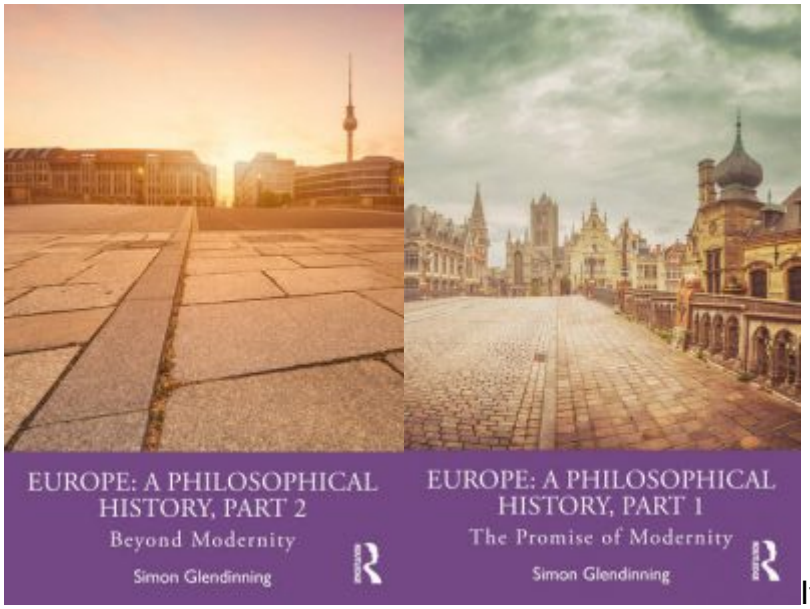
Book Review: Europe: A Philosophical History, Parts 1 and 2 by Simon Glendinning

In his two-volume work **Europe: A Philosophical History***,* **Simon Glendinning** *explores how emblematic European philosophers have understood Europe and detected a pattern or trajectory to its development. Full of illuminating detail, there is much to be gained from reading these books, writes* **Jonathan Wolff***, as Glendinning's skill as reader, expositor and critic shines throughout.*

Europe: A Philosophical History, Part 1: The Promise of Modernity **and** ***Europe: A Philosophical History, Part 2: Beyond Modernity*****. Simon Glendinning. Routledge. 2021.**



It's an unusual experience to start reading a work of philosophy and to have so little idea what one might encounter. *Europe: A Philosophical History*, in two erudite, sometimes playful and always highly sophisticated volumes, starts out by defying obvious assumptions. It is not a history of European Philosophy. It is not, exactly, an account of the role of philosophy in European history. And author Simon Glendinning implies that now, of all times, is an unlikely

moment to be writing about the canon of philosophical thought in Europe, the traditional refuge of the dead white male. But how to overcome this sense of a time that is passing seems to be what motivates Glendinning's project. His tantalising, and at first somewhat enigmatic, self-characterisation is that the book presents 'a philosophical history of philosophical history' (Part 1, xlx).

One way of presenting such a history is to trace how the emblematic European philosophers of each period understood Europe and the ways in which they detected a pattern or trajectory to its development, in what is itself a developing pattern of interpretation. And typically, they took Europe's history to be the universal standard-bearer for history as a whole. Broadly, *Part 1: The Promise of Modernity* is a story of Enlightenment cosmopolitan optimism, grappling with and attempting to transcend its Greco-Biblical legacy, and *Part 2: Beyond Modernity* the coming to terms with existential pessimism.

We are treated to what starts as a triumphant narrative that ultimately loses confidence in itself, but with an elusive promise that the idea of Europe is not entirely exhausted. Yet, as I have said, the book is not at all a straightforward history of ideas. At its root is the idea that there is some intimate connection between Europe's self-understanding and philosophy; that 'Europe is itself a philosophical phenomenon' (Part 1, xv) and especially of Greek origin.

The book sets out to explain this conception, or rather to display it in its rich variation. And ultimately we find that the idea inherent in Europe that remains unexhausted is initially an underwhelming one: the power of self-critique. Yet this is turned in a constructive direction in which thinkers of European origin transcend the distinction between the 'Eurocentric' and the 'anti-Eurocentric' to create some level of acceptance of 'the other' and a much more open understanding and corpus of ideas. One of the central observations of the book is that Europe is characterised by 'unity in difference' and so, by extension, there may be no limit to how much difference it can absorb.

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Reading the books was, for me, like a stylish balloon ride over terrain that was sometimes very familiar, and sometimes rather exotic. At points we travel close to ground, with a view of fine details, while at other times we are at altitude where only the broad outlines were visible. The terrain is philosophical and historical, and, initially, theological, linguistic and anthropological, much more than geographical.

Though we glimpse other thinkers, we spend time visiting Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Paul Valéry, and as we come up to date, we travel through a more surprising vista including T.S. Eliot, Lenin, Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams, Stanley Cavell, Francis Fukuyama, Jean-François Lyotard and David Wiggins. At all times we are elegantly guided by Glendinning himself, assisted by incisive, if sometimes cryptic, navigational aids supplied by Jacques Derrida. And like most balloon rides, the purpose of the mode of transport is not so much to arrive at a destination by the fastest route, but the exhilaration of the journey.

Although the broadest outlines are familiar, the strength of the book is the illumination at the level of detail it provides, including insight into what's not on the page of the authors discussed but their assumptions and, in some cases, prejudices. Europe, entangled with empire and privilege hoarding, is a cradle of culture, with a superior attitude to the rest of the world that never seems to fade, even though any entitlement to such an attitude increasingly comes into question over time.

Although the book starts with a resolutely European focus, the thinkers homed in upon in detail are primarily Germanic, supplemented with twentieth-century reflection from France, England and North America. The spectre of making the discourse overly Germanic is briefly raised early on in connection with Heidegger, as is, in the second volume, Jürgen Habermas's question of whether the European Union is in practice a way of 'Germanising Europe'. An anxiety is expressed about identifying Europe with its Western parts to the exclusion of those further East, but the omission of the North and South is striking. Spain, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, Portugal and so on are mentioned almost exclusively in terms of economic and political union, and not in their contribution to European ideas. Greece, introduced in its ancient form as the initial synthesiser of the philosophical tradition, does not reappear. Did thinkers from these other European countries really have nothing of worth to contribute to the narrative on the nature of Europe? Or was the nature of Europe simply not as important a topic for those outside German, French and British influence?

A second question flows from the first. If 'European' is at least heavily 'Germanic', how much of the more recent exhaustion of European ideas is to be attributed to the intellectual hollowing out of the Germanic world that followed the rise of the Nazis? As many have observed, Vienna, for example, went from the intellectual capital of the world to a backwater of thought in little more than a decade. Within philosophy, the flight of the Frankfurt School, as well as figures such as Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper and Rudolf Carnap, together with the tragic suicide of Walter Benjamin and the discrediting of Heidegger, are probably the best-known episodes. But there are many, many, more, and every discipline has similar tales to tell. It is beyond the imagination of most of us to think what Europe might have been now without the vortex of destruction and emigration brought on by the Nazis. According to some reports, German university faculties had already shrunk by 40 per cent by 1938, with even greater loss in the social sciences, and much more to follow in the war years.

Yet though touched on, the intellectual devastation of Germany is not part of the central story. Part 1 of the book takes us past World War One to the brink of World War Two, and Part 2 through the Cold War, but the horrors of World War Two, while mentioned several times, are largely present only by the shadow they leave. True, in political and economic terms, there is no doubt that American dominance had asserted itself by the early decades of the twentieth century, but intellectually this is less obviously the case.

The two volumes are said to be independent of each other, though obviously designed as a pair, but this independence raises the further question of how much of each book depends on its part in a continuing narrative, or whether each chapter is self-standing. There is a clear sense of an argument building over the two volumes, but the book is also a series of highly insightful engagements, sometimes feeling more like a collection of connected essays. And yet although each chapter could be read alone, the two books together have a powerful cumulative effect. And indeed one repeating highlight of the book for me is to see Derrida's work regularly used in highly illuminating ways, rather than treated as an object of veneration or a mystic.

But this is just one example of Glendinning's ability to think alongside the staggering range of philosophers he introduces. There is much to be gained from every chapter of *Europe: A Philosophical History*, and at every stage Glendinning's skill as reader, expositor and critic shines through.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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