The idea that Europe is in crisis constitutes one of the most widely repeated phrases of our age. Of course not everybody shares the same understanding of the crisis; but the sense that Europe – as an entity, as a set of institutions, or perhaps more profoundly as a culture bounded by certain core values – is in crisis is an assumption which it has become difficult to avoid, and still more to refute.

Historians, of course, are not particularly enamoured of languages of crisis. We have seen them before: in feudal Europe, in the seventeenth century, in the late ancien régime, and most profoundly in the first half of the twentieth century. Such precedents relativize the present-day language of crisis, and give us reason to consider what is at stake behind its widespread use. Languages of crisis are never objective, and they are often resorted to by those who have a stake in the existing regime. This seems particularly so in the current circumstances. The present-day sense of crisis is rooted in shifts in power from west to east within Europe, in the changing structures of the European economy, in the volatile electoral behaviour of voters, and in the erosion of the liberal value structures of the post-Christian society of the second half of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the language of crisis is voiced primarily by those who feel threatened by these changes: the political elites of a Western-oriented Europe, those social groups rendered vulnerable by forms of neo-liberalism and
globalisation, and an intelligentsia accustomed to the defence of a pluralist and western model of society. Crisis in this context is the language of losers, or more specifically of those who fear that they have something to lose.

Historians are not neutral in this process. By their social background, intellectual formation, and historical studies, they are inclined to regard the Europe of the present-day – or more exactly what was until recently the present-day – as the product of long- and short-term processes which possessed an underlying historical rationale. The European Union, the social-market economy, and the emancipatory logics of an increasingly plural but united model of society, are all aspects of the Europe in which most historians came of age, and which tacitly or explicitly they tend to regard as the consequence of Europe’s long and contested process of modernisation. Many contemporary European historians are in this respect believers in a soft teleology. The united democratic Europe which emerged in the 1990s might not have constituted, in Francis Fukuyama’s formula, the end of history, but to many it seemed that it had long been the direction in which Europe was headed.

History and Europe became, in this sense, mutually reinforcing constructions in the final decades of the twentieth century. Europe was the product of history; but, equally, contemporary history acquired a purpose and a sense of direction through Europe. This latter process went much deeper than some simple partisanship for Europe on the part of historians, though there was (and remains) an element of that as well. More importantly, Europe became the prism through which many historians approached their subject matter. As is often the case, there was a strong generational element to this historiographical trend. Europe became the new home of a predominantly younger cohort of historians, for whom the ‘other’ against which they chose to define themselves was the national-oriented historiographies (and historians) that had flourished in the decades immediately following the Second World War. As the manifesto which launched this debate well indicates, the wish to define the project of European history against the mentality of the Sonderweg remains a defining element of the project of European history.

Europe as a subject and a methodology

This discovery of Europe – a point that would in truth have hardly come as a surprise to historians of earlier centuries of European history – became the new focus for the writing of much contemporary history. Multi-volume histories of Europe flourished, of which the five-volume Storia d’Europa published by Einaudi from 1993, with the collaboration of a stellar and for once genuinely international team of historians, was perhaps the most imposing achievement. Significantly too, it started from the present-
day, with the publication of the first volume as L’Europa oggi.\textsuperscript{2} Europe, it suggested, was best understood from the vantage point of the present, which provided the template by which to examine the Europes of the past.

Europe served a dual purpose in such studies. It was both a subject, and a methodology, seeking to identify the ways in which larger processes which one might identify as European emerged at different points in the history of the continent. This historiographical trend, to which Kiran Klaus Patel and I made our own modest contribution,\textsuperscript{3} drew its energy from the intuitive sense that Europe was not just a useful framework for studying historical problems, but also a means of rethinking contemporary European history, outside of national parameters. What was interesting, for us at least, in the study of Europeanisation was the way in which it changed chronologies, and made new sense of processes of political, social and cultural change which were in danger of becoming overly familiar. By focusing on the changing dynamics of the European, we could identify how different forms and definitions of Europe had waxed and waned across the modern history of Europe. This mentality might have been Europeanist; but it was also emphatically historical. In an era when the ascendancy of the EU risked diminishing other chronologies, it provided a means of indicating that other Europes had existed, and would no doubt do so in the future.

\textit{A rallying-call for a generation}

This approach provided a rallying-call and a legitimation for what constituted the first (modern) generation of European historians. The policies of research councils, the proliferation of schemes of academic mobility, and the professional and personal trajectories of a more transnational cohort of younger historians, all contributed to the flourishing from the 1990s to the 2010s of a Europe-minded history which mixed together ingredients derived from different historical methodologies to privilege the hitherto neglected importance of the European.

That this process should have coincided with the zenith of more institutional projects of European integration, most notably the expansion of the EU into post-Communist east-central Europe was far from accidental: where grant-giving bodies lead, historians tend to follow. But the more profound logics of this Europeanization of contemporary history lay not only in the perceived obsolescence of the much-abused national templates but also of other ways of writing history. National paradigms were not the only ways of writing history in and of Europe which flourished in the twentieth century. The ascendancy of a European methodology was also the consequence of the decline of a distinguished Marxist tradition of historical writing as well as of the confessional mindsets of an older religious history.
As these older stage-sets of European historical writing fell away, so it was the European which came to seem more essential, and simply more visible. But, as the opening manifesto of this debate rightly makes clear, the definition of the European was always problematic. It rested on mental maps of the shape of Europe and also of its frontiers which carried within them assumptions which at their most benign were essentialist and often verged on the colonial. The reasons for this were of course much larger than the practice of history. The definition after 1945 of a smaller and more homogenous Western Europe excluded territories such as the Near East and Turkey, as well as those on the southern littoral of the Mediterranean, which in previous eras would have been unproblematically regarded as part of a European zone. Above all, the collapse of the Cold War division of Europe in 1989 sucked the former Socialist states of the east into a unified but western-led Europe, the centre of which lay somewhere between Brussels, Frankfurt, and Berlin.

A tacit Franco-German axis

The project of writing European history was complicit in these larger changes. The post-1945 project of contemporary history had long rested on a tacit Franco-German axis, in which British and Italian scholars also played a notable but supporting role. This implicit hierarchy was abruptly rendered much more explicit by the reconfiguration of the universities and research institutes of east-central Europe that occurred after 1989. As an older generation of historians from the Socialist era were marginalised, so they were replaced by historians from the west, or by those of a younger generation who succeeded in re-tooling their methodologies for a post-socialist era. The imbalance which this created in east-west historical relations was evident in the ambitious projects of European history which flourished in the new landscape of the 1990s. Though continent-wide in their scope, these were directed in large part from the major scientific and academic institutions of Western Europe, who supplied much of the funding and personnel, and also the methodologies and agendas.

That this Western ascendancy should over time have been challenged by the emergence of more national schools of historical writing within east-central Europe was not surprising. But, at the same time, the definition of European history was also destabilised by the resurgence of the global. Much of the writing about European history in the final decades of the twentieth century was remarkable for the way it established a distance between Europe and the non-European world. It acknowledged the importance of the European imperial experience (as well as its crimes and abuses), but also defined it as a process that happened outside of Europe, and which belonged to the pre-1945 past. In the project of writing the contemporary history of Europe after
the Second World War, empire was a problem inherited, wrestled with, but then resolved through the retrospective rationales of decolonisation.4

From the 1990s onwards, however, these separate histories of Europe and of empire converged, or more simply collided. Again this was a process which had origins wider than the writing of history: the engagement of European powers in quasi-imperial interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as well as the emergence after 9/11 of Islamic-inspired violence within European cities brought the interconnectedness of Europe and projects of empire, past and present, to the fore of contemporary politics. But it also reflected the emergence of new forms of global historical writing – perhaps most influentially the work of Jürgen Osterhammel – which located modern structures of European imperialism in much more complex and continuing narratives of interaction between Europe and the other areas of the globe.5

The resurgence of the global

The idea of writing a history of Europe separate from these larger stories came to seem myopic, or even a deliberate evasion of a shameful past.6 Dipesh Chakrabarty’s highly influential concept of ‘provincializing Europe’ – as expounded in his book of the same title, first published in 20007 – serves as an encapsulation of this new orthodoxy. In the manner of the imperial statues which remain a prominent element of the topography of many European towns and cities, Europe must be pulled down from its privileged plinth, and studied on an equal level with other areas of the world. This also implied a need to study the history of Europe in a new way. The inward-facing mentalities that had long taken precedence in the writing of histories of Europe needed to be replaced by an outward-facing history of Europe, which studied European societies – emphatically in the plural – through their multiple interactions with the non-European world. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there has been a shift of historiographical focus from the European to the global. The prism of a global history of Europe offers an agenda better attuned to our times, but also to the scholarly recognition that the contemporary history of Europe for too long ignored the ways in which Europe was shaped profoundly by forces that emanated beyond the continent. So much we unreflectively thought of as European has turned out not to be distinctively European at all.

This new approach is demonstrated most strikingly by the success of the collective volume a Histoire mondiale de la France, published by Seuil in 20178. In truth, this volume might seem to be the fruit of a very French conception of global history, as indicated by the fact that nearly all of its 122 contributors are French, and all but a small number are employed in French academic institutions. But perhaps what is most
interesting is the way in which the book, for all of its apparent radicalism, is a reconceptualization of a very traditional national enterprise. Taking its inspiration from the universal ambitions of Michelet’s history of France, its purpose is to provide ‘une histoire mondiale de la France’, rather than ‘une histoire de la France mondiale’. The word order is significant. The volume is intended as a study of France open to the world, rather than of how the world has made (or unmade) France. Perhaps most significantly, there is no place in the Histoire mondiale for Europe, which one searches for in vain in the titles of its many brief chapters. Europe, it seems, has no explanatory force for approaching the history of France, thereby demonstrating rather starkly the decline of the European paradigm for the writing of history, at least as seen from Paris.

A need to re-think the history of Europe

This effacement of Europe, crushed between the global and the national, serves as a demonstration of the need to re-assert, but also to re-think, the history of Europe. This is no easy task. Vacuous plaidoyers for a European history floating above national agendas risk becoming the formulae of inaugural professorial speeches which display all too visibly their historical and political vintage. Times have changed, and the embattled and defensive priorities of the contemporary European Union no longer have the same historical legitimacy as once did the federating ambitions of Mitterrand, Kohl, and Delors. The academic and scientific landscape too has changed. The drive, so visible in the two decades following 1989, to create transnational research teams of historians, spanning the diversity of Europe’s academic cultures, has lost energy over the last decade, and has been replaced by the more individual and rooted projects supported, ironically enough, by the European Research Council. This has been accompanied by a decline in mobility within the European historical profession. In difficult times, historians – and especially those understandably enough in search of a post – tend to stick close to home, reinforcing the distinctively national character of academic cultures. Indeed, it is striking that the system of higher education and research which has most markedly opened itself up in recent decades to historians from Europe (and elsewhere), namely that of the United Kingdom, is the one that is becoming, in formal terms, the least European.

And yet, as historians well know, crises are never the end of the matter. There remains a need for a historiography which asks questions about the contemporary history of Europe, rather than providing answers; and which is willing to confront its complexities and diversity, rather than seeking to elevate a particular definition of Europe. Above all, it is a history which needs to read the messy contemporary history of Europe forwards rather than backwards. We have had too many examples of the writing of European
history which knew where they were going to end up; now we need a history of Europe that has no idea as to where it – and we – are going.

July 2020

Cite this article as:
