

# One heritage, one story: that's not the Europe we know

Our continent's past is made up of many varied stories. Only by examining and accepting this can we secure our future

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As the European parliamentary elections approach, there's a widespread sense that the idea of Europe as a union has been lost. We see an almost daily disintegration of a project that was underpinned by a utopian vision. This vision reread a thousand years of conflict into the possibility of an integrated Europe, and it foresaw Europe as an irreversible unit, the construction of which was believed to be the end of history. But in the wake of earlier crises, Brexit forces us to recognise that Europe as a union is no longer an unalterable project. Instead it is in grave danger.

One factor is the tilt of the United States away from treating Europe as an automatic ally. Life in Europe is no longer so sheltered. Europeans feel vulnerable, and they now face questions they have too long avoided. Staring into this abyss, there have been many attempts to construct a simplistic history of Europe versus others. One could perhaps flash a knowing smile at symbolic reconstructions of a "fortress Europe": this is a continent that not long ago dominated the world. And it is not as if this domination left no marks on others, across centuries of colonial or commercial encounters. But among the rightwing, the history of Europe can still be celebrated as a narrative of a white Christian civilisation – a mighty past to be looked back on with pride and self-assurance.

We strongly condemn such views, which entirely set aside the cultural, religious and political diversity so characteristic of our continent and the responsibilities inherited from our past. We see them as simply displacing on to some "other" our own feelings of frustration and helplessness – whether directed domestically at the Muslim, Jew, immigrant or refugee, or internationally towards other powers and their competing interests.

We also see no value in dwelling on national histories as a litany of sufferings, wars and genocides, or in adopting an exclusively accusatory stance where Europe is held collectively guilty. It's time to abandon such self-defeating binaries and face the world, acknowledging both the light and the shade of our European past – in short, to rethink Europe through the prism of its opposites.

Let's give up compressing Europe into a single story. Rather than clinging to nostalgic linear narratives that imply a pre-established unity ("one" heritage, "one" history, "one" memory), let's recover memories that are polyphonic. Master narratives are no longer viable as they once were for nation states. We should instead recognise our multiplicity without giving up our sense of unity, since we still feel that we share things in common: a past and a present – and a future if we want it.

Let's be honest. Europe is a patchwork of invisible and imagined borders that divide Europeans from one another in all countries and regions. There is an Atlantic Europe, whose

gaze is transatlantic at the cost of its links closer to home. There is the rich north-western Europe, which lectures “club Med” countries under the guise of good governance. Western Europe cultivates an old disdain towards central and eastern European states, with their new and flawed democratic cultures.

There is a Christian Europe that excludes or ignores the religious and atheistic minorities that for centuries helped shape its history. There is the Europe of large countries that don't hear the legitimate fears of smaller ones, while the latter retain bitter memories of prolonged foreign domination. There is the Europe of immigrants, who are too often regarded as unreliable, second-class citizens. The list goes on. Europe is riven by fault lines, many of them all too easy to reopen.

Without looking at our pasts, what future can we build? There are two possible paths, each of which may help construct more clear-eyed narratives from our history. First, to embrace the notion that Europe is all the richer for its divisions. As we get better at recognising the division generated by our incessant conflicts, we become more adept at developing the kind of shared narrative we need. And we need it precisely because this is an era of dangerous competition, and we are seeing the return of political, economic, social and cultural models from another age.

That history of divisions, considered as a common heritage, is yet to be written. But it can be written precisely because we know how such divisions were overcome in our recent past, particularly after 1945 and after 1989. This did not happen because we were ordered to reconcile from the top down. Instead it emerged from the bottom up, through us Europeans engaging in a process of genuine “memory work”, which, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur once said, is always a “plural memory” work.

A second path comes from the fact that Europe is a continent of law, which protects us in the expression of our diversity. Many voices pit state sovereignty against an allegedly overstuffed, anti-democratic European Union system centred in Brussels. That may well be a fair complaint. But that same union has guaranteed national sovereignties by protecting and even organising their differences.

The European project is the direct opposite of past imperial ambitions. And it runs counter to any vision of a “prison of peoples” that would be conceived and enforced by global elites. Instead “Europe” is an unprecedented project of solidarity backed by the will of peoples who have abolished war between themselves and who share a desire for freedom. This surely is a story worth telling and defending.

To reconstruct Europe, it is vital to reconstruct its history. It seems crucial that this unique and fragile European experience be given a fuller meaning. By reflecting on our divided memories and engaging in renewed forms of “shared memory” work, we believe it is possible to tell the story of a Europe struggling against all odds towards building a new kind of relation with itself, and with the rest of the world.

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