INTRODUCTION

For over two and a half millennia, the idea of Europe, and of what it means to be European, has attracted the attention of writers, philosophers, and political and cultural theorists. From the ancient Greek myth of Europa to the European Economic Community’s Declaration on European Identity (1973), followed two decades later by the creation of the European Union, the question of Europe and the European has become an increasingly critical one, with profound political, philosophical, social, and cultural implications. In the years following the First World War, there was a widely shared belief that Europe was a civilization in profound crisis, and that the urgent priority was to rediscover the European spirit, and to nurture that spirit in the interest of humanity as a whole. Today, too, there is a widespread sense that Europe is facing a crisis of identity and legitimacy, and that this crisis once again has implications not only for those living in Europe, but also for world civilization. Etymologically, the word “crisis” indicates a moment of decision, and thus, in this context, a time when Europeans need to decide what it means to be European in a world shaped by the apparently antithetical forces of globalization and nationalist populism. In seeking an answer to this question, it seems reasonable to look to history, in the hope that it might cast light not only on the present, but also on possible futures for the idea of Europe.

As it happens, an historical consciousness – the sense that a knowledge of history is not only a value in itself, but can inform our understanding of the present and guide us in our attempt to shape the future – has often been identified as a core element in a distinctly European mentality. To give just two recent examples, in his long essay on the idea of Europe, published in 2015, the literary critic George Steiner argued that one of the axioms of the European is an historical sense, this being reflected in material form not only in the many monuments to historical events and personages to be found in European cities, but also in the names that have been given to streets, squares, and train stations across the continent. Similarly, the
Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has recently asserted that, if the idea of Europe has a meaning, it consists in the fact that, unlike Asians and Americans, Europeans “can gain access to their truth only by means of a confrontation with the past, only by settling accounts with their history.” Thus it would seem that there could be nothing more European than to look to the history of the idea of Europe when seeking to understand what it might mean to be European today, and to imagine a future for the idea of Europe that would be grounded in self-awareness.

It is important to recognize from the outset, however, that the history of the idea of Europe is not to be mistaken for the history of Europe as such. Indeed, some of the most fully developed and influential ideas of Europe since the eighteenth century have stood in stark contrast to the history of the period in which they arose. For instance, the idea of a United States of Europe was widely discussed in the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time when nationalism was on the rise across the continent and the major European nation-states were seeking above all to ensure their own particular political, economic, and military hegemony. Furthermore, the history of the idea of Europe is far from being the history of a purely political idea, even if today Europe is often conflated with, and even taken as a synonym for, the European Union. While the idea of Europe is, to be sure, always necessarily political, it is also geographical, religious, economic, ethnological, philosophical, literary, and cultural in the wider sense. Literary writers, cultural historians, and philosophers have contributed as much to its history as have political theorists.

The history of the idea of Europe is political in the sense that it entails reflections on the relations between nations and nation-states, and on what distinguishes Europe politically from other parts of the world. Democracy has often been cited as the most fundamental contribution to politics to have come from Europe, originating as it did in the ancient Greek polis, or city-state. And yet, totalitarianism is no less a product of European civilization, as are imperialism and colonialism, first in the form of the Roman Empire, and then well beyond Europe’s geographical borders following the discovery of the Americas in the late fifteenth century and, in the later nineteenth century, the so-called “scramble for Africa.” In the case made for colonialism, the idea of Europe, and, in particular, of European civilization, has played a significant justificatory role.

If the history of the idea of Europe is political, it is also necessarily geographical in the sense that the very definition of Europe has always entailed determinations of its natural as well as its political borders, of where it ends and where Asia and Africa begin. Indeed, questions of
landscape and climate have informed ideas of Europe from the beginning, these factors being cited time and again as the reasons for Europe’s much-vaunted balancing of unity and diversity, distinct local or national cultures seen as thriving within a shared civilization. The history of cartography reveals the emergence of an idea of Europe in which the geographical sits closely allied to both the political and the cultural.

The history of the idea of Europe is religious in the sense that, since the early Middle Ages, it has been framed in terms of the relation between the three great religions of the Book – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For hundreds of years, Europe was more or less synonymous with Christendom (Christianitas), and to this day there are many who insist that European civilization is essentially Christian, albeit in secularized form. In addition to triggering the Wars of Religion, the fifteenth-century Protestant Reformation also prompted a rethinking of Europe as divided between North and South, just as the decline of the Roman Empire had led to a preoccupation with the difference between East and West, reflected in the division of the Empire in 286 CE. That division between Eastern and Western Europe, cemented by the great schism between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in 1054, would return with a vengeance to haunt ideas of Europe in the post–Second World War era. To the religious conception of Europe may be added the role that secularism has played in the history of the idea of Europe since the Enlightenment. In recent years, ideas of Europe have repeatedly been framed in terms of Islam, with the latter being seen as a religion that is fundamentally alien to the essence of the European. As it happens, the attempt to define Europe in opposition to Islam, and the idea of Islam not just as non- but as anti-European, has a long history, shaped by considerable ignorance and prejudice.

The history of the idea of Europe is economic in the sense that both capitalism and communism are core products of European thought. Since the mid-nineteenth century, attempts have repeatedly been made to establish the relation between these two economic models and the essence of European civilization, conceived in terms of the idea of the free individual, naturally inclined to a free market economy, in contrast to what has been seen for over two and a half thousand years as the collectivist mentality of Asian civilization, in which the individual is less highly valued. The idea of Europe as economically superior to other parts of the world has also been an abiding theme of the discourse on Europe, with the economy being seen as the expression of a distinctly European spirit.
The history of the idea of Europe is ethnological in the sense that Europe has repeatedly been conceived in terms of a particular ethnicity. There have been those who have highlighted the impact of migration and ethnic diversity in the shaping of a European humanity. One of the more influential proponents of this idea was the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Today, Herder is generally remembered as one of the founders of the idea of a national spirit and a national culture, and thus of modern nationalism. He was, however, also among the first to argue for the idea of the European in terms of recurrent patterns of migration and ethnic mixing. At the same time, the idea of ethnic purity has also long haunted the discourse on Europe. Among the many dubious etymologies of the term “Europe,” the one given in the entry on Europe in the great Enlightenment Encyclopedia, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert, has it deriving from the Phoenician word urappa, meaning “white face.” In the nineteenth century, in the rapidly developing race theory, some ethnologists attempted to establish an ethnically distinct Homo Europaeus. These efforts provided the pseudo-scientific underpinning for a European colonialism grounded in the notion of the superiority of European humanity over the non-European “inferior races,” particularly in Africa and the Americas. This idea of a superior Homo Europaeus would culminate in the first half of the twentieth century in the Nazi idea of an Aryan master race, defenders of a European civilization the enemies of which included the Jews and the “Asiatic” Russians.

The history of the idea of Europe is also both philosophical and literary, with many of Europe’s most eminent thinkers and writers having engaged with the question of what Europe is and, above all, what it should become. Philosophers who have reflected at length on the idea of Europe include Aristotle, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Peter Chaadaev, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jacques Derrida, and Jürgen Habermas, among many others. As for writers who, in one way or another, have explored the idea of Europe, these range from Montesquieu, Novalis, the Schlegel brothers, Goethe, Germaine de Staël, Victor Hugo, Ivan Turgenev, Henry James, and Fyodor Dostoevsky in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to Paul Valéry, Stefan Zweig, Thomas Mann, T. S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera, and Orhan Pamuk, among many others, in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The attempt to determine which writers and thinkers are European, in the sense of transcending their national cultures, has been particularly prevalent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,
the idea of a distinctly European spirit having been adumbrated during the same period.

Within these various intertwining discourses, the history of the idea of Europe has for the most part been the history of what has been seen as a very good idea. Europe has repeatedly been championed as the most advanced (and even as the only) civilization in human history. It has been celebrated as the source of science and modern technology, of democracy, of the freedom of the individual and human rights, of justice and tolerance. The vast majority of those who have contributed over the past two and a half thousand years to the discourse on the idea of Europe have done so as fervid advocates of the European. And this has meant that, in large part, that discourse has been Eurocentric, Euro-supremacist, and Euro-universalizing in nature. By Euro-universalism is to be understood the view that, in its assumed superiority over all other civilizations, the European should become the model for the universal. In other words, human history is, or at least should be, the history of the Europeanization of humanity. European values should, in short, become global values.

Far rarer have been those who have emphasized the darker side of the picture. That darker side is evident in European expansion across the globe by way of a rapacious imperialism and colonialism. It is evident in Europe as the source of political and technological innovations that have been responsible for the death of millions, and that have devastated the environment through an exploitative approach to the natural world. It is evident in Europe as the so-called civilization from which has issued the greatest barbarism, through racial theories that have justified genocides, not only during the Nazi reign of terror, but also in the many European colonies in Africa, Australasia, and the Americas. In the vast majority of cases, the fundamental distinction between the European and the non-European has been deployed to the advantage of the former, the assumption being that European civilization is in every way superior to non-European civilizations, and that the latter should be either plundered, incorporated, or obliterated. The thinking of Europe’s relation to the Islamic world in particular has been shaped by a profound sense of a struggle between the European and the non-European. It constituted the foundation for the recent theory of a clash of civilizations, with the idea of the West being an extension of the idea of Europe in which America constitutes the fullest realization of the European spirit.

The history of the idea of Europe also reveals recurrent insistences upon pronounced internal divisions. These have been between a Northern and a Southern Europe; a Protestant and a Catholic Europe; a Christian...
Europe and its internal others, above all the Jewish population; Europe’s center and its periphery; and those parts of Europe considered to be properly European as opposed to those adjudged to be lacking in certain essential European traits, with Russia having repeatedly been identified as the least European – or even, along with Turkey, as the principal non-European – part of western Eurasia. The sense of a Europe divided between the properly European and the less or even the non-European has been no less central to the history of the idea of Europe than has been the sense of Europe as a civilization that has to define itself against the non-European located beyond its geographical borders. The history of the idea of Europe is, in other words, no less the history of its perceived others, almost without exception conceived negatively.

At each phase in the history of the idea of Europe, one finds both optimism and pessimism, as well as contradiction. One also encounters the same set of basic ideas, circulating and recirculating. Of these, the most abiding is the idea of Europe as the superior form of human civilization. It was precisely on account of this sense of European superiority that Europeanists of the interwar years were so troubled by what they saw as an attempted civilizational suicide on Europe’s part, when what they considered to be the anti-European forces of nationalism triumphed over the pro-European forces of cosmopolitanism. The result was that Europe was surpassed, economically and politically, if not culturally, by the new global superpowers: the United States of America and Russia, and then, more recently, China. Among the first to articulate this sense of decline in the interwar years was the French poet Paul Valéry, who in 1919, in the immediate aftermath of what was then known as the Great War and even as the Great European War, identified the principal lesson of 1914–18 as the recognition of Europe’s mortality as a civilization. At the same time, Valéry continued to champion a profoundly Eurocentric, Euro-supremacist, and Euro-universalizing idea of Europe, rooted in an inheritance from ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and Christianity. The turbulent years between the First and the Second World Wars were rife not only with anguished reflections on Europe’s decline, but also with plans for a united Europe that could compete politically and economically with Russia and the United States of America. In the post–Second World War era, those plans came to rapid fruition, as the economic and political steps were swiftly taken to establish, for the first time in its long history, a partially united Europe.

While the history of the idea of Europe dates back to ancient Greece, the writing of that history is considerably more recent, commencing only when, amidst the ruins, and in the shadow of the Holocaust, plans for
European economic and political unification were finally drawn up and realized in the post–Second World War years. The profound bias in the discourse on the idea of Europe as a good idea, a bias that almost always entails Eurocentrism, Euro-supremacism, and Euro-universalism, is reflected in many of those histories. Among the first of these attempts to write the history of the idea of Europe was an inaugural address entitled “L’Idea di Europa” (1947) by the Italian historian Federico Chabod, who argued, reasonably enough, that the idea of Europe needed to be understood in terms of Europeans’ self-awareness of being European, and that it entailed not only the political, but also the cultural and the moral spheres. He also pointed to the fact that this European self-consciousness necessarily entailed the idea of the non-European; that is, an “other” against which the European could define itself. According to Chabod, this history of European self-consciousness originated in antiquity, although the decisive moment came only in the eighteenth century, with the emergence of a European republic of letters, something on which Voltaire had reflected explicitly at the time. Chabod would go on to publish an influential book-length study of the topic: Storia dell’idea d’Europa (1961).

Following Chabod’s lead, the 1950s saw the publication of a number of histories of the idea of Europe, notably Europabild und Europa (1951) by the German historian Heinz Gollwitzer, Europe: The Emergence of an Idea (1957) by the Scottish historian Denys Hay, and the two-volume Europa, storia di un’idea (1958) by the Italian historian Carlo Curcio. None of these works, however, sought to cover the entire history of the idea of Europe. Gollwitzer focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany, Hay on the period from classical Greece to the eighteenth century, while Curcio limited himself to the period from 1848 to 1938. The 1960s saw a further series of major contributions to the topic, with the publication, and translation into English, of the Swiss cultural historian Denis de Rougemont’s Vingt-huit siècles d’Europe (1961), followed by L’Idée d’Europe dans l’histoire (1965) by the French historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, and L’Idée européenne 1918–1965 (1965) by the Dutch historian Henri Brugmans. In addition to their historical work, Rougemont and Brugmans also both played significant roles in the post-war effort to create a politically and economically united Europe, Brugmans being the co-founder and first president of the Union of European Federalists.

Following this flurry of major studies, notably from continental Western Europeans, all of them male, numerous other studies followed in the ensuing decades, although for the most part these did not follow Rougemont’s lead in seeking to cover the history of the idea of Europe.
from its origins in classical antiquity to the present day. Furthermore, their focus was often primarily on the political dimension. This was understandable, given the rapid progress made toward an economically and politically united Europe, albeit restricted to Western Europe, commencing with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, the European Economic Community in 1957, and, following the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the European Union.

In recent years, however, the focus has turned toward questions of European identity, culture, and values, alongside the political and the economic. The reasons for this undoubtedly include the very significant challenges faced by the European Union, on account of the global financial crisis in 2008, the refugee crisis that began in 2015, and, in 2020, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Union, following an “in/out” referendum in 2016. The more resonant works on the idea of Europe to have been written by cultural historians, philosophers, and literary critics in recent decades have included the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin’s *The Concept of Europe* (1987), the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida’s *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe* (1991), and the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas’s *Europe: The Faltering Project* (2008), as well as George Steiner’s *The Idea of Europe* (2015). Unlike the earlier histories, especially Rougemont’s, these more recent works have, by and large, taken a more critical approach to the idea of Europe, flagging Eurocentric assumptions, and calling for a more or less radical rethinking of the idea of Europe in a postcolonial era.

Today, with the rise of nationalist populism across Europe and beyond, an ongoing refugee crisis, an increasingly unstable neoliberal global order, and the climate emergency, as well as the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the pressures not only on the European Union, but also on the very idea of Europe, are undoubtedly greater than at any time since the end of the Second World War. It is a moment when it would be all too easy either to abandon the idea of Europe altogether as a bad idea—that is, as an idea belonging to a political and cultural vision that has lost all purchase and justification—or to seek to champion the idea of Europe not only as a good idea, but as the only idea that can possibly bring peace and prosperity to those inhabiting the western part of the Eurasian continent. Both of these approaches are misguided. For, as its long history demonstrates, the idea of Europe is far from being an unambiguously good or bad idea. In all its complexity and ambiguity, the idea of Europe requires a critical approach that questions a number of long-held assumptions. Of these, the most
abiding are that European civilization owes nothing to anything beyond its borders, that it is superior to all others, and that it should serve as the model for a world civilization. All that is most problematic about the idea of Europe can be captured by the terms Eurocentrism, Euro-supremacism, and Euro-universalism. The assumption that it is necessary to pass directly and exclusively by way of European civilization to world civilization, from European humanity to humanity as such, is both one of the most enduring and one of the most questionable in the long history of the idea of Europe. No less questionable are the many stereotyping conceptions of the non-European that have shaped the history of the idea of Europe for well over two millennia: from that of a collectivist Asia, best suited to despotism, to that of a primitive and servile Africa, and that of a debased Europeanism in the United States of America.

It is no irony that, among the post-war historians of the idea of Europe, one of the greatest advocates of a federal European union, Denis de Rougemont, should be the champion of just such a Eurocentric, Euro-supremacist, and Euro-universalist idea of Europe. In the series of lectures that he delivered in Geneva in 1962, and published in the same year under the title *The Meaning of Europe*, he celebrated European civilization not only for its having discovered “the whole of the earth,” but also for its having “held sway on all the continents in succession,” and its being “imitated by the whole world.” For Rougemont, European colonialism was an almost unambiguously good thing, and the darker side of modern European history, which he put down to nationalism, was to be dismissed as “anti-Europe.” The Eurocentrism, Euro-supremacism, and Euro-universalism embraced by Rougemont have a long history, for they were already well established in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Even those who place the emphasis upon cultural or ethnic diversity as being central to European civilization have found it hard, if not impossible, to avoid championing European civilization in contradistinction to the negatively conceived non-European, precisely on account of that perceived diversity. No less questionable, although less often remarked upon, has been the assumption that the idea of Europe has consistently stood against the idea of nationalism. The relation between European cosmopolitanism and nationalism is far from being so simple, not least because Europeanism often shares many of the fundamental characteristics of nationalism.

Those histories of the idea of Europe that do not reflect upon the highly problematic nature of Eurocentrism, Euro-supremacism, and Euro-universalism are fundamentally non-critical. To call for a *critical* history of the idea of Europe is not, however, to call for a history that would finally
free us from a bad idea, resolving the crisis facing the idea of Europe by taking a final decision against it. For there is much in that history that warrants preservation. Almost all that is best in the thinking of the idea of Europe is encapsulated in what the Bulgarian-French historian, philosopher, and literary critic Tzvetan Todorov has termed “European values.” Those values are rationality, justice, democracy, individual freedom, secularism, and tolerance. Todorov argues that these values can thrive only within a civilization that manages to balance unity with diversity. In the 1973 Declaration on European Identity, issued by the nine European member-states of what was then the European Economic Community, this relation between unity and diversity was presented in terms of the distinction between civilization and culture, which dated back to the late eighteenth century. According to the Declaration, unity lay in a distinct European civilization, with a shared heritage, shared values, and shared aims. The diversity lay in the various national cultures that were embraced by this civilization. Todorov takes up this distinction between European civilization and European cultures (in the plural) when he writes of a “common European mentality,” arising from a “common history and geography,” and the diversity of the countries that make it up, each possessing its own language, its own customs, and its own challenges.

Following in the footsteps of many other theorists of the idea of Europe, Todorov argues that the emergence of these European values required the intermingling of the ancient Greek, Roman, and Hebraic/Christian sources, as well as both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The ancient Greek philosophical revolution inaugurated a practice of rationality, as distinct from scientism. From this arose science as we understand it today, and from that in turn the great technological revolutions from the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution to the present day. The idea of justice, as distinct from the law, is also to be found in ancient Greek culture. With the French Revolution, this value would blossom into the core values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. It is to ancient Greek culture, too, that Europe owes its idea of democracy. As for the notion of individual freedom, its emergence as a core European value may originate in ancient Greece, but its development has taken millennia, with European humanism playing a decisive role therein. As for secularism, understood as the separation of church and state, the theological and the political, its partial realization has come only after centuries of internecine conflict. Europe today remains a civilization deeply divided by religious convictions, above all with regard to Islam. And if one considers totalitarian ideologies to be non-secular in their compelling of the individual to embrace a state