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Viewpoint: reflections on the European Union's future by way of its past

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VIEWPOINT: REFLECTIONS ON THE EUROPEAN UNION'S FUTURE BY WAY OF ITS PAST

By [discoversociety](#) April 05, 2017 0 Comment 2017, Issue 43, Viewpoint

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M. J. Rodríguez-Salgado

Historians are frequently asked what the present can learn from the past, so it was no surprise that the question was put to a panel on early forms of European cooperation at the Library of the European Parliament in Brussels on 7 December 2016. My remit was to discuss European cooperation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when most of Europe was divided into composite states, one of which has been described as the precursor of the European Union. Large-scale international coalitions were frequent, and a distinct, European identity evolved. But it was also a time of almost constant civil and international wars: to understand Europe's past it is necessary to consider unity alongside disunity.

Christian princely states covered much of the European continent in the early-modern period. It was a world dominated by honour and status and as princes married almost exclusively within their own rank, extensive kinship networks were created across the continent. The 1519 Triumphant Arch commissioned by the Habsburg emperor, Maximilian I, included the coats of arms of over a hundred polities, including the lands he ruled, those he had a claim to, the states of his kin (which he or his successors might inherit), as well as of his allies. The son of a Portuguese princess and an Austrian Archduke, he had married the French-speaking duchess of Burgundy, and his court was a prime example of the cosmopolitan nature of all early-modern courts, with their diverse personnel, multiple languages and fusion of different cultures.

Charles V (1500-1558), Maximilian's grandson, was promoted in the 1950s as 'The Father of Europe', the precursor of the European Union, and an ideal model – a contested claim that still has adherents now. He inherited his father's Burgundian lands – disparate lordships roughly covering the area of modern-day Belgium and Holland, parts of Northern France and the Franche-Comté. In 1517 he took over his mother's realms: Castile and Aragon, aggregates of multiple, diverse kingdoms and lordships within the Iberian peninsula, and of much of southern Italy, several Mediterranean islands, parts of North Africa and America. He later conquered further territories in the Low Countries and in America as well as the duchy of Milan.

In 1519 Charles V was elected Holy Roman Emperor, assuming leadership of a vast entity with thousands of mostly German polities, and judicial powers over large parts of North Italy. For a time he also ruled the Habsburg lands: Upper and Lower Austria, Styria, Carinthia and Carniola (in modern-day Slovenia), the Tyrol, parts of Dalmatia and other territories now in Austria and South-Western Germany, but in 1521-2 he transferred these to his brother.

Each state he inherited was polycentric: an amalgam of many erstwhile autonomous units where the ruler exercised widely differing powers. The cultural, judicial, linguistic and religious diversity of his lands was

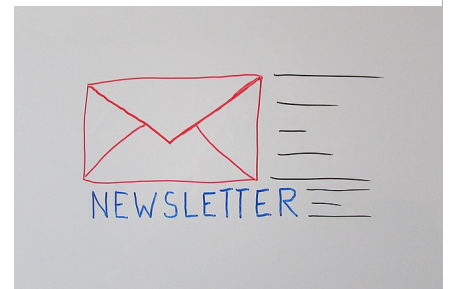
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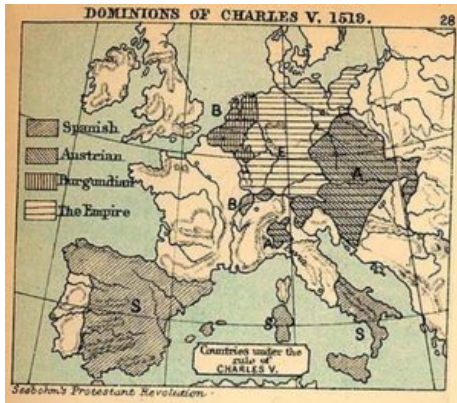
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extraordinary; coinage and weights differed; internal barriers endured. To add to the complexity, large swathes of Europe were under the control of the Catholic Church, and divided up into ecclesiastical units that cut across political, linguistic and cultural boundaries. To tax their territories, Christian rulers had to reach an agreement with the Pope as well as with the multiple local parliaments. Jurisdictions often competed and overlapped. The diversity and vastness of the early-modern Habsburg polity offered proof that a pan-European state was viable. The implications of the fact that its success was in large measure due to the contributions of its non-European lands was seldom registered.



Few European realms were compact and even these were polycentric, having been put together gradually and retaining a plurality of legal systems, languages, culture and significant variations in the degree of power the monarch exercised over them. Although states might appear random, princely marriages followed a political logic and often a common defensive goal. Even distant lands shared common interests. Further links were created by encouraging commerce and inter-marriage among elites. Defence was also facilitated by the fact that wars were fought with mercenaries irrespective of origins. Each army and navy was a mix of people from numerous regions and levies could be raised near threatened areas. Whether as part of the armed forces, or as a result of exposure to the troops, Europeans frequently encountered extraordinary diversity.

The same was as true of Eastern Europe which was mostly in the Ottoman empire, another vast, composite state straddling three continents ruled by Sunni Muslim sultans. Christians and Jews were allowed to practice their religion and retained much of their cultural and social structures in exchange for loyalty to the sultan, payment of taxes, and acceptance of social, economic, legal and political discrimination. By contrast, Christian Europe from the late fifteenth century was intent on excluding competing faiths. The drive for orthodoxy led to the conversion or expulsion of Muslims and Jews, and later to brutal wars between Catholics and Protestants. And this was another reason why Charles V was thought an ideal model for Europe in the 1950s: he had a reputation (since challenged) as a staunch Christian crusader. By then, Europe and Christianity had become synonymous. That was one of the significant contributions of the early-modern period.

Despite the extraordinary degree of diversity and problems of distance, not to mention limited forces and bureaucracy, early-modern polities functioned effectively. Recent research has highlighted the importance of the rule of law, respect for tradition, a common cultural heritage and the acceptance of constant negotiation and power-sharing in Europe's polycentric states as crucial factors in their success and longevity. There was a general belief that it was inherent in human nature to love and defend the *patria*, and sovereigns accepted the need to preserve the distinctive identity of their lands, and allow considerable levels of autonomy. Even taxation was tailored to what the area could be made to pay. Sovereign and subject engaged in constant negotiation and compromise. A sense of unique identity was preserved in the constituent polities, but it was compatible with loyalty to a common sovereign. Individuals were habituated to this plurality.

Trouble arose when sovereigns attempted to take more power by imposing greater central controls and homogeneity. Resistance and, at times, rebellion followed, with demands for a return to the past, often an idealised or imagined past, associated with justice, local traditions and autonomy. Just rule was interpreted as something consistent and consonant with their perception of being a distinct and autonomous polity. Where benefits were uneven – and having a resident sovereign was the most highly prized – contributions had to be uneven too, and government adjusted accordingly. It was rare, however, for rebellions to lead to secession, and then only if there was both external support and a powerful ideological element. The norm was for a compromise settlement, a 'new covenant', to emerge between the sovereign and the affected region.

Theoretically, there should have been no external intervention in internal affairs. It was believed that sovereigns were sanctioned by God, and had the right to be obeyed by their subjects and respected by other rulers. Although Christianity and Islam called for collective action against Infidels, pragmatism was at the heart of politics. The most powerful element bringing powers into coalition was not ideology but fear – fear of losing power and reputation; above all, fear of a potential or real hegemon. In the early sixteenth century, France and the Ottomans appeared as such, later it was the Habsburgs. The need to contain or defeat a perceived hegemon explains enduring alliances such as that between the Habsburgs and the sultan of Tunis, the kings of France and the Ottoman sultan, the English queen and the sultan of Morocco.

This is not to say that religious ideology was unimportant. Both Christianity and Islam were torn by internal divisions: Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists and other Protestants fought for dominance in the former; Sunni, Shia

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and Marabouts in the latter. Many considered the heretic within a worse enemy than 'an unbeliever'. In the name of 'the one God', Christian and Islamic radicals attempted to annihilate their own dissenters. During the early-modern period religion divisions intensified and severed the bonds of allegiance to a sovereign, a state, and all other forms of community, including family, and justified intervention in other states.

The scale of destruction, savagery, brutalisation and mass displacement of populations reached its horrifying pitch in the Christian conflict known as the Thirty Years War during the first half of the seventeenth century. It is often said that this finally brought about a reaction, but just as important was the fact that a century of conflict had not resulted in the annihilation of religious dissent. Over a hundred sovereigns came together to negotiate peace in the late 1640s and they agreed on the importance of reinstating fundamental precepts such as the inviolability of sovereignty in order to restore peace. They also agreed to hold international congresses in future so as to manage conflict, accepting that maintaining order was a collective duty since it benefitted all. Divisions between Catholics and Protestants continued but their impact on international conflict was radically reduced, and it was generally accepted that expulsion and exile were preferable to execution. With a brief exception in the 1680s after a new wave of Ottoman conquests in Europe, war against Islamic states was not acknowledged as a general duty on Christian sovereigns, but regarded as a local matter.

Paradoxically, even as this violent, fragmented Europe, so redolent of local patriotism and competition, was engulfed in widespread wars, it was increasingly envisaged and projected as a unique, superior civilisation, blending the best of the Greek and Roman worlds with Christianity. A continent with a common history. Elements of this can be traced earlier, but this distinctive identity emerged now in large measure as a result of the unity provided by the wide spread of Renaissance culture, and the impact of the frequent encounters with peoples beyond Europe, which made them acknowledge how much Europeans had in common, despite their differences.

The indigenous populations of the Americas and Africa they judged imperfectly civilised and this helped nurture a sense of superiority. The same was not true of the sophisticated and powerful states of China and Japan, but when they turned against Christian Europeans, it was seen as confirmation of Europe's distinctiveness and unique desire to spread commerce and culture. It became commonplace to present Europe's fragmentation and diversity as positive features. True, it led to constant conflict and competition, but this was precisely what nurtured technological innovation, and the urge to discover and settle the world. Although projected as the identity of the whole continent, the emphasis on Christianity blended with the classical past; on a common history, and on the technological and commercial advances that led to settlement across the world, gradually marginalised Ottoman Europe.

In what sense can this segment of history provide lessons for the present? In my experience, the past does not provide lessons. It offers material for reflection that can usefully inform present debates. In the international sphere, tension and the longstanding conflict between Christian and Muslim was more potent in theory than in practice. Other, vital interests were given priority and were fully justified by the prevailing morality. In fact, the situation favoured cross-faith state cooperation. The worst violence resulted from wars within Christendom and Islam. Interestingly, although both had powerful ideals of peace and toleration, only the Ottoman state applied them to a degree. Only after devastating wars did Christian Europe apply limited forms of 'toleration', first of Christian creeds and later of other faiths. This underscores the different choices that equally successful states in Europe can make with regards to religious pluralism.

What struck me forcibly was the possibility of creating successful, diverse polities, even when scattered and very large, as long as there is constant negotiation and compromise. Success did not require centralisation or homogeneity, or the loss of distinctive identity in the constituent parts: on the contrary. Patriotism was a powerful force then too. It is not predestined to end in the exclusive nationalism which has dominated Europe since the nineteenth century, which in turn is clearly not the only way in which Europe can be organised. Strong tensions and bitterly-fought readjustments of power should not be confused with a fundamental desire to break up these composite units. For the most part they overcame the challenges and reached a settlement. In the rare and extreme event of the loss of an area, including important states such as the Netherlands, Portugal and Hungary, it did not spell the end of the vast Habsburg and Ottoman states, however cataclysmic it appeared at the time. Their secession had benefits: it reduced tensions, cut defence costs, and allowed a better calibration of power among the remaining constituent polities as well as in the international system.

More remarkable still, in my view, is the fact that wide-scale cooperation within Europe existed in a context of almost ceaseless war, and that a distinctive collective identity evolved which placed Christianity at its heart despite the brutal conflict within it. A common European identity did not prevent wars any more than nationalism put an end to civil wars. Such seemingly contradictory processes appear less so when we consider that the same elements that lead to cooperation and unity, such as loyalty to a common sovereign or faith, also lead to conflict. Europe's past, as perhaps its future, is a story of constant and complex changes, unity and diversity.

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