Europe's Other Self

The history of Europe is not only internal, but external: its relation with its Others. Stuart Hall examines the impact of fundamentalism and Third World migration on European identity.

We are advancing steadily towards two anniversary occasions for Europe. The countdown has already begun to 1992, the birthday of the new Europe. Despite the rearguard action of the Thatcherite rump, the supranational shape of the new Europe is beginning to emerge. This occasion will be inward-looking - the lowering of economic and trading barriers, the opening of convergence and integration which everyone hopes will bring prosperity to western European peoples. Here, it is the waning of the era of the separate nation-states, which have for so long provided the engine of European growth. Once again, Europe is able to produce from within her own borders and resources, both material and spiritual, the conditions for the next phase of social development. This has been the dominant narrative of modernity for some time - an 'internalist' story, with capitalism growing from the womb of feudalism and Europe's self-generating capacity to produce, like a silk-worm, the circumstances of her own evolution from within her own body.

The other anniversary marks another, equally important, but less frequently celebrated aspect. 1992 is also the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's so-called 'discovery' of the New World. This event, along with the Portuguese opening-up of the African coastline and advance (with the assistance of Arab traders who had long plied those waters) into the Indian Ocean and beyond, marked the opening of the era of European expansion - the process of exploration, conquest and colonisation by which virtually the whole globe was harnessed in one way or another to Europe. 'Globalisation', which we often speak of as if it began with the 'Big Bang', and the computerisation of the Stock Exchange, really started there with Columbus's 'mistake', and has been going on ever since. (He was really on the way somewhere else and remained stubbornly convinced, when he hit the New World, that, like any other good European businessman, he had arrived in Japan.)

Europe's external relations with its Others has been central to the European story since its inception, and remains so. The story of European identity is often told as if it had no exterior. But this tells us more about how cultural identities are constructed - as 'imagined communities', through the marking of difference with others - than it does about the actual relations of unequal exchange and uneven development through which a common European identity was forged. Now that a new Europe is taking shape, the same contradictory process of marking symbolic boundaries and constructing symbolic frontiers between inside and outside, interior and exterior, belonging and otherness, is providing a silent accompaniment to the march to 1992.

One of the key sites of this discursive work is, of course, eastern Europe, a boundary which has always given western Europe trouble. Westwards, what used to be called 'the Green Sea of Darkness' provided a natural boundary. But eastwards, the continent refuses to end naturally. It stretches out to the Urals and beyond, into the dark unknown from which the barbarians descended. Where does Europe stop and Asia begin? The question is critical - European prosperity depends on finding an answer to it. In the negotiations between European capitalism and the disintegrating communist empires of eastern Europe - the Second World - we are about to discover the answer.

Currently, the line is staked out in terms of the contrast between the 'international' West and the 'nationalist' East. As national boundaries are weakened and eroded in western Europe, we are told, so in eastern Europe there is a resurgence of nationalism. The contrast between the 'rational' and civilised West and the irrational and barbarous East underpins this opposition. Of course, many of the nationalisms which are helping to fragment the old communist empire are driven by ethnic absolutism, hatred of difference, racial exclusiveness and religious orthodoxy. But it ill behoves western Europe to complain. Its own development occurred on the back of nationalisms which also had their own racially and ethnically exclusive character. It is not a surprise that the Croatians, the Slovaks, the Latvians, the Estonians, etc., should regard the construction of a little nation of their own as a passport to the West. These emergent nationalisms are not simply revivals of the past but reworkings of it in the circumstances of the present - entry tickets to the new Europe. Though they look like a return to a pre-1914 historical agenda, they are functioning as a way of evading the past and making a bid for modernity (ie, entry to the Euro-club).

As Europe consolidates and converges, so a similar exercise in boundary maintenance is in progress with respect to its Third World Others. Currently, the two favourite discursive markers in this discourse are 'refugees' and 'fundamentalism'. The question of illegal immigration has once again surfaced as an urgent topic of European discussion, the redoubtable French Socialist prime minister, Edith Cresson, regretting that 'of every ten immigrants found to be here illegally, only three are expelled', and Jacques Chirac, that model of the new European cosmopolitan enlightenment, remarking on the 'noise and smell' of foreigners which drove decent French people 'understandably crazy'. Douglas Hurd and Kenneth Baker have been spinning complicated webs around the distinction between 'political refugees' and 'economic migrants'. Political refugees deserve refuge in enlightened Europe, home of liberty. Usually they are few in number, and it is often hard to prove conclusively that they are in direct danger from some oppressive or tyrannical regime of the kind which poverty and indebtedness breeds - which allows a reasonable proportion to be bundled unceremoniously back to the waiting arms of the local police.

Economic migrants, on the other hand, are simply the unwitting casualties of the 'normal' processes of market forces as they operate at the periphery. Europe, whose banking arrangements have destroyed subsistence agriculture and whose new Gatt arrangements will price most of them out of the commodity markets, owes them nothing. It is true that, Tebbit-like, they got on their bikes (or the nearest equivalent - a one-way charter flight ticket) and, quite rationally, went to seek their fortunes in the only place where fortunes are to be made. But this will never do. Suddenly, European prosperity is a strictly European affair, designed exclusively for self-respecting Euro-politicians is calling 'our populations'. No wonder, when the Berlin Wall collapsed, every self-respecting Pole and East German who had a Lada capable of making the jour-
ney climbed aboard, and like Columbus in search of pure gold, headed west. The frontiers are closing...

The problem is (as Colin Prescod's excellent BBC2 series, Black On Eu-

ope, about the plight of western Eu-

rope's ethnic minorities, has been show-

ing) the 'barbarians' are already inside the gate. With them, European cosmopolitanism does not stand up well to the test. Millions of Muslims in France, Sudanese and Ethi-

opians in Italy, Turks and Africans in Germany, Portugal, Spain, Asians and Af
dro-Caribbeans in Britain, Indone-

sians and 'gypsies' in Holland, bear witness, not only to the actual mechan-

isms of 'globalisation' but to the diffi-

culty of sloughing off in one easy move-

ment Europe's long colonial past or keep-

ing the periphery in place.

The so-called 'homogeneous populations' of the new Eu-

rope - the ethnic absolutism on which the new 'openness' is being constructed - always been, at best, an elaborate metaphor. As Daf-

fyd Ellis Thomas, the Plaid Cymru MP, recently pointed out, no single western European state corresponds to one people. The Slovanes, like the Scots, the Welsh and the Basques, may hope to 

side...