

Europe has an Identity Crisis.
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There is an old Persian tale about a man who went up to a palace gate, banging on it and demanding entrance. The guard asked what he wanted. "I want to stay at this inn!" he said. "This is not an Inn," said the guard. "It is a palace of the Shah."

"Who lived there before him?" asked the man. "His father," said the guard. "And before that?" "His grandfather and great-grandfather."

"This sounds like an inn to me! People coming and going."

Europe is an inn too—with illusions about whom they really are. Today, the countries of Europe pretend that they can become like the United States—a single entity with a central government and currency. Alas, they cannot do this because their identity is not unified, but is made up of very separate countries with histories that show layers of people who came and went.

Geography. One reason for Europe's vitality since the 10th century has to do with where it is: a great peninsula at the far end of Eurasia, divided by networks of rivers (good for trade) and mountains into small principalities. Between the unifications under Rome and until the Renaissance, there were no dominant nation-states at all. France became France by crushing all the independent dukedoms and forcing them into a central government under one king. England did the same, suppressing the Scots, Welch, and Irish—and then bringing large parts of the world into their empire. Germany and Italy came very late into nationhood, and have not always managed to keep their unity under the duress of their fascist dictatorships.

However confusing and contentious this history, having multiple power centers is sometimes a good thing. Columbus couldn't get funded for his voyage to the New World in his native Italy, but did in the newly unified Spain, after they expelled the Muslims. Another explorer in China at the same time was not as lucky. One Emperor financed his voyages, but his successor had the fleet scuttled and its records burned. One power center is not always good.

Ethnicities. Frenchmen think they have always been French, Spaniards have the same illusion, and so does Portugal, where I recently visited in a cruise of coastal Europe. Just taking the Portuguese alone, let us see which aggressive "tourists" occupied that land from its beginning.

The Neanderthals were there (in what later became France, Spain, and Italy); next came the Cro Magnons, who painted extraordinary art in caves; then thousands of years later, the movement of the Indo-European tribes throughout northern India, Persia, and all of Europe; and along the Mediterranean, the Phoenicians, who founded most of the port cities, including Lisbon; then came Romans, then Muslims from North Africa, and finally the mix of blood we now see in Portugal (including Black Africans—both from their colonial period and from the desperate immigrants today). Portugal is an inn of shifting (and violent) guests.

In Spain, I visited the region now inhabited by Basques—who were there before the Indo-Europeans arrived—and still speak a language with no known connections to any other in the world. (Perhaps they were Cro Magnons.) They were driven by the aggressive Indo-Europeans to the fringes of Europe—but are now asserting themselves.

Sailing up to France, past Brittany and going through Normandy, one could see other movements of people. The Bretons were a group of Celts driven out of England as the Anglo-Saxon tribes moved in and they live now in France—not altogether happily. Normans started out as very violent Viking pirates who were pacified by giving them land and French wives, who tamed them nicely. Now they grow apples.

The whole point of this tour through history is to show us that Europe is an old hotel through which successive waves of peoples moved—sometimes into empty land, but more often with violence. They have finally come to think of themselves as having national identities—but are not yet ready to be a United States of Europe.

668 words

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