

The Idea of Europe

Wonderful Symbol

I'd just been in England but I did not think I had arrived in Europe until I landed in Amsterdam. The UK is also "Europe" but it isn't really. No euros for one thing. An English friend I met when I returned to attend Binger Film Lab in Amsterdam a year later would say, I have to remember to call myself a European. It didn't come naturally. No one really thinks of Brits as Europeans and nor do Brits really think of themselves as Europeans. Real Europeans live on "The Continent." Europe becomes Euroland. I began to hear that when the euro was instated it made most things more expensive. Doing nicely now if you're selling. Sad or annoying or even brutal for others.

Still, how well it works, the euro, so convenient, and what a wonderful symbol. One Europe!

It was like once hearing stories from war years to remind ourselves of these days when we began to travel, before ATMs and euros, the days of travelers checks and exchange bureaus, your passport and your forms, the waiting, the many hours it all took, the great wad of cash you then had to schlep, and all the left-over coins and notes. Yes, I know some people are nostalgic for *lire* and *deutschmark* and *francs* . . . For the old borders, too. There are people who say the euro has failed, that Europe has failed. Not me. I took my first euro notes out of a cash machine in Schiphol and within a day saw the end of the idea that this trip was "one last look" at Europe.

a memoir from
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The idea of Europe that had been emerging, maybe more strongly since the euro became part of our everyday worlds, had made other thoughts possible. I could think about a "Europe" as my origin and earliest influence.

We Migrant Kids

There was a kind of tribalism among Europeans in my Australian childhood. I spoke Hungarian at home, some of the others spoke Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, or "Yugoslav" and so on, but We made up an Us. Until I was in my twenties I did not think I could have a really close friendship with someone who did not have an immigrant background. With that in common, you knew about things perceived and taken for granted among Us that They had no idea of. When the anglos said We, they assumed they made universal statements; they simply did not perceive that they excluded Us. Their We meant We Real Australians. We remember the Anzacs. We eat meat and two veg for tea. We call London home. We put up a picture of the English Queen.

We migrant kids in Australia made up a One Europe long before we ever heard of the European Union.

However minimal its form and vague our understanding, we all had a story about why we were in Australia, was it when the revolution or when the war. All the details were personal and unique, but we shared the general sense of an original disruption. Our parents did not lead the life they had been brought up for and brought us up as strangers in this land.

Whether and how any or all of my life would have been different had I grown up somewhere else can never be answered, but immigrants like us grew up aware that a mere

flash in fate's workings led to life in this country rather than another. Argentina or America, say, as it so easily might have been.

We children of migrants tried to talk about these things. I remember the sensation of gaps in the language, of the need of an explanation that had not yet come. We're different from Them: we'd skirt around it, then someone would say it. We didn't know how to put it, only that our parents came from over there and their parents came from here and acted like the country was theirs in a way it could never be ours. We were not always welcome and were supposed to be grateful to be let in at all. We knew too little about our parents' lives before. Eventually, much later, a new discourse invited new insights. When I began publishing I was labeled a "multicultural writer." Since then, the typical migrant experience has been thoroughly scrutinized, documented, deconstructed, theorized.

Varieties of Reffos

When I was growing up in Australia, the Australians did not usually make any distinctions between the varieties of reffos, as we immigrants were referred to. Short for refugees. We were also indiscriminately referred to by the term "New Australians," apparently kindly meant, at least when it was coined. That term did not refer to British migrants. As a child, I would be asked if we spoke "New Australian" at home or told that people couldn't bring themselves (insert shudder of disgust) to eat "New Australian" food. All the significant migration was from Europe in those days; the infamous White Australia policy was not overturned until 1973, to become part of the history of multiculturalism, a term that was not uttered in my childhood.

It's ok she's a wog was the re-assurance of a kindly truck driver who'd given me a ride when I was once hitching back to Sydney, to his Greek or was it Turkish mate who had a café in a town where the driver would usually stop to have a bite. The visible relaxation and gratification in the wary, tense men as I genuinely enjoyed the food, its garlic and oils and strong flavors as essential to me as them. *It's ok she's a wog*, how often did you hear that? Must have been in my twenties, still liable to hitchhike (never had a problem by the way).

The Leopard

When I began to learn a thing or two about history, I learnt a thing or two less than I should. At school I studied the unifications of Germany and Italy and gained a vague idea of Europe being made up of large nations formed from small nation-states to which their heroes brought unification. Really, I remained largely ignorant. Another idea came from or was articulated in the novel and later the film *The Leopard*: that the social order of the past began dying with the rise of new classes, for good and for ill for those concerned. The wise elders would look upon the change that largely disposed of them with serene, sad, or sardonic acceptance. Although *The Leopard* was set in the late 19th century, I felt it was about the time before the war that had interrupted history and led to our life being here, here in Australia. When I was a child my grandmother's old friend would tell me that the peasants had loved them, the artisto landowners of that faraway land long ago, before the war, before Australia, before.

Budapest Was a Showpiece

In 2008, during the time of my residency in Rome, beginning to write this memoir, I visit Budapest for a few days and there a twenty year old student tells me, "I can choose anywhere in Europe to work or study." It is fantastic, she says. Being part of Europe is fantastic. It's a declaration of feeling "more European than national." This is the moment I realize that being eligible for a Hungarian passport really means a European passport.

The first time I went to Budapest, where my parents each had lived in their youth, was in 1979. I had just arrived in Europe for the first time, aged twenty-nine. Budapest was a showpiece for communism, that's what they said about it. A place where communism would look good to the believers and to the others not that bad after all if it's all like this. I went to a Bartók opera in a fabulous old opera house and to see *Hamlet* in Hungarian in a fabulous old theatre. Tickets cost about a dollar, the communists got that right. The people I met in Budapest, distant family and elderly family friends, said that you only had to admit that people in the country were better off. They lowered their voices to whispers talking about 1956, the failed Revolution, betrayed by the Americans, as if fearful spies could chance to hear them.

I was enchanted with things that were antique: furniture, doorways, the soft yellow streetlights. These things represented the frustrations of the lack of progress to my relatives, who would have rather had, I began to understand, the choice of new appliances and modern Swedish furniture, renovated buildings and neon lights.

Eurotrash

An English comedian I saw with post-euro eyes in Sydney in early 2007 included in his repertoire a little routine in which he pretended to pretend to be European. What this meant was swishing about as if you're always on stage, and showing off your pretensions at being in the know in fashion and art. All of this in a fakey Euro accent: sophisticated, laden with worldliness; the whole act a reference to a long-playing idea of the European: *louche*, jaded, supercilious.

Europe is famous for, or signifies, centuries of art and architecture, an edge in fashion design, a natural elegance: what the comedy character of the sophisticate who revels in it is based on; the character is also based on the late-20th-century phenomenon, the idea of Eurotrash—degenerate, way too rich, lots of shiny stuff, designer everything, sunglasses always, tanned, just one trend behind the *avant garde*. Never achieving the status of a “real” European, someone who will look more elegant in something old than all the entirely latest big-name designers can do for you with all the money in the world; *you* simply haven't had any piece for long enough.

The Euros

Once in a beachside café, a simple thatch hut, in Thailand, a white man came stumbling in, loudly searching for “where the Euros hang out.” That also was the seventies. *There*, where travelers hung out together, Europeans meant non Asians, *there* Australians were also “Euros,” along with Americans.

Some of us did not travel only to meet “Euros.” Rather, we were keen on intimate insights into local life and courted the humbling experience of being where our usual assumptions did not necessarily obtain.

The Thais that also hung out in the cheap café there did so because we tourists were there. And then also because their friends were there. Local life was being re-made by our being part of it, is what we came to realize. We weren't outside of it. Cafés meant for “Europeans” had become part of local life.

Australia Day

Back from my three-month trip to Europe, back at home on the Gold Coast, I begin writing applications for the Binger Film Lab in Amsterdam and for the Australia Council's Rome studio.

Early one morning I open the curtains of my front room to see groups of young people beginning to set up camp on the beach across the road. It happens to be Australia Day 2007. A little later I get up from my desk to make some more coffee and see that they are putting up flags. The Australian flag is stretched out along the tarpaulin shades and along the barbecues. The Australian flag is made up of the Union Jack, Britain's flag, in one corner, plus seven stars representing the Southern Cross. It's an important constellation over these skies, the Southern Cross, as every school-girl knows: it'll point the way south if you need directions. And if it's not too cloudy. And if you are able to pick it out from all the other constellations in the sky.

Later, I go for a walk along the beachfront passing my next-door neighbor, the one who's there on his annual holiday; he's set up his outdoor chairs on the lawn outside the block of flats; he's wearing a flag cap and a flag something else and exchanges thumbs up gestures with the kids—young adults—going by in their flag t-shirts, flags flying from their bicycles and skateboards. Cars cruise along the esplanade sporting the flag. Flags fly from bicycles and babies' strollers. Flags are displayed in apartment windows; some will remain there, some, I've lately noticed, have been there for a while.

In the following days I gather that a Sydney daily tabloid had published a screaming, rabble-rousing, front-page editorial about the banning of the national flag at a popular outdoor concert. The paper urged its readers to refuse to bow down to this oppression of our righteous pride in being Australians and loving Australia and supporting Australia. Words to that effect.

Elsewhere it was clarified that the flags hadn't actually been banned; the spokesperson for the concert had announced that they *preferred* people not to bring them in. Therefore, evidently, the display of the national flag had already become an issue.

The display of the national flag for some people has connotations of anti-immigrant sentiment.

Not all of those people object.

There's no shortage of comment. Some find the fashion-

able flag and the new celebratory spirit of Our National Day imbued with a sinister meaning. Nationalism is way too close to jingoism for some people to ever find it appealing. (Who even says “jingoism”?) And what happened to the movement for a new flag, one without the colonial overtones of the Union Jack? Round where I was living there was no sign of the popular alternative flags—the Aboriginal flag, the rainbow flag—often displayed in inner cities or more “alternative” areas.

Or is the popular mania for flag-flying a thing to celebrate in itself, an appreciation of the freedom we comfortable people enjoy? And how nice for us that our national day is the end, or culmination, of the summer holiday season.

European Imagination

I was back after my three-month trip to Europe, living on the Gold Coast, walking along the beach every day and finding myself wondering what European meant these days.

When I was young,
I dreamed of a Europe without borders.
Now, I travel back and forth
without ever having to show my passport,
and I even get to use the same currency all over,
(even if it is pronounced differently everywhere),
but where has that big emotion gone?

Here in Berlin, I am German,
in the meantime with all my heart.
Yet, hardly do you set foot in America,
than you no longer say you are from Germany, France,
Italy or wherever.

You come “from Europe,” or you’re about to return there.
For Americans, this epitomizes culture,
history, style, “savoir vivre.”
It’s the only thing they feel strangely inferior about.
Even rather permanently.

And even when viewed from Asia, let alone other parts
of the world,
Europe appears to be a bastion of human history,
dignity, and, yes, this word again: culture.

Europe has a soul, indeed.
No need to invent or create one for our continent.
It’s there in plain sight.
It is not to be found in its politics or in its economy.
It is first and foremost embedded in its culture.

So said Wim Wenders in a speech about the need for Europe to express this soul, to achieve the popular universal appeal of America’s mass-culture films. The latest “James Bond movie,” *Casino Royale*, had been screening everywhere, as I had seen myself in the previous months, where it was playing in every city I went to. Now I’d begun reading more European journals. And found Wenders saying that apparently the media had made as much of that movie in Slovenia as in Sydney and he was asking: why aren’t European films capturing the world’s imagination that way?

The question of the European imagination became part of my thinking; not a question that needs an answer, more of an idea that floats around attaching itself to things. It seemed to have become attached to the work I wanted to do next, to the emerging sense that I needed to live in Europe for a while.

I would see what was meant by a European soul, if I could find it, if it was something to do with my soul. Not sure if I mean soul. Or what soul means. □

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