard-currency West German one. They were waved aside by politicians; and though the German public are largely unenthusiastic, they do not assert their lack of enthusiasm in actual voting power.

Contrast this with England (Scotland is rather different). With large majorities, public opinion goes against European union – it is almost unanimously hostile to a European federal state, three-quarters hostile to a European currency, while widespread resentment against such measures as the conversion of weights and measures into continental equivalents also exists. Foreign languages are a disaster area, far more so than in 1914, when three members of the cabinet that went to war with Germany had studied at the then famous German universities. The tabloids never really miss a chance to mock the French or the Germans;



sometimes, it seems that the only two European peoples for whom the English have any time are the Dutch and the Russians.

Much of this, we might as well concede, is hopelessly irrational. Exposure to continental European competition did the British economy a world of good: if, say, British Steel became a success story, it was because the old problems of overmanning, mistaken investment and lavish subsidy had to be overcome if the industry were not to collapse altogether. The same has been true of inward investment – again, an important cause of the British recovery in the 1980s. We would probably never have changed our ways had it not been for the competition from Europe, or the attractiveness of that vast market. And yet ignorance, or hostility, are the most common English reactions. Why? And is it, in the end, healthy?

Jean Monnet was right when he said that the British would never really see the point of 'Europe' because they had not been invaded, and experienced that humiliation at first hand. But, beyond that, English and continental history took a sharply different turn: institutions that on the continent were fossils were, in England, well and truly alive. Much of what we regard as ineradicably English is in fact pre-Absolutist European. 'The Common Law', for instance, is a version of *ius commune*

(Roman Law), updated as and when necessary, and common to western Europe until Absolutist and Enlightenment rulers started to upset it in the name of rationalism. Ideas such as ‘freehold’ are only barely translatable into continental languages, and people do not know what they signify. Even serfdom was not formally abolished in England until the 1930s, though by then, and for centuries past, it had only involved a particular type of property, by which, say, a retired farm labourer had a cottage in return for mowing a lawn or looking after the dogs. There was no *académie britannique* to standardise spelling; Oxford and Cambridge, with colleges that are essentially medieval, were never centralised and modernised at bayonet point, as happened with Louvain or the Sorbonne.

‘Why?’ is a good question for English historians, and those with a good (or sometimes direct) knowledge of Europe – Frederick Maitland, Lewis Namier and Geoffrey Elton are the most obvious names – each had his answer. Elton, pointing to the Tudor dissolution of the monasteries, is convincing. On the Continent, the church held about one-third of the land, and looked after education and charity. Come the dissolution of the monasteries, England was compelled to find different answers: the Elizabethan Poor Law, ‘public’ schools, colleges in Oxford and Cambridge that were often built out of the proceeds of confiscated monasteries. Absolutism, even the formal Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, did not occur in England because they were unnecessary. What do you make of a country, I often ask my Turkish students, which by 50 years was the first to abolish slavery, and by 80 the last to abolish serfdom?

Insistence on the uniqueness of England is therefore not wrong, and whatever the benefits the country had from joining the European Union in 1972, the popular reaction is more soundly based than is, say, the Europhile presentation of my old friend Norman Davies in his recent book *The Islanders*. He makes the point that, in the Middle Ages, the language of the court was Norman French; he makes the further point that England absorbed the Celtic fringe, Scotland and Wales, whereas these countries, left to themselves, could easily have found some European identity. It is a discussion point, and Scotland, poorer than England, was indeed compelled to use the machinery of the state for enlightened purposes because there was not, as in England, a rich aristocracy or a City to produce the schools and the canals and the

roads and the agricultural improvements on their own. *Am Anfang war Napoleon* – ‘in the beginning was Napoleon’ – is the start of a famous multi-volume history of modern Germany by Thomas Nipperday. You could, maybe, use it also to start a multi-volume history of modern Europe, and it would even, quite neatly, define today’s Europe, in the sense that it follows quite closely the boundaries of the countries that accepted Napoleon’s Continental System in 1808. But it would not fit the British Isles at all, except maybe for a few Irish rebels and the shadowy Jacobite claimant, a cardinal living in Rome.

It is, no doubt, ungrateful of the British not to recognise what Europe has done for them, and it is carping of them to point to this or that defect in the European machine (all that money stolen). It is, no doubt, ungenerous of them to say that the European army would just be ‘camping with attitude’. But there it is: I doubt if the British are going to be changed very much by preaching. And, in the end, it is healthier that they should remain, as a mass, fairly sceptical about the whole venture.

The real danger with Europe is surely that it will be unable to stop itself from trying to do too much. That is, in a way, the great danger with hurriedly built unities of this sort. When Italy was created, in 1860–61, there were, by universal confession, few true Italians. Francesco Crispi, an imperialist-minded prime minister in the 1890s, said that he would make Italy run (with an empire) so that she would at least learn to walk (with a state). Of post-Bismarckian Germany you might say the same; and in both cases the results were a disaster for the twentieth century. Nowadays, we have a Europe that is indeed, whatever spokesmen say, an attempted state-identity: an army, a foreign policy, a parliament, an anthem, a passport, a currency and even a unified tax scheme. The danger of a nationalist backlash is palpable – hence the absurd overreaction to the Austrians’ promotion of Jörg Haider in an obviously impeccable democratic process. The problem is that national identity goes far, far deeper than a European one, and it would be better for us to live with that reality. As John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) wrote, seeing the disarray of the left-wing intelligentsia in the *New Statesman*, ‘three cheers for Colonel Blimp’. We might yet need him. □

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