

# Is Britain European?

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To ask 'Is Britain European?' is to inquire into the identity of our quite peculiar state. Nowadays it has become rather fashionable to classify states by region, by culture or by what Samuel Huntington calls 'civilization'. Curiously, Europe is not one of Huntington's civilizations. Europe, for him, is subsumed in Western civilization. Indeed, in a map in his *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* he draws a thick line through the eastern half of Europe.<sup>1</sup> Here, he says, Western civilization ends. The Huntington Line was originally drawn by the cartographers of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. It was then a very modest dotted line in a publication by William Wallace, showing the dividing line between western and eastern Christianity.<sup>2</sup> But in Huntington this has become the end of contemporary Western civilization, and woe betide you if you are the wrong side of it—as, for example, Greece is. To address that little problem, Huntington says that Greece may have been the home of classical civilization, but it is not part of Western civilization.<sup>3</sup> So much for Greece.

Identities, as this example illustrates, are a tricky business—and so are Identity Studies. It seems to me that the central point about identities—regional, cultural or national—is that they are voluntary but not arbitrary. For example, when the Serbs still ruled Kosovo, they kept saying that they had to talk to all the people who lived there; not just to the Albanians, but to the local Serbs, to the Vlachs, to the Macedonians and to the Egyptians. We must, they said, consult the Egyptians, and many of us wondered who these 'Egyptians' were. Now the 'Egyptians' of Kosovo are in fact what used to be called gypsies or Roma.<sup>4</sup> When the former Yugoslavia began to collapse they decided they were not

This article is based on the Martin Wight Memorial Lecture delivered at the Royal Institute of International Affairs on 2 November 2000.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (London: Touchstone Books, 1998), p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> William Wallace, *The transformation of western Europe* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1990), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Huntington, *Clash*, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> See Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 132ff.

gypsies or Roma, but Egyptians (as gypsies/Roma had sometimes been called, or described themselves, in the middle ages). This was their new identity, and they wrote a letter to their fellow Egyptian Boutros Boutros-Ghali, wishing him well in his efforts to keep peace in Yugoslavia. But they are not Egyptians, or I'm a Dutchman. This identity is arbitrary.

A more serious and substantial example comes from Australia. Australia in the 1970s decided, or at least, some of its leaders decided, that it was actually in Asia. This was slightly disconcerting to those of us brought up on conventional geography textbooks—six continents seemed to have become five—but one could see the point. Then Labour governments in Australia went further and said that not only was Australia in Asia, it was an Asian country. More questionable, but still possible. Then Prime Minister Paul Keating went further still and said that the most characteristic Australian value of 'mateship' might indeed be understood as an Asian value.<sup>5</sup> For some of us, it is quite satisfying to see that *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea of Asian values. But no, Australian 'mateship' is not an Asian value.

So identities are voluntary but they are not arbitrary. They are a mixture of the subjective and the objective, and that is one reason why Identity Studies have no clear methodology or criteria. Take this question: 'Is Britain European?' What does it mean? Does it refer to what we think we are? But then, which 'we' are we talking about? Are we talking about the elites or about the wider public? And how should we measure it? By personal impressions and anecdote? By quotation? By the kind of semantic detective work which in German scholarship is known as *Begriffsgeschichte*? By public opinion poll? Should we turn to supposedly objective facts—about lifestyles, travel preferences, trade, investment, government and legislation? Or to history, which is itself always a blend of the objective and the subjective?

Identity is mainly self-identification. But we also have to take account of what others think. For example, what if we think we are European, but everyone else in Europe thinks we aren't? Or what if we think we're not European, but the Japanese and the Chinese and the Americans think we are? (I recall sitting at a dinner table on my first visit to Washington 20 years ago, and hearing people start to complain about the 'Europeans'. Soft on Brezhnev, and so on. I heartily agreed. Then I suddenly realized they were talking about us. For them, we were 'the Europeans' too.) In his account of the Kosovo war, Madeleine Albright's former spokesman James Rubin talks about the US Secretary of State coming to a decision on a strategy and then setting off to 'work the Europeans'—or, as he says in private conversation, to 'work the euros'.<sup>6</sup> And 'the euros' definitely includes us, as well as the French and Germans. An American who knows us well, the former US ambassador to Britain Raymond Seitz, takes a slightly different view. He finds from his experience that Britain is 'absorbed by

<sup>5</sup> See Stuart Macintyre, *A concise history of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 253.

<sup>6</sup> James P. Rubin, *Financial Times*, 30 Sept.–1 Oct. 2000, Weekend section.

the business of trying to be European' (the reference is surely to people in government rather than the press). However, four pages later he offers his own conclusion that 'the British are not, at heart, European.'<sup>7</sup> Again, what does that mean?

Identity Studies are an elusive business at the best of times. The question, 'Is Britain European?' makes things even more difficult. It looks like a simple question but, on closer examination, only one of the three words has any certain meaning. This is the verb 'is'—and even that often carries a fair amount of 'was' and not a little of 'should be'. The noun and the adjective are both of quite uncertain meaning.

What is this 'Britain'? In the last ten years there has been a massive, almost German-style debate about British identity. What is Britain? 'When was Britain?', as Neal Ascherson has memorably written. Does Britain still exist? Will Britain survive? Britain has been declared 'dead' by Andrew Marr and 'abolished' by Peter Hitchens.<sup>8</sup> For decades people have thought of Britain as a classic nation-state. Now Norman Davies tells us that Britain was never a nation-state,<sup>9</sup> and Andrew Barnett tells us that Britain was never a nation, though England was.<sup>10</sup> But Roger Scruton, in his extraordinary recent book on England, tells us that England—which he says is also dead—was not a nation either, just a country, a land, home.<sup>11</sup> One almost begins to long for the pellucid simplicities of the German debate about identity, with its simple distinctions between *Staatsvolk* and *Kulturvolk*, and so on.

More prosaically, an answer to the question 'Is Britain European?' may clearly be very different if given in what are now sometimes curiously called 'the devolved territories', in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, from an answer given in England. Indeed, Anthony Barnett suggests in his book *This Time* that British opposition to Europe is really English opposition to Europe.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the question 'Will Britain exist in ten or twenty years' time?' is closely linked to my question, but the responses to it are quite contradictory. For some the answer is: 'Yes, there will be a Britain, but only if Britain becomes more European.' Only in a larger European framework can a stable new settlement among the constituent nations of these islands be found. Others take quite the opposite view. Their answer is: 'Yes, Britain will survive, but only if Britain is not more European.' For them, to go further into that framework is the end of Britain, because to be British means by definition to be independent and self-governing. But perhaps what they really mean, and what some would clearly say, is not 'Britain' but 'England'. 'One more step,' writes Roger Scruton, 'and England will become in law what it already is in fact—a secular republic,

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Seitz, *Over here* (London: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 304, 308.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Marr, *The day Britain died* (London: Profile Books, 2000); Peter Hitchens, *The abolition of Britain* (London: Quartet, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Norman Davies, *The Isles: a history* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 1039.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Barnett, *This time* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 299.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Scruton, *England: an elegy* (London: Chatto & Windus).

<sup>12</sup> Barnett, *This time*, p. 292.

governed by conspiratorial elites, most of them resident elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> So for some, Britain can only be saved if we have more Europe; for others, England can only be saved if we have less Europe.

For both, though, the question is clearly central. Anthony Barnett has suggested that the most important question for British identity is 'Does the country wish to be European?' Hugo Young, in his well-known book *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 once again, what does that actually mean? If the noun 'Britain' is elusive and multilayered, the adjective 'European' is even more so—in all European languages, but perhaps particularly in English.

One can with little difficulty identify six possible meanings of European which are relevant. My first two are in some sense archaic and buried, but nonetheless significant. The first is: to be European means to be white. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, under meaning 1a, explains that in India 'European, not English or British, was the official designation applied to the troops sent from the United Kingdom'—and hence by extension to the British altogether. One is tempted to say, half in jest, that the only place where the British really thought of themselves as European was in India. A curiosity perhaps, but with a possible contemporary significance. It is surely right to ask whether this word 'European' still has connotations of whiteness. One hopes not, of course; but it's reasonable to ask whether it may not be slightly more difficult for, say, an Asian or Afro-Caribbean Briton to identify with a notion of British 'Europeanness' than it is for a Croatian German or an Albanian Italian.

The second, archaic, half-buried but still significant meaning is: to be European means to be Christian; or at least formally or formerly Christian, ex- or post-Christian as it were. This is, of course, the original meaning of 'European'. One of the first mentions of the word 'Europeans' is in the context of the Crusades. 'Europe' emerged into regular usage as a term for what had previously been called 'Christendom'.

Then there are three interlocking meanings which are more familiar. The first is a purely geographical one: 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 definition leaves Ireland.) This is a familiar usage. We not only talk of 'the continent'. We also say 'Jim's off to Europe' or 'Fred's back from Europe'. Europe is somewhere else. Thirdly, Europe means the EU.

In contemporary British usage these three meanings are very often elided but, certainly in political debate, the third meaning is predominant. Referring to a British presidency of the EU, Hugo Young writes that Prime Minister Blair

<sup>13</sup> Scruton, *England*, p. 198.

was ‘at the time the chairman of what we mean by “Europe”’.<sup>14</sup> If Young’s ‘we’ is translated as ‘the British’ then he is broadly right, for that is what most Britons do mean by Europe. Correspondingly, the primary meaning of ‘European’ in contemporary British political usage is ‘supporter of the project of the European Union’—as in ‘committed European’, ‘dedicated European’. Taken in this sense, the question ‘Is Britain European?’ comes down to asking: Is Britain fully participating in the EU, and supporting some version of what people in continental Europe would recognize as the European project?

Yet there is, finally, a sixth sense of Europe, more exalted and mysterious. This sixth sense is well captured in a recent headline in the *International Herald Tribune*: ‘End sanctions on “European” Austria, panel advises the EU’.<sup>15</sup> A panel of three ‘wise men’ had just concluded after long deliberation that Austria was European. Put thus, the statement can sound ridiculous. To say that Austria is European is rather like saying the sea is wet. What else did they think Austria was? African? But of course 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 memorably called ‘l’Europe européenne’;<sup>16</sup> a Europe 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? One could, I suppose, go down the list of European values and put a tick or a cross or a question mark against each entry. But to do that is meaningful only if we think it matters to ask the question in this idealistic way. And when I say idealistic, I use the term in the philosophical as well as the political sense.

Having clambered, if only briefly, to these continental heights of idealism, political and philosophical, let me come back to earth. 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 in fact more different from continental European countries than they are from each other? In what respect is Britain in fact more like other countries—for example the United States, Canada or Australia—than it is like those European ones? In mathematician’s terms, which ‘set’ are we in? Here again that reassuring British ‘in fact’ soon dissolves in a treacherous mixture of subjective and objective, of reality and perception.

The first answer conventionally given is ‘history’. Our history makes us different from Europe. What is this ‘history’? It is a story: a story of British—or is it English?—exceptionalism. A story of separateness, starting with the geographical separation of the offshore island from the mainland, but then, following the end of the Hundred Years War, of political separation. G. M. Trevelyan in

<sup>14</sup> Young, *Blessed plot*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 9–10 Sept. 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Mark Mazower, *Dark continent: Europe’s twentieth century* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 403.

his *English social history* says that Britain thereafter became 'a strange island, anchored off the continent'.<sup>17</sup> It is, above all, a story of continuity, by contrast with the fickle mutability of the continent, with its constantly changing regimes and borders and monarchs and constitutions; a 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 'thousand years of history' that Hugh Gaitskell saw about to be ended if Britain joined France and Germany in a continental European community. The story was told and retold in purple prose by G. M. Trevelyan, Arthur Bryant, Winston Churchill and H. A. L. 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 probably grew up. Partly this is because of what one might call textbook lag. The original historiography itself inevitably comes after the events, and tries to explain them or rationalize them. But textbooks, schoolbooks and children's books are usually a further 20, 20 or even 30 years behind. This means that the exceptionalist vision, though late Victorian in origin, was hugely influential right into our time.

One finds traces of this self-image in the most unlikely places. I found one even in an otherwise remarkable speech delivered in Warsaw in October 2000 by the Prime Minister. In the midst of a very clear-eyed passage about Britain and Europe, Tony Blair suddenly describes Britain as 'a proud and independent-minded island race (though with much European blood flowing in our veins)'.<sup>18</sup> Arthur Bryant, thou shouldst be living at this hour! Then there are copious numbers of much more demotic examples. In a reader's letter in the *Daily Mail* in January 1997, we read as follows: 'We appear to be one tick of the clock away from losing our sovereignty, our independence, and not just 1000 years of history, but history from when the first man sought to protect this country from an invader.'<sup>19</sup> And, since I earlier mentioned the possible difficulties for an Asian Briton of identifying with a European Britain, let us listen to Tom Patel, 20-something, gay, just back from his holidays 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.'<sup>20</sup> Thus Tom Patel.

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

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in P. H. M. Bell, 'Eminent historians: Trevelyan, Fisher, Bryant and British attitudes to Europe', typescript conference paper.

<sup>18</sup> The speech is reprinted in Mark Leonard, ed., *The future shape of Europe* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Edwin Jones, *The English nation: the great myth* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), p. 320, from *Daily Mail*, 3 Jan. 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *Who do we think we are? Imagining the New Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 116.

exceptionalism? Actually, if you look at the historiography of any other nation in Europe, you realize that exceptionalism is the norm. Every national historiography is about what is distinctive or peculiar about that particular nation, and most of them contrast what is distinctive or peculiar in their own national history with some slightly idealized ‘Western’ or ‘European’ normality—for which the examples given are normally France and Britain. Britain serves as the model of a ‘normal’ nation-state. Look at the literature on Germany’s so-called special way, the *Sonderweg*. It is all about the question of 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 to. If you compare Britain just with the original six members of the EEC, countries sharing a large body of Roman and Holy Roman—i.e. Carolingian—heritage, Britain does indeed look exceptional. But if you now compare it with the 15 current member states of the EU, or the 20 that will soon be members, or the 30 that may be members in 10–15 years’ time, then Britain hardly looks exceptional at all, because the histories of these countries are themselves unbelievably diverse.

Furthermore, in the past 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 consisted not in discovering anything new about the past, but simply in effecting a double shift of focus. First, it has changed the focus to look at the whole history of the British Isles—or what Norman Davies calls simply ‘the Isles’—as, in Hugh Kearney’s phrase, a ‘history of four nations’.<sup>21</sup> Second, it has looked at our national history in the larger European framework. The work of Jeremy Black has been particularly helpful in making systematic comparisons with continental European experiences.<sup>22</sup> Things look very different, simply put in that different context. 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 actually far less continuity—continuity, that central notion of British exceptionalism—than the grand narrative suggested, especially if you look at the history of Wales, Scotland or Ireland. In *The Isles*, Norman Davies offers a list of the 16 different states there have been in the history of these islands, ten or so in the last 500 years.<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Black observes very pertinently that the British have ‘a genius for the appearance of continuity’.<sup>24</sup> Ferdinand Mount, in his marvellous book on the British constitution, calls this ‘the continuity myth’.<sup>25</sup> We are the people

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: a history of four nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Black, *Convergence or divergence? Britain and the continent* (London: Macmillan, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Davies, *The Isles*, pp. xl–xli.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremy Black, *A history of the British Isles* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 325.

<sup>25</sup> Ferdinand Mount, *The British constitution now: recovery or decline?* (London: Mandarin, 1993).

who invented ‘The Invention of Tradition’—not just the book but the thing.<sup>26</sup> Peter Scott has rightly observed that ‘Britain is an invented nation, not so much older than the United States.’<sup>27</sup> This is history for our time: though also written with a time-lag. It starts a generation later from a changed reality—some 20 years after Britain went into the EEC—and then tries both to explain that changed reality and to shape or reinforce it with a new consciousness.

For all this comparative deconstruction, there is no question that Britain in 1939 was still an exceptionally exceptional place. That exceptionalism is memorably and movingly evoked by George Orwell on the last page of *Homage to Catalonia*, when he returns from the Spanish Civil War and travels by train through southern England, back to London, 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 says England—‘from which I sometimes fear we will never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs’.

That was a reality, and the question then becomes: What has changed over the 60 years since 1939? Is the kind of exceptionalist, insular consciousness that I have illustrated here with a few quotations, and that is familiar to all of us, really a sort of ‘false consciousness’, quite at odds with the reality?

There is a new story we are now told, a companion to the deconstruction or reconstruction of our national history. This is that what has happened over these 60 years is that Britain has become much more European, and, correspondingly, both less insular and less transatlantic and post-imperial. Yet only half this story seems to me evidently true. Yes, Britain has obviously 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? Or has it, in some respects, become even stronger?

To use—just once—a horrible neologism, we have seen the de-insularization of Britain. But it is not clear whether what has come in its place is Europeanization, or Americanization, or just globalization. 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 on to 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 cooperation with partners in the EU seeks its parallel anywhere else. On the other hand, if you look at policy content, and ask what is the largest single foreign inspiration for British policy over the past 20

<sup>26</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 372.

years, the answer has to be the United States. This is something that the Thatcher and the Blair governments have in common: a fascination with American policy and American solutions.

Yes, in defence policy, we have, after an interval of nearly four centuries since the loss of Calais in 1558, again made what 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 organization. The planned European Rapid Reaction Force will change that, if at all, only slowly. Yes, in foreign policy, we have very close cooperation with European partners. But look at the biggest European foreign policy challenge of the last ten years: the Balkans. 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 United States, 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 go? The United States.

What about our version of our capitalism? In his book *Capitalism against capitalism*, the French author Michel Albert identifies us very clearly as part of an Anglo-American model of capitalism, as opposed to a Rhine-Alpine model of capitalism.<sup>28</sup> Will Hutton, in *The state we're in*, puts us somewhere in between.<sup>29</sup> Yes, most of our trade is with the European Union; but the largest single part of our investment is in the United States or from the United States. What about society? The 2000 edition of the statistical compendium *Social trends* has a very interesting preface by A. H. 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.'<sup>30</sup> Halsey rightly comments that it would not be true today. But, looking at the whole range of this 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 Huntington's 'West'.

Again, many British 'pro-Europeans' like to cite lifestyle evidence of the Europeanization 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 Ruud Gullit and Jürgen Klinsman, Arsen Wenger and, most recently, Sven Goran Eriksson, the new manager of the England football team.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Albert, *Capitalism against capitalism* (London: Whurr, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Will Hutton, *The state we're in* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995); see e.g. the table on p. 282.

<sup>30</sup> *Social trends* (London: Stationery Office, 2000), p. 19.

All this evidence of the popular European presence in daily lives has led Mark Leonard to make the ingenious suggestion that we should strengthen support for the unpopular EU institutions by reconnecting them in the public mind with such popular European figures or experiences.<sup>31</sup> But for each of these examples of Europeanization one could give at least an equal and opposite example of Americanization. For every cappuccino bar there is at least one McDonalds or Starbucks. American films, American television programmes and American English are a major, even a dominant part of our popular culture.

Now, you may say that this is just part of what it means to be European at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Such Americanization is, so to speak, a European phenomenon. In many ways that is right. But in Britain it is especially intense. Nor is it confined to the relationship with the United States. In an *Observer*/Harris poll conducted in 1990, people were asked in which other country they would like to live, if not here. More than 50 per cent mentioned Australia, Canada, the United States or New Zealand. France, Germany and Spain scored just 3 per cent each.<sup>32</sup> Evidence of an attitude, surely. Add a small piece of semantic evidence. There is an extraordinary little phrase many people in Britain use when talking about America: ‘across the pond’—as if the Atlantic were a village pond, and America were just the other side of the village green. In one semantic bound, the Channel becomes much 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.’<sup>33</sup> It seems to me that this is a false opposition, unrealistic and probably undesirable. For 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.’<sup>34</sup> The statement sounds a little self-congratulatory, but it seems to me substantially, historically true. And this is a very important and positive part of our identity.

So, finally, 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 Spring 2000 *Eurobarometer* presents the usual set of questions about identification with the EU. Britain is simply bottom of the table. Is membership a good thing for your country? Just 25 per cent of British respondents say yes.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Leonard, *Rediscovering Europe* (London: Demos, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Roy Denman, *Missed chances: Britain and Europe in the twentieth century* (London: Indigo, 1997), p. 289.

<sup>33</sup> In *Guardian*, Saturday Review, 29 April 2000.

<sup>34</sup> *The National Interest*, Fall 1999.

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 making enlargement of the Union a priority, is Britain not bottom of the current table (although support for enlargement as a priority is a mere 26 per cent).<sup>35</sup>

Now, one could say a couple of things to qualify this picture—gloomy or encouraging, depending on your point of view. The first is that these British answers are historically extremely volatile. If you take that first, basic 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.<sup>36</sup> Wildly up and down. One of our leading experts on public opinion polling, Robert Worcester, insists that British views on the EU are strong but not deeply held. Worcester distinguishes ‘opinions’ from ‘attitudes’ and ‘values’. He argues that these are just opinions, heavily influenced by the latest coverage in a press generally unsympathetic to the EU and by recent political developments. Attitudes, in the sense of more settled views, Worcester finds especially among ‘middle-class, older men’.<sup>37</sup> So maybe British views on Europe are, for the most part, strong views weakly held.

Yet the evidence that I have been amassing in a piecemeal way, and simply one’s 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 said ‘a fair amount’, but 49 per cent ‘not at all’.<sup>38</sup> This is reflected also in the semantic point I mentioned at the outset: the way in which we still talk about ‘Europe’ as somewhere else.

It is often said that this usage is peculiar to Britain. In my experience, that is not actually true. There are quite a lot of 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 this: for them, Europe may still be somewhere else, but it’s somewhere else they would very much like to be. There are, I think, only two countries in Europe which not only talk about Europe as somewhere else but are not at all sure if they want to be there. They are Britain and Russia.

Sir 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 [i.e. the EEC] will become just as much our Community as their Community.’<sup>39</sup> Thirty years on, we are little closer to that point.

<sup>35</sup> *Eurobarometer*, no. 53, Spring 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Young, *Blessed plot*, p. 507.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Worcester, *How to win the Euro-referendum: lessons from 1975* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2000), esp. pp. 18–19.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Peter Shore, *Separate ways: the heart of Europe* (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 226.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Denman, *Missed chances*, p. 240.

Of course, we all know that our elites are deeply divided on this issue. But even the most pro-integration British ‘Europeans’ among our politicians do not talk about Europe in the way in which continental elites do as a matter of course. They do not, as a French–Greek friend of mine puts it, ‘speak European’.<sup>40</sup> They do not talk about Europe simply as Europeans engaged in a common enterprise. This is partly because we smell hypocrisy. We suspect the national instrumentalization of the European idea. Remember Harold Macmillan’s comment about De Gaulle: ‘He talks of Europe and means France.’<sup>41</sup> Probably every British prime minister since Macmillan has been tempted to say that privately about the current French president (with the one possible exception of Heath and Pompidou). For it is partly true—and not just of France. I have written a whole book describing how Germany has pursued its national interests ‘in Europe’s name’.<sup>42</sup> But it is only *partly* true. There is also—very much so in the German case—a genuine, emotional identification with a larger common project of Europe. Emotion in politics always lies somewhere very close to the frontier between the genuine and the phoney, between sincerity and hypocrisy, but here there is a component of genuine emotion.

This connects to my final, sixth sense of being European: the normative, idealistic sense of *l’Europe européenne*, 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 left and centre-left, made the case for constitutional reform in terms of the ‘Europeanization’ of Britain. ‘European’ in that context meant more democratic, more modern, just, open—a sort of distilled essence of the best contemporary European practice. But then Jonathan Freedland came along and said, no, what we really need is the Americanization of Britain; we need, as his book title says, to ‘bring home the revolution’.<sup>43</sup> The American revolution, that is. And—for this is Britain—idealized America trumps idealized Europe.

My conclusion? There is no conclusion. We are confused, but perhaps confused at a higher level. Why is there no conclusion? Partly because I myself have not reached an analytical conclusion; what I offer here is a first report on work in progress. There is no conclusion also because of the very nature of Identity Studies, which rarely arrive at any definite, clear finding. But it is also because of the particular nature of the identity that I have been discussing. Arguably, the statement ‘no conclusion’ about British identity is in fact a conclusion—even an important one.

If I return to my starting point, that identities are voluntary but not arbitrary, and then look at what I have discussed, there is no doubt that a European identity is an available identity for Britain. This identity would not be arbitrary,

<sup>40</sup> I owe this pithy formulation to my colleague at St Antony’s College, Oxford, Dr Kalypto Nicolaidis.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle: the ruler, 1945–1970* (London: Harvill, 1991), p. 345.

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe’s name: Germany and the divided continent* (London: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Freedland, *Bring home the revolution* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

like that of the ‘Egyptians’ in Kosovo. There is plenty of material here from which to make 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 Americanized way, ‘period’.

The other identities are simply too strong. Not so much, I have argued, the insular identity any more, but the Western and transoceanic identity, the identification not just with the United States but with all the English-speaking peoples. And then, of course, 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 identity, for Britain has always been and will remain—so long as there is a Britain—a country of multiple overlapping identities.

Yet partial identities are not necessarily shallow identities, which is what Britain’s European identity currently is. After all, we have had, in our own history, 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 just to our own position in Europe, which is all we usually talk about in our so-called ‘European debate’. It matters to the project itself. The British know better than anyone else that initially artificial, invented political structures cannot survive without a bond of emotional identification, without some shared myth, some mystique, or what Walter Bagehot, in 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 then, so was Britain once, and perhaps is now again. Whether one thinks that conclusion is hopeful or gloomy depends on what one thinks will happen to Britain, and what one wants to happen. But that in turn depends on what will happen in Europe.