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# Europe and its Historians

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STUART WOOLF

## Histories of Europe and the nation-state

Histories of Europe have a long genealogy, whose origins can probably be found in the defence of Christian Europe, above all in humanist circles, against the threat of Muslim Ottoman expansion.<sup>1</sup> In the course of the Enlightenment and the Napoleonic years, earlier elements that were regarded as characterising all Europe crystallised into a sense common to European elites – described as ‘civilisation’ – of the distinctiveness and superiority of Europeans and Europe from all other regions of the world. If we analyse what was understood by this ‘idea of Europe’, as I have argued elsewhere, we can identify a number of constituent elements of Europe’s progress that, for their authors, explain its distinctiveness, particularly when compared with the historical experiences or contemporary condition of states and societies elsewhere in the world.<sup>2</sup> These elements can be summarised as: (i) a secular cultural tradition, originating in classical antiquity, that revived (after the ‘barbarian’ interlude) with the Renaissance and culminated in contemporary France; (ii) individual entrepreneurship as the motor of European economic dynamism and strength; (iii) liberty as the defining quality of governance; (iv) the balance of power between a limited number of leading states; and (v) civilised manners, or *civilités*, understood (in Norbert Elias’s sense<sup>3</sup>) as publicly accepted regulatory mechanisms of the forms of social relationships. The Restoration, as Federico Chabod has clarified, extended this corpus of values attributed to Europe through a recovery of the Middle Ages and Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

‘Civilisation’, a noun that entered French and English usage in the 1760s,<sup>5</sup> was synonymous with Europe, as was ‘progress’. The two words incorporated the different

<sup>1</sup> Derry Hay, *Europe: the Emergence of an Idea* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1937).

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Woolf, ‘The construction of a European world-view in the Revolutionary-Napoleonic years’, *Act and Process*, 137 (November 1992), 72–101.

<sup>3</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process: the History of Manners*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Federico Chabod, *Storia dell’idea d’Europa* (Bari: Laterza, 1961), ch. 6. Chabod only included François Guizot – the major exponent of the importance of the Middle Ages for European civilization – in his third (and last) lecture course on the idea of Europe: Stuart Woolf, ‘Reading Federico Chabod’s *Storia dell’idea d’Europa* half a century later’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 7, 1 (2002), 279–80.

<sup>5</sup> Lucien Febvre, ‘Civilisation: l’évolution d’un mot et d’un groupe d’idées’, in *Idées. Pour une histoire et pour servir* (Paris: Seppen, 1962).

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