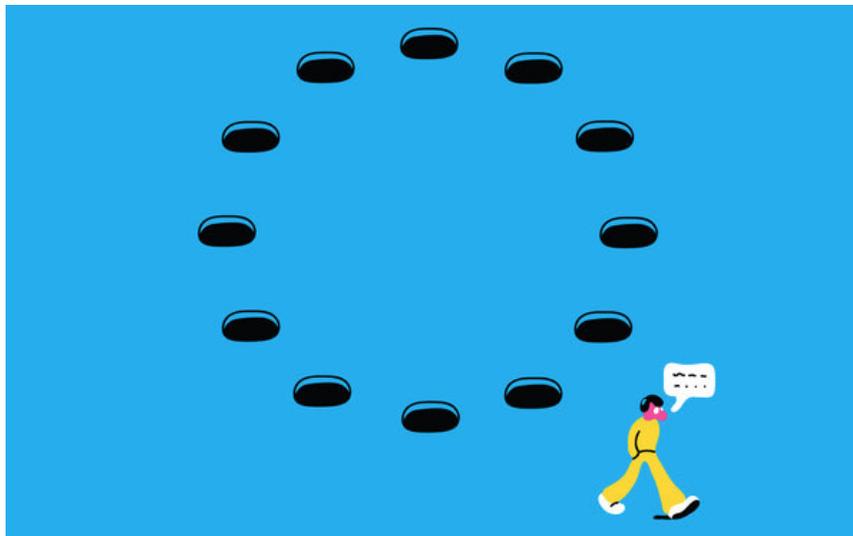


OPINION

Are There Any Europeans Left?



Oscar Bolton Green

By OLIVIER GUEZ
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PARIS

SO Greece didn't collapse, and Europe began breathing easier. But not for long. Italy's rebellious voters, who opted for a flamboyant billionaire and a clown, reminded us last week how deeply in crisis the Continent is. Meanwhile, France is going it virtually alone in Mali, and Britain talks openly of jumping the European ship altogether. This is a crisis not just of Europe's currency, but of its soul.

If there ever was an emerging vision of a united Europe, it is falling apart for lack of support from its various peoples. Each has its own resentments or suspicions of its partners. But all suffer the same lack: very few of their citizens think of themselves first as Europeans.

Oddly enough, it turns out, back in the late 20th century, the leaders and institutions of the Old Continent never understood that to build a common Europe, they needed to find, or cultivate, Europeans with a Continental spirit, to give the project a federating mortar.

How could this be? The history of Europe's past half-century is usually depicted as step after step toward a common future. But maybe, to understand where we are now, the story should start earlier — not with the coalescing of France and Germany in the 1960s but with the model of Europe in the decade before the calamity of 1914.

In important ways, the Europe of 1913 was more cosmopolitan and European than the Europe of today. Ideas and nationalities mingled and converged in a hotbed of creativity. That year saw the height of Futurism, the beginnings of abstraction in Picasso and Braque, the debut of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," the publication of "Swann's Way" by Proust. Collaborations to uncover science's deepest secrets jumped borders easily. The architecture of imperial Austria and republican France found imitators in smaller gems of cities throughout Central and Southern Europe; they were called Little Vienna or Little Paris.

And there were large communities of cosmopolitan expatriates — "passeurs" between cultures, notably urbanized Jews, as well as German minorities, scattered throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Though prejudice ran deep and they were harshly mistrea

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in many places, in others they could identify as citizens of a broader European group, not merely the land they inhabited, and aspire to respect and comfort.

Later, at the hands of totalitarians, most of the Jews would be slaughtered, and the Germans — like other groups — deported to their country of origin. Alongside their greater crimes, Hitler and Stalin thus did their parts to erase the idea of cosmopolitanism as the old Europe had understood it.

Which makes the usual starting point of the modern European narrative — the rubble of 1945 — all the more poignant. An overwhelming imperative to rebuild, augmented by the cold war, united Western Europe and pushed West Germany center stage. Europeans prospered in an increasingly common market. But the unifying element was not optimism as much as dread — fear of another war among themselves or of Soviet expansion was what spurred West Europeans to bridge differences if they developed.

After the Berlin Wall fell, Western Europe expanded east and seemed to be serenely approaching the End of History — peace, prosperity, social security, democracy, with a unifying token, the euro, from Helsinki, Finland, to Seville, Spain. For its more than 400 million people, Europe became a theme park, museum, supermarket — the EasyJet continent: efficient, fast, open to all at little cost.

But now Europe asks for sacrifices and solidarity, and it finds itself on the decline. Everywhere, populists and nationalists gain. Managing austerity, fighting debt — this, it turns out, is no way to unite Europe.

Perhaps Europe's leaders should have been more alarmed when enthusiasm for unity began fraying even before the crisis. In 2005, French and Dutch voters blocked progress toward a European constitution. Meanwhile, the newly free countries of Central and Eastern Europe — Milan Kundera's "kidnapped West," disfigured by 45 years of Soviet occupation — hadn't so much re-Europeanized their economies as globalized them. The same is true of Europe's rising generation; it knows the pleasures of a modern economy. But those are available globally to anyone with their level of wealth and privilege. Apart from that euro in their pockets, Europe's young people do not feel Europe's presence on a daily basis.

Leaders of opinion, commerce and government generally agree that the Continent could benefit from greater political unity, since globalization favors continental blocs. But the nations and peoples of Europe would have to give up great areas of sovereignty, and nothing has prepared them for this. At the rate things are going, if Europeans are asked to push for unity, they will refuse.

For that reason, Europe must find a new idea, a new vision, a mortar for the future. Familiar lofty principles will not be enough. The rights of man, pluralism, freedom of thought, free-market social democracy — all are in the nations' constitutions; citizens don't need the European Union to supply them.

How, then, to establish emotional ties to Europe?

Perhaps the answer is to conceive of a Europe in the flesh, with colors, smells, folklore, poetic force. And variety. The goal is not one formed on familiar principles — common language or history or bloodlines — but the very opposite: a supranational, fundamentally Continental cultural understanding and reference point. Mr. Kundera talks of Europe's "maximum diversity in minimum space" — a notion perhaps as powerful as "liberté, égalité, fraternité," or "all men are created equal."

Such a foundational ideal is the sine qua non of Continental political unity. A European culture at large would allow for ties that no longer exist but used to, when the passeurs and the Little Viennas and the flow of brilliance across borders conveyed what it meant to consider oneself a European.

It could be achieved through a European civic curriculum in every school; through emphasis on mastering other languages; through increasing exchange programs (across ages and classes); through improving mobility; through unifying European health and retirement systems; through electing European representatives directly responsible to their constituents; through more equal treatment of guest workers and immigrants.

Now there's food for thought. François Hollande, Angela Merkel and especially David Cameron: remember the passeurs! Encourage the creation of a *single* European public

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cultural space. Give us a vision for the peoples of Europe: make them dream of being one people, and leave your ambiguities behind. If you sincerely aspire to a political Europe, then take up the responsibility with courage and a vision that goes beyond the next elections and the next economic bump in the road.

Promote the Continent's spiritual unity, organized around its diversity.

*Olivier Guez is a [contributor](#) to the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the author of a book about Jews in Germany since 1945. This essay was translated by Edward Gauvin from the French.*

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