



EUROPE: WHAT WENT WRONG?

By **Ronald J. Granieri**



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Back in April 2012, I presented a paper at a meeting of the FPRI Study Group on America and the West with the catchy title, "Who Killed Europe?" Later [published as an FPRI E-Note](#), that essay, written in the early stages of the Euro financial crisis, tried to disentangle the responsibility for Europe's mounting problems. I ended with something of an evasion, concluding that, as in the denouement of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, pretty much everyone—from the allegedly profligate and irresponsible southern Europeans to the parsimonious and self-satisfied German, English, and French leaders of the EU, not to mention Europe's supposed American ally and the international economic system generally—had a hand in the crime.

My reference to collective responsibility, however, was not intended to let everyone off the hook. Rather, by showing how many different ways European leaders, allies, and publics had damaged the European project I hoped to make a case for collective action to salvage it. It's not just a matter of making the Greeks live within their means, or to get the Germans to loosen up about inflation.

Hoping for collective action was of course not the same as expecting it. I ended that talk with the consciously provocative assertion that "any effort to reverse the disintegration of Europe will require more than another series of technocratic fixes and high-level photo opportunities. It will require European leaders to consider where they want Europe to go, and to be honest with both themselves and their electorates about their vision. It will require them to take significant political risks. Which is why such a reversal is extremely unlikely."

Well, more than two years have passed, and the news is only vaguely better. Although no one speaks of the breakup of the EU or even the collapse of the Euro in the same apocalyptic tones that dominated the discussion in 2012, Europe is still far from healthy. A tentative recovery has faded, and the Continent's economies are facing a triple dip recession. Even the strong German economy is sputtering, while especially battered states such as Spain and Greece continue to face astronomical levels of unemployment, especially among the young, which threaten the future of their societies. Greek politicians and the public, chafing under the burdens of ECB-imposed austerity, have rebelled, forcing an early election in late January that has not only inspired discussion of substantial changes in Greek policy but also resurrected an unwelcome discussion of the "Grexit" from the common currency.

Meanwhile, last May's European Parliament elections saw a rise in voting for protest and anti-EU parties. In Britain, Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party showcased its ability to siphon votes away from David Cameron's Tories. In France, Marine Le Pen's xenophobic *Front National* scored more votes than any other party. In Germany, the *Alternative für Deutschland* continued its growth, which has since led to success in state elections. Most disturbing was the result in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz* party, along with an even more disturbing far right *Jobbik*, signaled the increasing distance of frustrated Hungarian voters from the liberal political and economic models of the West.

Even if the anti-European parties themselves cannot agree on their concerns or their plans for improvement, the vote suggests a free-floating malaise in Europe, a lack of enthusiasm for the EU in general that does not necessarily lead to any specific policies, but is certainly not healthy.

Europe's economic problems would be bad enough on their own, but they pale in comparison to the pressing problems of violence from without and within. Russian intervention in the Ukraine helped to turn a political revolt into a civil war, and threatens to cause an even greater regional conflagration. Meanwhile, the horrific attack by Islamic extremists on the staff of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* both reminded Europeans of the ways that international conflict can reach into their greatest cities and rekindled still-tendentious debates about immigration, national identity, and religious pluralism. In both cases, the response of the European political class has been uneven. Although Europe has joined with the United States in imposing economic sanctions on Russia, the cacophony of voices in the various European capitals has raised serious questions about the long-term willingness and ability of European institutions to maintain a firm policy. Similarly, although European political leaders assert their commitment to freedom of expression and pluralism, the failure of those same leaders to make a clear and affirmative case for Europe has left the initiative with the nativists and nationalists, whose fear and loathing for their Muslim fellow citizens is matched only by their contempt for Brussels and all it represents for the European project.

European leaders continue to meet, and committees continue to discuss plans for this or that technical solution, while national leaders continue to rail against Brussels to serve local purposes. It's business as usual. To quote General George Marshall from a different context, "the patient is sinking while the doctors deliberate."

Even as I make that last comment, however, I am aware of the potential objections. Certain of my colleagues in the European studies business complain that American news media and politicians, out of either ignorance or malevolence, only report the bad news out of Europe. Things are actually great, they assure me, as long as you measure by the proper yardsticks. Life is still good in Europe, they say—the cafes are still open, the welfare state is still stable, and the educational system is still brilliant. Bookshelves groan with volumes praising everything from the elegance of French women to the superiority of French parenting. Europeans are still much more cultured, with better clothes, longer vacations, and better food than anyone on this side of the Atlantic.

The high politics of Europe may be dysfunctional, this argument runs, but that is not nearly the most important thing. That the EU or even the smaller subset of its larger states has not been able to act decisively in current diplomatic and military crises is not a sign of weakness, but of European cultural superiority over muscle-bound Americans with their fixation on hard power. For these fans of Europe, the organizational and material failures of the European Union, and even the complexities of geopolitics are irrelevant; Europe is just fine as it is.

Whenever I hear such arguments, I can only think of former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's response to Donald Rumsfeld's case for the Iraq War in March 2003: "Sorry, but I'm not convinced."

That Europe remains a nice place to live if you are a well-paid member of the educated elite I have no doubt. That European governments provide greater stability and public services than the United States I will also allow. Indeed, beneath the surface of politics, European institutions continue to operate, and plans for intensified European-American trade in the ambitious Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) also continue. But the failure of European institutions to build and maintain a political consensus in favor of their existence, continuing to rely instead on tired sufferance and acquiescence rather than enthusiasm for their continued existence, should give no one comfort. That would be true even if Europe had not compounded its internal weakness by proving itself incapable of acting with consistent and unified determination in favor of the values it claims to prize.

Indeed, even the supposed advantages of TTIP have been obscured by the utter failure of any of the governments to make a public case for it. Europeans may be full of self-confidence, but the European project continues to suffer from an identity crisis with no foreseeable end. I think that is a terrible historical tragedy. European integration is a great adventure, a potential triumph for humanity that no one cares about, a story that few tell and none embrace.

My grim predictions may actually cheer some people on this side of the Atlantic as well as over there. Euroskeptics, especially in the Anglosphere, are so hostile to the current organization of Europe that they act as though it doesn't matter if the EU fails. Indeed, some of them cheer on the failure, to prove that their continuous objections were true. Be they Nigel Farage or Marine Le Pen or Patrick Buchanan, they welcome the failure of Europe with the same enthusiasm they applaud Russian aggression in Crimea. The connection between the two is not accidental.

Others, less cynical and sinister, continue to imagine that the long-awaited collapse of Europe will open the door for a new celebration of national sovereignty. Thoughtful people speculate about some kind of renewed Anglo-American trade area, allowing their political distaste for European social democracy to undermine their belief in western civilization.

It is a spectacle that should shock and depress people of good will, because it did not have to be this way. Just as there is a tendency in some quarters to believe that Europe can withdraw from geopolitics and enjoy its high standard of living in peace, there is a tendency in some quarters to assume that Europe is stagnant and unimportant, not worth the effort to understand, and the United States should pivot in another direction, whatever that is supposed to mean. But Europe remains connected to the world whether its likes it or not, and Europe's responsibility to play an active role in the world extends beyond merely protecting the flow of imports and the safety of vacation spots. Europe also remains the United States' largest trading partner, with annual business activity in excess of \$4 trillion. It is also a geographical entity vital for any projection of American power. As the United States pivots to and from the Middle East, Africa, or Asia, it still relies on Cold War bases across Europe.

These were the reasons for the resurgence of the European ideal in the 1950s. There was a time when the idea of European integration both fired the imaginations of the young and figured importantly in the realistic foreign policy scenarios of the powerful. Especially since the formation of the European Economic Community in 1957, European leaders and those who wanted to see Europe learn and recover from the catastrophes of the preceding century hoped that a prosperous and united Europe could play a major world role—as a model for post-modern governance and transnational cooperation, a source of support for democratic development around the world, and an example of successful multicultural social democracy.

On 19 September 1946, one European statesman, surveying the material and moral wreckage of two world wars, told an audience in Zurich:

[There] is a remedy which, if it were generally and spontaneously adopted, would as if by a miracle transform the whole scene, and would in a few years make all Europe, or the greater part of it, as free and as happy as Switzerland is today.

What is this sovereign remedy? It is to re-create the European Family, or as much of it as we can, and provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living.

The process is simple. All that is needed is the resolve of hundreds of millions of men and women to do right instead of wrong, and gain as their reward, blessing instead of cursing.

That statesman, of course, was Winston Churchill. The same man whose contemporary acolytes treat the very idea of European solidarity with contempt and distaste. Five years later, in a speech in London, NATO Supreme commander Dwight Eisenhower, no starry-eyed idealist he, told members of the English-Speaking Union, "Europe cannot attain the towering material stature possible to its people's skills and spirit so long as it is divided by patchwork territorial fences... But with unity achieved, Europe could build adequate security and, at the same time, continue the march of human betterment that has characterized Western Civilization." It is much harder to find anyone willing to speak in these terms today.

What went wrong?

This is a consciously big question, and my goal tonight is to provoke conversation, so I will beg your indulgence as I offer three interrelated developments that have contributed to Europe's current malaise:

First, there has been a **failure of political imagination and leadership**. The successes of the European project in the first postwar decades depended on the relationship between a public eager for new ideas and leaders who were willing to express their idealistic support for the project. I have mentioned Churchill but even more important were leaders such as Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, Paul-Henri Spaak, and Robert Schuman, who combined idealism with political skill. Even General Charles de Gaulle, who was unafraid to criticize aspects of the European institutions, spoke eloquently to the French and world publics that economic integration was not enough, and about the need for Europe to organize and cooperate. One seeks in vain for such leaders today. Encouraged to focus on their domestic concerns, they have discovered that there is no ready-made constituency for Europe, and thus have decided that it is not worth the effort to try to build it. It is a chicken-and-egg problem: the public is apathetic at best, hostile at worst. It is possible that vigorous and imaginative leadership would

encourage them to reconsider the project, but no leader is going to risk a backlash from an apathetic/hostile public by hectoring them on a subject which does not appeal to them, so there is no leadership, which guarantees that the apathy and hostility will grow, encouraged by those who seek short-term advantage in fanning those flames.

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

This failure of imagination feeds the second larger problem, which I would call the **loss of geopolitical urgency in Europe**. Statesmen such as de Gaulle and Adenauer argued that European cooperation was necessary because only a strong and unified Europe could speak with one voice in the world and defend European interests. Decades of peace, and the peaceful end of the Cold War have encouraged too many Europeans that old conceptions of international politics no longer matter. By the 21st century, that expresses itself in a jumble of attitudes that imagined that Europe's lack of a clear political center or a unified geopolitical identity were strengths rather than weaknesses, signs that the Europeans eschewed hard power and preferred soft power, whatever those terms are supposed to mean. In their rush to overcome the nation-state, too many Europeans believed that they should abandon the concept of the state as a geopolitical actor altogether. One can see that beginning of this transition already in the 1960s, when hopes for tighter political and military integration among the Six were cast aside in favor of broadening membership in the EC, believing that improved economic cooperation would be a good in itself, while the Europeans believed that someone else would maintain their security. Indeed, the superpowers, busily attempting to reach an accommodation in and around Europe, each in their own way encouraged the Europeans to focus on economic issues and to avoid concerted political action, to avoid the emergence of a coherent and confident rival. Furthermore, the recognition that building such a unified Europe would require significant political and material effort sapped the willingness of the next generation of leaders to bother to risk it, returning us to the first point.

Which leads to the third major problem, which I call **Europe's technocratic temptation**. This has always been part of the European project, going back to one of Europe's founding fathers, Jean Monnet, an economic planner who believed that practical measures, beneath the political, would build Europe while no one was looking. Recognizing that there may be quiet but practical benefits to economic and trade cooperation, European leaders have constructed institutions that operate behind the scenes.

There have been successes to be sure—Europeans today enjoy the benefits of a vast area in which people, goods, and capital can move freely, in which increasingly uniform regulations allow for ease of educational and work exchanges and familiarity of products.

Ironically, though, this technocratic development of Europe has fed the first two-philosophical/structural problems. Europeans may enjoy the benefits of this technocratic Europe, but they feel no affection for it. Indeed, the sense that Europe is governed not by elected representatives but by faceless regulators and bureaucrats is one of the most common arguments used by Europe's detractors. The crowning achievement of this technocratic impulse, the Euro, tells us all we need to know. A common currency has eased trade, encouraged tourism and investment, and given much of Europe a practical proof of unity. Yet it also can be portrayed as a tool of central bankers, an element of undemocratic dominance, insulated against popular control. Europe's critics have mobilized all of those arguments through the past years of crisis. Without an integrated Europe with legitimate federal institutions, the Euro was a fair-weather union whose legitimacy has been called into question as soon as times got bad.

For Europe to pull together in the face of this crisis of legitimacy will require both creative leadership and a sense of political urgency. Yet right now we see neither. Instead, Europeans and their friends appear to be doubling down on everything that has gone wrong. As we speak, the EU and the USA are continuing negotiation on TTIP, a perfect example of the technocratic impulse. Even as leaders in those countries speak among themselves about how important TTIP can be to strengthening the Atlantic Community, no one has been willing to make a vigorous case with the public. Instead, negotiations held in secret have only come to light in dribs and drabs, usually by writers who are hostile to the project, which they portray as an elite conspiracy by the economically powerful to undermine national sovereignty. They can portray it that way because that's what it is. If the leadership has neither the courage nor the creativity to make its case, someone else will.

Europe seeks in vain for a leader. Its most powerful states are wracked by their own problems.

Britain is a disaster. Always ambivalent about Europe, the British are again toying with talking about leaving, and the political

Britain is a disaster. Always ambivalent about Europe, the British are again toying with talking about leaving, and the political class has been unable or unwilling to make anything like a case for Europe. The same leadership that told the Scots things would be “better together” acts as though cutting themselves off from Europe would be a good idea. David Cameron can’t decide whether he wants to be craven or irresponsible on the subject of Europe, so has decided to be both, alienating even the one political ally that he needs most, Angela Merkel. Earlier this year, he invited Merkel to speak at Westminster and advocate for the European idea. Reforms are possible, Merkel said then, but only if all partners work together, which led to her central pitch. “We need a strong United Kingdom with a strong voice inside the EU,” she said. “If we have that we will be able to make the necessary changes for the benefit of all.” Now, thanks to continued Cameronian pandering to the Tory Right, the Prime Minister has pushed the Chancellor to the brink of abandoning the idea of Britain as part of Europe. One can only threaten such an action for so long before someone takes you up on it, after all.

France is worse, tied up in its own problems, made that much more complicated by the repercussions of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. Germany under Merkel is facing its own internal problems, including not only the threat of the AfD but the rise of the PEGIDA protest movement, which combines hatred of the European Union with its opposition to further immigration and its fear mongering about the “Islamization of the West.” This is even before you get further to other European states where the combination of weakness and interest shapes their reactions to issues from the Euro’s future to the possibility of maintaining sanctions on Russia.

One of the greatest temptations for any so-called expert commentator is to claim to stand between two terrible alternatives and offer the wise middle course. I cannot completely avoid that temptation myself, and beg your indulgence. But when I look today at the arguments made by both critics and fans of Europe, I despair. One hears the skeptics more, of course, especially in this country, and especially among those who consider themselves to be practical realists. They dismiss Europe as a chimera and praise the nation-state, even as individual European nation-states obviously cannot stand up to the continental challenges of China, Russia, India, and even the United States—none of which are nation-states on the classical European model. We do not have any leaders of the practical stature of the great Bavarian conservative statesman Franz Josef Strauss, who rejected “the idea that any European state—no matter its name, no matter how glorious its history, no matter how impressive its traditions—will be recognized in Moscow as an equal partner. One cannot ignore the laws of mathematics.”

But even Europe’s fans depress me. Europhilia is the love that dare not speak its name in politics, but those who want to praise Europe mistake its weakness for strength, its irresponsibility for wisdom. Europe has much to offer the world, but only if it is engaged enough to care and strong enough to take political risks. An irrelevant, self-satisfied, and insular Europe is no help to anyone. Europe is in danger of becoming nothing but a tourist attraction, much like its great Cathedrals: empty monuments to the faith and wisdom and creativity of generations past, echoing with the footsteps of those who neither understand nor care about what they see, gathering dust as memories fade, their meaning receding from the minds of the living with every passing day.

That is how things are. Europhiles who deny this are not doing themselves or Europe any favors. But Skeptics who celebrate it are contributing to digging their own grave. We can all do better; we need to do better. Europeans need to seize the opportunity to display the creativity and bravery of earlier generations, and Americans should encourage their allies to do that.

I want to make a special plea to those so-called conservatives in the United States who dismiss the European project and want to write the Continent off. We spent four decades during the Cold War claiming that the Atlantic community was bound together by shared history and shared values. I for one happen to think that was all true. If it was true then, it is still true now. Recognizing that historical fact has profound significance for how we act today. Of course the United States can and should have connections to other parts of the world, and indeed should promote greater understanding between and among all of the people of the globe. But honestly, if the United States and Europe simply throw up their hands and imagine that it is impossible to understand or be understood by the other, despite how much we have in common, how much we share, how exactly do we hope to develop constructive relationships with other, much more different cultures and societies?

If we, Europeans and Americans, fail to nurture our common ties, fail to recognize that what binds us is so much greater than what divides us, fail to do the hard work to understand and communicate with each other, then we will have betrayed a sacred cultural trust, the ideals of the West. What’s more, we will have sacrificed an inheritance of generations for a mess of diluted pottage made up of self-satisfied capitalism and exclusivist nationalism that will not nourish or sustain us. The hour is late, but there is time, if only those of us who believe in the West are willing to do the hard work of repairing the damage and building a new future for Europe.

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