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What Does it Mean to Be European?

A Review of “The Temptation of Homo Europaeus”²

by Victor Neumann.

Perhaps one of the most contested questions in the world today revolves around the notion of European identity. As the global destination for refugees - according to the UNHCR, 12.4 million migrants entered the EU in 2022, many times more than the US-EU citizens have become so concerned about the ramifications of the influx that political fortunes are made and broken by them, as the recent election in the Netherlands shows. For the Romanian historian, Victor Neumann, there’s nothing new about the debate. Hailing from a country pushed and pulled for millenniums by imperial forces outside its borders, including the Ottomans, Habsburgs, Russians, Soviets, Western Europeans, and even the United States, he’s more than familiar with the question of diversity and what it means. In fact his book, *The Temptation of Homo Europaeus*, a work that explores the very notion of European unity going back to the Middle Ages, was thwarted by the Ceaușescu regime at a time when diverse ethnicities were being subsumed under a more nationalist, "Romanian" ideal. The mix of personal and national history, that collision, has resulted in a work of extraordinary insight, depth, and topicality.

Inspired by the conceptual-historical work of Reinhart Koselleck, the methodology at play in *Temptation* seeks a continuing thread amid an apparent tangle. In the 1980s perhaps the

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² London: Scala Arts Publishers Inc., 2020.

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evocation of Koselleck alone would have been the occasion for a fight of some kind in the Anglo-American context, given the rift between French and German theoretical schools despite the fact that they were often doing much the same thing. Cultural fragmentation surfaces in the most surprising ways and for the most surprising reason, even within what people refer to as a unity, totality, or singularity - both schools were uniquely European. With the exception of the Manchester School, which was inspired by the Frankfurt Marxists, Anglo-Americans historians often took their cue from Francophone developments, promulgated largely by Michel Foucault; while the Germans referred to their method as Conceptual History, Foucault pursued a History of Ideas. Largely similar in intent, and both left-leaning, there were key differences that led to heated words - one can find an example of the confrontation in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, in a dialogue between the author and Jürgen Habermas, standing as they were on either side of an idiosyncratic - and constructed - divide.

Fortunately, we've come a long since then; cooler heads have prevailed. Many of the "belligerents" have passed, for one, along with the heated nature of the discourse, making it possible for a kind of cross-fertilization that theorists fail to bat an eye at today. Enter Neumann's history of the notion of Europeanness, conceptualized in the allegorical figure of *homo europaeus*. To characterize it as a universalizing gesture is an understatement. Tracking developments from the thirteenth century, he demonstrates that the struggle to find commonality has always been there, initially in the form of a confessional unity, and then, when fault lines developed, in the form of secular ideas. From the Medieval to the Renaissance and up to the Enlightenment periods an impetus toward a whole or totality tracked across time. And though the Reformation and Counter-Reformation harnessed the machinery of war to sway that debate, with deadly effect, the birth of secularism that followed attempted a synthesis, a "beyond" the divisions.

It's a comforting concept in a way, *homo europaeus*, and as Neumann argues it's no fiction. He follows the way it emerged in the shift toward humanism in the lead-up to the Renaissance, which is to say in the lurch toward modernity. He refers to that turn as a "symbol of civilization" and a kind of "spiritual heights", arising in western Europe primarily, but not at all exclusively. After all, what we take as a western trope was inspired by Greek antiquity, kept alive during the Middle Ages in the Islamic centers of learning, including Baghdad, which is to say in the East; there it survived, and in the Byzantine world. And yet in some ironic twist the West is held up as

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the shining city on the hill, which eastern Europeans were encouraged to imitate and admire, never mind identify with, that is with a bill of goods, homo europaeus, manifesting a “universality of spirit” that again brought modernity into being. The cartographic illustrations in the book that map the flow of ideas appear a great deal like choreographic notes for a contemporary dance, or a visual record of the game *Twister*; a game that played out across a continent. Though Neumann stresses that “the crisis of conscience” that took place in the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries moved ostensibly in an easterly direction, in an effort to participate in “the soul of Europe” or “the civilized world”, in fact - it can't be stated enough - the realms were interdependent, the dialogue much more complicated and multi-sited.

The true heft of the work involves Neumann's encyclopedic, almost otherworldly, proliferation of examples. Believe me when I say the volume of evidence is nothing short of breathtaking - and persuasive to be sure, seated firmly as it is in the historical record. There are far too many example to do justice to them here, but a small sampling includes, among others, in-depth discussions of the Transylvanian humanist and Catholic prelate, Nicolaus Olahus (1493-1568), a proponent of the Counter-Reformation but enough of a humanist to be admired by Erasmus; the Portuguese-Jewish physician Amatus Lusitanus (1511-1568), who had a Leonardan interest in science and human anatomy to become the target of popes, inducing him to move to Thessaloniki, then part of the Ottoman Empire, where he lived out his life among the flourishing Jewish community there; the free-thinking Theophilus Corydalleus (1563-1646), a Greek neo-Aristotelian and Orthodox cleric who advocated for philosophical materialism in his courses in Constantinople; the Moldavian “philosopher prince”, Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723), a bridge figure for sure who also lived in Constantinople, for twenty-two years, and helped further a humanist dialogue that reached from the locus classicus of the Enlightenment, namely France, to the center of the Ottoman Empire, and at a time when the Habsburgs were struggling to drive the Ottomans out of Southeastern Europe; another Portuguese Jew, Daniel de Fonseca (1672-1740) who also made the trek to the Ottoman realm, followed by Bucharest and Wallachia, where he advocated for the civil rights not just of other Jews but all people, which included challenging the colonial force of the Habsburgs, those “benign dictators”; the German theologian-turned-historian and polyglot August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735-1809), who studied in Hungarian then settled in St. Petersburg, where he learned Russian and became a historian of the Slavs and a promoter of “a

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history coupled with a philosophy of ideas”; the Hungarian-born Serb, Ignaz Joseph Martinovicz (1755-1795), the secret agent who dreamt of overcoming the old order based on Enlightenment ideas, “establishing fruitful communications between Vienna, Pest, Zagreb, and Timișoara in the East, and Paris in the West”); and many, many more. Indeed the array of thinkers almost overwhelms by virtue of their numbers, not to mention the numbers of their accomplishments. In that way Neumann not only provides a wealth of resources for any reader open and visionary enough to transcend the usual clichés about West over East but shows the situation was *always* more nuanced, complicated, multi-sited, and interesting than Westerners have ever conceived.

Perhaps one of the more welcome and salutary elements in *Temptation* is the historicization of the contributions of European Jews toward the discourse on humanism, secularism, and a shared Europeanness. In a sense, the figure of the Wandering Jew epitomizes European identity. It’s ironic really, given their treatment at the hands of clerics and governments both. And yet as a group they had no small hand in furthering dialogue; as the offspring of a mixed marriage, living in the Banat - his father was a German Jew and his mother Romanian Orthodox - he has a thing or two to say on the subject. He doesn't shrink from posing questions about the whys and wherefores of the Jews’ contributions to the advancement of contemporary European identity, toward which end he cites the nomadic nature of Jewish lives over many centuries, pushed as they were by shifting politics and tolerances in Christian Europe; their love of books; their facility with languages, related to the peripatetic nature of their lives; their general tendency to de-emphasize land ownership and an effort to excel in trades - which is to say their intelligence and adaptability. So long overlooked and misunderstood as a group, again they played an intimate role in the advancement of the European project.

On another note, while the work purports to be a conceptual history, it also invokes and participates in what Foucault called a “thick history”, that is a historiography that steps down from the heights of the powerful to the gritty - or dusty - earth. I’m thinking in particular of Neumann’s reading of cemeteries and libraries, including the Jewish graveyard in his hometown, Lugoj. About that space he writes:

[There] is evidence of a strong community, not so much in size, but rather in its social, economic, and political condition. The gravestones often indicate professions, functions, activities in Lugoj society . [...]: lawyers, doctors, merchants, judges, pharmacists, landowners, factory owners. Some of the inscriptions date from the eighteenth century,

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indicating the first stage of their settlement in Lugoj. They are in Hebrew, German and Hungarian.

In a sense the Banatian Jews constitute a microcosm of the modern world, homo europaeus at its most successful, which is to say diverse, derived from so many points on the compass as Banatian Jews were all of which Neumann discerns by reading gravestones.

I'd argue there's a dialogue in the book to be found between cemeteries and libraries both, and Neumann reads the latter with similar insight; it's clear he's spent an hour or several thousand researching libraries in particular. He writes that a library

“can be [. . .] seen as an institute of learning that transmits ideas and propagates culture. In this regard it functions like other institutions: school and church, printing press and publishing house. . . . [L]ibraries establish enduring communications and even a sense of emancipation, bringing the communities of the world together.”

He discusses individual libraries, including Matthias Corvinus' collection in Buda, that served as “a unique cultural center, European in content and form”; the Transylvanian and Banatian libraries of Sibiu, Blaj, Alba Iulia, Târgu Mureș, Cluj, Oradea, Sfântu, Brașov, Arad, Radna, and Timișoara. He discusses them in detail, their provenance, size, breadth, and upkeep, such that it becomes clear that libraries, like cemeteries, constitute a kind of thoroughfare, a crossroad where ideas and practices land, not to rest but to inspire anyone curious and intelligent enough to be open to what they have to offer. Libraries, like cemeteries, transcend geography, but cultural prejudice as well.

One of the most insightful elements of the book is a recent addition to the 2020 English translation, namely a new Afterword that queries, and in many ways deconstructs, the notion of margins and center, or center and periphery. In the postcolonial discourse popular in the Anglo-American academy of the 1980s and 90s the words margin and center were bandied about freely and in some sense carelessly. Neumann takes issue with the reductive nature of the binarism - as Derrida reminded us, all binarisms mask a hierarchy - but he also points up the wrong-headedness and even offensiveness of the concept. Margins to center: marginal to what? Or whom? The notion implies an ontology, one we all know but so rarely state openly, namely that the West - France, Germany, and England - constitute a centrality, and everywhere else is peripheral too it. That very thinking is the problem. It's akin to saying there's a place where things happen, outside of which one finds Nowhere, as though Nowhere were possible anywhere on the planet. It's a

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crucial point, one that asserts the notion of multiple and even infinite centers - period. Or to put it in another way, in the universalizing gesture of the book, the globe itself operates as a center.

Also groundbreaking in the Afterword, familiar to anyone who has read Neumann's *The Banat of Timișoara: A European Melting Pot*, is the assertion that the Banat, a small region in Southwestern Romania that was highly contested historically, and never more than during the Ceaușescu regime, stands as the true representation of the European project in the ideational, historical - and lived - profusion of its diversity. Long before the collapse of its colonial heritage, when Western Europe began to see formerly colonized citizens turn to the metropolitan "center", the Banat had been a petri dish for a multitude of ethnicities, nationalities, classes, confessions, occupations, and ideas - it was indeed the original melting pot. In a sense it was Europe before Europe, a site where universalizing gestures surpass the theoretical into the realm of praxis. Again, Neumann hails from there, which in many ways informs his vision of a Europe capable of transcending the diversity that has tended to trip it up, to the point of being deadly, over the centuries. In many ways the Afterword alone is worth the price of the book, one that, it must be said in passing, has been exquisitely translated into English by Dana Miu and Neil Titman.

What isn't stated in the book, but what every reader knows, and what begs stating, is that the humanist or secular turn in Europe, the espousal of reason over dogma, has been a failed project in many ways. It wasn't only Freud who pointed up the lie of rational man. More recently postmodernists recognized the fact as well - it was one of the bones of contention that united the French and German schools. What did Enlightenment humanism, secularism, and rationalism result in but a major mess and worse, including the slave system; colonial excess and oppression; two world wars; the ascendancy of an insane dictator - several; forced deportations and concentration camps; a holocaust; a cold war that dragged the entire globe into its enmities; the excesses of red-meat capitalism; environmental destruction; and so much more. Neumann refers to the tendency toward a European ideal as a *temptation* for a reason. The rhetoric has been a comforting lure for sure, a wonderful fantasy, an alternative among nations that have fallen prey to strongmen, Ottoman, Soviet, American, and home grown. The language of reason beckons perhaps because in a world of superpowers the inclination is to pick your poison, whether you want to or not - that has never been more true than it is today. The problem is if homo europaeus

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disappoints and even fails, what is the alternative? The diversity is certainly there, unlike anywhere else in the world, if it could only be seen as a strength instead of a threat. What is the alternative?

In *The Temptation of Homo Europaeus* Neumann advocates for a beyond, a looking past the endless minoritizing and splitting of groups so common today - the obsession with divisions - toward a notion of commonality, even as we acknowledge difference (they're not the same thing). We have division down pat; what we are poor at envisioning is a shared humanity. Notions of centrality and marginality only further estrange; they miss the mark. They also serve to massage old power structures that have long outgrown their use. It's for a good reason that the European Commission has designated Timișoara, which the Habsburgs referred to as the Jewel of the East, as a European Capital of Culture in 2023, which is to say a center, even an example. Anyone who's been there understands why: the layering of history and culture, apparent in the architecture and the people, eastern, western, northern, and southern; Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and Islamic; Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and Enlightenment; European and Soviet; are evident everywhere. It's no mistake that the end of the Ceaușescu regime, along with everything it represented, was initiated there; its demise made possible a new turn, toward a recognition of Banat's Europeanness, going back many centuries and even millennia.

The broad cultural embrace that the Banat represents, the place that in a sense gave birth both to Neumann and his historical perspective, has a thing or two to say to the West: embodying diversity is the only way. That is the through-line of *The Temptation of Homo Europaeus*, a book that not only Europeans but anyone on the American continent would do well to read at this time in history. It has never been more germane or topical, more worth reading, at a moment when what people call The West has become so tripped up over the question of diversity.