The study of the history of the idea of Europe has now amassed quite a pedigree, and includes a number of its own subfields. A recent example makes the point: entitled *Europe in Crisis* (Hewitson and D’Auria 2012), it comprises a historical study of the period 1917 to 1957 (‘Europe before the EC’), and covers a wide range of aspects of the history of the idea of Europe, including incipient political integration, various plans for uniting Europe (Coudenhove-Kalergi, Schmitt, et al.), European art and visual images as expressions of the idea of Europe, the European ‘spirit’, and federalism. Sometimes this approach can result in a history of the intellectual movements that have led to the current European integration project. Indeed, there is an important group of historians who investigate recent European integration, rather than apply political science to the past, and their work also covers what people thought Europe should or did consist of (e.g., Kaiser 2007, or Segers 2012). However, most avoid a straight, teleological, European Union (EU)-targeted

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approach, pointing out that many developments in the history of the idea of Europe had little to do with what eventually became the EU. Indeed, the EU can be viewed as just one manifestation of Europe – perhaps the most important one to date, but one of several in recent centuries, and certainly not the only representation of the idea of what Europe is or should be.

There is thus a clear distinction to be drawn between the history of Europe and the history of the idea of Europe (although inevitably there is some overlap). The history of the idea first attracted systematic attention during and after the Second World War, for example from Federico Chabod (1961, posthumously published; further examples are summarized in Swedberg 1994). This new wave of authors on Europe, which continued into the 1970s and included a number of ‘founding fathers’ of European integration like Henri Brugmans and Denis de Rougemont, was concerned primarily with the history of a consciousness of Europe, an Europabild. It was a variant within the history of ideas: rather than charting the objective reality of European history, the interest was in how Europeans had thought and dreamed about the continent. Various ‘staging points’ began to be recognized in the evolution of a consciousness of Europe: medieval Christianity and Charlemagne’s empire, the Enlightenment, nationalist Europe in the nineteenth century, reactions to hegemonic attempts by Louis XIV, Napoleon and Hitler, and the European project of the later twentieth century (ibid.).

Much of the sub-discipline undoubtedly concerns the political, interested as it is in political ideas and plans about how Europe (or parts of it) might come together in some kind of peaceful organization, in a centuries-old attempt to avoid war. This can include notions of how to ‘run’ or organize Europe from above (Napoleon, the Congress System, the League of Nations, the Third Reich, the EU), but it can also extend to studies of what kinds of shared structures make up Europe, whether they be demographic, economic, social, cultural or political. Related to this is the study of various competing ideologies and their views on Europe – from Fascists to Christian Democrats – and of adherents of various kinds of integration (supranational, federal, intergovernmental, etc.).

The other side of the coin has more to do with the study of ‘Europeanness’: what it means to people (if and when anything) to feel European. Often this concerns a kind of history of the invocation of Europe in support of some specific cause (the First Crusade, Italian nationalism, Kosovo separatism), or seeing Europe as a set of values or customs, or as a culture (whether a high culture or a more popular one) or civilization. There is evidence, certainly since the Renaissance period, of quite widely held ideas of what European civilization consisted of: a number of scholars therefore investigate those ideas, who held them, what the essential components of that ‘civilization’ were, and how they changed over the years and centuries. And those ideas about European civilization have resulted in proselytizing and culture-export at certain times: this Eurocentric tendency is also studied.

Linked to this interest in European culture is the study of European identity, in past and present. Fifteen or 20 years ago there was very little work done in this area, but (partly stimulated by the Framework Programmes) there have been floods of it coming off the presses (just one example among the many is Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). This has to do with collective identity, and the perception of it; one way of expressing it would be in terms of Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ (1991), which studies how people who have never and never will meet each other can – mainly through the media – develop strong senses of community or joint identity, especially at the national level. Is there a European identity in that sense, and to what extent is it in competition with national identity? What attributes and norms have Europeans thought they shared? One of the seminal texts in this line of investigation (long before imagined communities or identities were common parlance in the academy) was Denys Hay’s Europe: The Emergence of an Idea (1957), which set out, with great erudition, to unearth what ‘Europe’ meant to the elites of Europe (kings,
politicians, academics, clerics, artists, successful writers). This traditional route has been followed by many, such as Wilson and Van der Dussen (1995), Mikkeli (1998), Pagden (2002), and Wintle (2009): they have tried to establish what people thought Europe meant as a set of values (rather than simply a political structure), and therefore its relative place as a civilization in the world at large. And although there were important elements of continuity (e.g., the Christian church), these views are seen to have evolved throughout the centuries.

There is also a group that focuses on the attitudes of people toward a European Union identity: on the basis of surveys like Eurobarometer and focus-group research (e.g., Bruter 2005), scholars want to know what interests citizens about the EU (Cerutti and Lucarelli 2008). Of course politicians are particularly keen to know how they might press the buttons to enhance that identification with the EU, in order to increase the political legitimacy of the E-institutions (e.g., Shore 2000; Sassatelli 2009).

Finally, in tune with post-modernism at large, there has been an acceptance that there is not just one European identity, but a very wide disparity of identification with Europe, of European narratives, and of interest in Europe and the idea of Europe (Delanty 1995). This has led to many recent studies of what Europe means to different groups of people, and how the idea of Europe is actually constructed and manufactured by smaller, local peripheral and even external groups, and not just elites. It is now accepted that Europe is also constructed and employed in identity-building processes experienced by migrants, pressure groups, exiles, the underprivileged, and those from outside Europe. Europe is now seen to be made and have been made in many different places, and endlessly different ways, rather than simply by elites in the capital cities of Europe (e.g., Bialasiewicz 2011).

People have been thinking about Europe and European identity (although they did not call it that) for at least 500 years, and probably rather longer. If it is necessary in European Studies to draw constant connections to the current EU situation, then it can be very strongly argued that a long historical process of cultural self-appraisal and self-representation has helped to determine Europe’s current position in the world. And that self-image is and has been contested. ‘Europe’ and European identity are not immutable historical and geographical givens, but rather form a historically and spatially mobile matrix. It is important to examine the ways in which Europe and European identities have been made across time and space, both within and beyond the EU’s current borders. The history of the idea of Europe and its identities, with its long-term perspective, can and does make a powerful contribution to understanding and analysis of current European issues.

So the field of the history of the idea of Europe is thriving and growing. There is at least one web-based research group that claims the subject (<www.historyideaofeurope.org>), and a recent enormous conference volume on the idea and identity of Europe (Pinheiro 2012), with its many dozens of articles, shows how truly wide the subject area is, and how it has expanded in recent decades. Any attempt at comprehensive coverage of the latest results would require a bibliographical book; I shall close with a brief indication of some current developments, especially with regard to a longer-term history of the idea of Europe.

Those current trends in the subdiscipline would include an ongoing analysis of the various ages of European consciousness, an awareness of the Eurocentric nature of the exercise as a whole, and a concomitant move to place the history of the idea of Europe in a more global context. The Vienna historian Wolfgang Schmale (2008), for example, has stepped back from his own erudite work on European history, and pointed to a succession of...
narratives of Europe. First Europe was imagined as a Christian commonwealth, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, followed by a view of the essence of Europe as a culture, in the early modern period and especially in the Enlightenment. After the Napoleonic interlude he sees the European idea as adopted by various different groups in the nineteenth century, whether a family of monarchs, an international liberal bourgeoisie, a brotherhood of democrats or a Europe-wide proletariat. This was also the age of Romantic nationalism, which was intensely European but at the same time detracted from any implementation of a structure of European unity: an early manifestation of the dichotomy between unity and diversity in Europe, enriched by the role of literary figures and philologists, and by many regional versions of an idea of Europe (Eastern Europe, Mitteleuropa, etc.: Neubauer 2006). In the twentieth century the European idea was taken up by different groups of idealists, from the left, the right, and the Christian-Democrat center, and in the twenty-first century the emphasis falls more on the individual citizen within Europe (and the EU), reaching well beyond the old core of Northwest Europe, and hoping at least for what Schmale (2008) calls a ‘coherence in diversity’. Another example of an attempt to refine an analysis of the ‘narratives’ of Europe is Joep Leerssen’s view that in the modern period before 1945 the European narrative was one of triumphalist Eurocentrism, but that certainty was annihilated by the need to confront the Holocaust; since then Europe’s narrative has been one of reflexivity and reconciliation (in European Cultural Foundation 2010).

There is a growing awareness in European Studies as a whole of the Eurocentric implication of studying Europe, and some who specialize in the history of the idea of Europe are paying more attention to the Eurocentric nature of such ideas, especially in the modern era. We have long been aware of the arrogance of the Enlightenment view of European culture, despite its occasional sympathy for the ‘noble savage’ and for other civilizations. But the ‘White Man’s Burden’ at the core of some if not most ideas of Europe, implying the superiority of European institutions, democracy, and civilization as a whole, has been remarkable, even immediately after disasters like the Second World War, and certainly in the period after the breakup of the Soviet Union (Stråth 2000): the idea of Europe is one that is often self-confident and even imperialist, and historians are beginning to recognize that more and more. In that respect, one of the answers and future directions that the subdiscipline might take would be to place the idea of idea of Europe in a more global context, in a bid to connect the ebb and flow and evolution of such ideas and awareness of European ‘civilization’ with the related or even simultaneous flow of other ideas of self-aggrandizement and idealism, right across the globe.

It is a space to watch.

References


