

Shaping the future of European studies

*The humanities play only a marginal role in academic research on Europe. Yet as **Simon Glendinning** argues, there is much to gain from integrating the perspectives of humanities scholars into contemporary European studies.*

Humanities scholarship has for some time been marginal to the mainstream of regional studies of Europe. In that mainstream, Europe is not explored in relation to its cultural identity and heritage but as the regional site of a legal, economic and political project. The academic study of Europe today is mostly the business of the social sciences, not the humanities.

Many students and scholars of Europe feel some regret about having to put aside humanistic things and are delighted when they get a passing glance at the Europe of *denkers und dichters*. Following a conversation with me about my book project on the philosophy of Europe, a friend who is just such a student of Europe gave me a book that had delighted him and which, he hoped, might inspire me too.

The book was not a work of philosophy but a work of history. Written in 1957 by Denys Hay, formerly Professor of Medieval and Renaissance History at the University of Edinburgh, the book is called [*Europe: The Emergence of an Idea*](#). It was reprinted in a Revised Edition in 1968, with a new introduction and a rewritten final chapter.

The dust jacket of the Revised Edition, the edition my friend had given to me, includes a quote from Hay's fellow medievalist Geoffrey Barraclough describing the original text as "agreeable". The first striking thing to note about the Revised Edition is that the publisher's blurb describes the new introduction as "controversial".

I think my friend had enjoyed what was agreeable and had not noticed what was controversial. Indeed, what made the new introduction controversial in 1968 is likely to go completely unnoticed by most scholars in regional studies of Europe today. That is because the controversy was over questions concerning the proper academic formation of such studies, and these questions have been, for some time now, settled – even if that settlement is sometimes felt somehow unsettling because, as a result, agreeable books

like Hay's are now regarded as more ornamental than integral to such studies.

However, whether my friend knew it or not, and I suspect not, Hay's book was not itself merely ornamental to the now familiar settlement. Despite being a historian, or perhaps because of the historian he was, Hay's book strongly promoted the settlement that has since been established. The central argument of the book is that Europe emerges as a suitable object of regional studies only relatively recently and attains a genuine "self consciousness" of its regionality only after the Second World War (xiv).

In that post-War world, Hay argued, the newly emerging focus on Europe as a theme for regional studies should then be centrally concerned with "concrete problems" that stand in the way of achieving European integration, concrete problems in "law, finance and politics which closer union would raise" (xix). There's not much room for the humanities here. From now on the humanities would contribute a charming (or, for some, embarrassing) tag on.

Against the grain of the contemporary mainstream, I believe a case can be made that regional studies of Europe today need to undergo something like a reformation. To understand why, it will prove helpful to revisit what was at stake in the "debate" that Hay experienced in 1968 as "dragging him towards questions which he might not otherwise concern himself" (xv). As we shall see, it concerns what place, if any, a scholar in the humanities should have in the formation of European Studies.

The new field of European studies

In its sweeping survey, covering some two thousand years, Denys Hay's book guides its readers through the history of the idea of Europe, taking us up to the emergence of the idea that we are familiar with today; the idea of Europe as "a region" whose identity has become inseparable from "a political programme" (127). In the concluding sentence of the first edition, a sentence Hay excised from the Revised Edition, he said it straight, even if with considerable rhetorical flair:

"The name of a continent was then to grow into a symbol of a way of life and was to prove, no less than the faith which had preceded it, capable of attracting loyalties and hatreds, missionaries and martyrs."

Quite a sentence. Quite a sentence to cut from the end – now included instead in the “controversial” new introduction, where it is included only as excised (xiii).

Alert to something in his own final words as he read them again a decade later, Hay catches a change of “mood” from then and now (xiii). The mood of the mid-fifties had, Hay says, “provoked” the book’s writing, and not just his; books like it were just then being written by other scholars too. And one thing projected by work written in that mood was something Hay would not later regret at all: it looked for all the world that this mood-launched development would “deepen” sufficiently for Europe to become the focus of new “regional studies” (xiv).

And something did deepen sufficiently for this to happen. Research in the new field of “European Studies” really did start to appear in European universities just then. But just as they did, it seems that Hay began to feel some considerable unease about the way that this scholarship was threatening to develop – a worrying trajectory that, in its catching the new mood, his own original text might have got caught up in too.

His own mood in 1957, like that of a number of other scholars of Europe, risked them becoming, he feared, “pure poets”, rising “above the mere facts of life” and engaging in the “facile manipulation” of historical fact (xviii-xix). He came to think his final sentence was an expression of that risk, and he cut it out. What Hay felt was needed in 1968 was something else. What he wanted to see more of were “solid studies” and “a much soberer academic approach” (xix).

Was it this call for sobriety that made Hay’s introduction controversial? It’s certainly not friendly to identify someone’s best efforts at writing about Europe as facile or as poetry – even if you suppose yourself to have been caught up in the mood that provoked it. But the controversy does not stop there.

Countering myths

Hay wants to put the nascent development and formation of academic regional studies of Europe on a secure path and on a path as regional studies, not something else. And he wants his contribution as an historian both to “erode legends” about Europe’s past and counter “new myths” about Europe’s present that would take the new studies in an unhappy direction (xvii).

The new myths he has in view are conjured up with what he regards as a noble aim and one that he fully shares: to “promote European unity” (xvii). But if that unity does come about as a practical reality, it should, he insists, be understood as the consequence of “nineteenth century optimism” and, more directly, “the severe realities of twentieth-century economic and military power” – and *not* legends concerning the “transcendental legacies” of “Greece and ‘Romania’ and Christendom” that some academics were, he felt, still too inclined to eulogise about or simply invent (xix).

In other words, what should not be so significant or central to the formation of European regional studies is precisely what, tacitly and never in that name, “European Regional Studies” actually had been hitherto and was still threatening, now it was becoming actual in that name, to remain: scholarship that was devoted not to the solid and soberer matters of contemporary law, economics and politics but to high-flying ideas concerned with “the literature, the art and the history” of Europe since antiquity (xiv). In short, what Hay’s new introduction tilts at above all is “European scholarship in the humanities” as it had “for centuries” been undertaken (xiv).

Here Hay does have a controversial point to make and a significant punch to throw. European scholarship in the humanities hitherto really had not thought of itself as contributing to anything like “regional studies” at all. On the contrary, it conceived itself as concerned with universal humanity not some merely regional human group and its culture.

And yet Hay was absolutely right. In reality, those studies of supposedly universal humanity were only ever concerned with the Greek, Roman and Christian worlds that preceded the only recently appearing modern Europe. “The literature, the art and the history of non-European countries” simply did not figure in this central dimension of “European higher education” (xiv). Indeed, humanities scholars would not even have conceived themselves as contributing to “*European* higher education”. It was “higher education” simpliciter.

While post-War Europe had become (in reality) a fitting subject for regional studies, the (not in that name) regional studies that had actually been going on for centuries hitherto were *not*, for Hay, the sort of thing that was now needed (in that name). This is a shot across the bows in a culture war.

The case for the humanities

It is not unwarranted for a reader today to feel pleasantly surprised by Hay's reminder, in 1968, that "the European student who attended a course of lectures on 'World history' was until lately given instruction in European history" (xiv). It was becoming increasingly clear that what the dinosaurs in the humanities were still doing just "made explicit" what had been tacitly the case "for centuries": the humanism or the presumed universalism of "European higher education" in the humanities was European through and through. The celebrated humanism of the humanities was fundamentally *ethnocentric* – as we might now say, in light of more recent studies... in the humanities.

And there's the rub. It is undeniable that, in the European West, it has been scholarship in the humanities, and first in that respect, scholarship in philosophy, that has most insistently taken up the challenge of cultivating a very critical attitude towards the profound ethnocentrism of Europe's dominant humanism, the humanism of western metaphysics.

For example, first published in French just a year before Hay's Revised Edition, Jacques Derrida's groundbreaking text [Of Grammatology](#) announced in its opening sentences the intention to "focus attention on the *ethnocentrism*" that has everywhere marked "*the history of (the only) metaphysics*" (3, emphasis in original); a metaphysical tradition in which cultural and spiritual developments among those we today call the Europeans were those thought as having made the greatest progress towards attaining what Hay recalls Christian humanists of the "Latin West" calling "full humanity in opposition to the brute beasts" (56).

From around the last third of the twentieth century, reflecting on the ethnocentrism of the humanism of the humanities became one of the central themes *in* the humanities – with its beating heart in the new work in "theory" drawn primarily from philosophy. And this critical attitude, first argued for and cultivated in the humanities, is now also (just) beginning to make its way into regional studies of Europe.

About time too. As Hans Kundnani notes in his assessment of "the existing literature on the EU and European integration" in the controversial introduction to his 2023 book [Eurowhiteness](#), "the obvious connections between the terms 'European' and 'white', has received surprisingly little attention" (7). Indeed.

Denys Hay was writing at a time when it was still mostly uncontroversial to assert, as he does, that “all Europeans” regard “black men” and “yellow men” as “characteristically different” to “white men” (xv). It is impossible not to wonder how much that idea stands behind talk of the “unity” of this regional “all”, an “all” whose “closer union” would get studied in the new “regional studies of Europe” that Hay promoted.

The old settlement now appears, for this reason, genuinely unsettling. Still focusing only on “concrete problems” in disciplines like law, economics and politics, these studies make no contact with questions concerning the formation of the “cultural unity” they study and can get along without once remembering that it is a culture historically marked by a conviction of its attained “superiority” over every other (127). It is not, I think, special pleading to say that it is time to bring scholarship in the humanities *back* into regional studies of Europe.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Vety Maria/Shutterstock.com](#)
