



What is Europe?

In 1959 General de Gaulle gave a speech in which he stated that the fate of the world would be decided by a Europe, “from the Atlantic to the Urals”. With this proposal he tried to promote European autonomy, fundamentally that of France, to overcome the logic of the Cold War. He considered it necessary to overcome or break with the subordination of European states to one or another block. The Gaullist initiative formulated more than half a century ago has aroused certain sympathy and is periodically taken up by political leaders such as Emmanuel Macron before Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2019: “I know that Russia is a European country deep down in its soul. We believe in a Europe that extends from Lisbon to Vladivostok”.

But what are the limits of Europe? Is it a geographical unit, a continent, a geopolitical space, or a cultural unit? Is it possible to conceive of a united Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals? More than 40 million inhabitants live in Siberia, of which 95% are ethnically and culturally equal to the inhabitants of St. Petersburg or Moscow. Are the Siberian Russians and Europeans who live west of the Urals Asian? Is Turkey a European country? Is it Georgia, which is part of the Council of Europe and has applied to join NATO?

Europe is a historically constructed cultural concept and its limits have been changing over time. Europe is born from a myth. As a geographical term, the Greeks of the archaic period used this denomination for the continental, European territory of Greece as opposed to the Peloponnese and the coast of Anatolia. The concept of Europe as a continent is historically quite recent. In the late period of the Roman Empire, only the province located in the territory that currently comprises the European part of Turkey received this name. Only from the eighteenth century has it been imagined as a space, with supposed common characteristics. Placing the limits of Europe in the Urals and in the Caucasus mountains was formulated in the middle of the 18th century by the Russian geographer Tatischev and the Swedish Strahlenberg. The latter's books, which included maps, were translated into English, French and Spanish and achieved notable popularity among European cultural elites. Also by the tsars, who took up the idea, as part of their political project to transform Russia. Therefore, it has been barely three centuries since this image of the limits of Europe has been consolidated.

From a geographical point of view, Europe is nothing more than a large peninsula of the Asian continent or Eurasia. In the Cenozoic era, some 66 million years ago, an enormous geological process began, caused by the clash between the African and Indian tectonic plates against the northern Eurasian one, giving rise to a succession of mountain ranges and massifs that extend from the Cantabrian Mountains in northern Spain, the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Balkans, the Caucasus, up to the Himalayas and even extends to the island of Sumatra. These mountain systems neither separate differentiated human groups nor are they specific to Europe. There is continuity in the landscapes and the settlements on both sides of them. They delimit regions or bioclimatic areas, from the





Mediterranean area with its mountainous Iberian, Italian and Balkan peninsulas, to the Arctic regions. Various subareas can be defined, modulated both by their latitude, relief or degree of continentality (distance from the seas). The dynamics of the atmosphere and ocean currents in the northern hemisphere influence the western coasts of Europe and North America to receive the influence of warm currents while the eastern coasts are colder. That, over the centuries, more population has been concentrated in these more temperate zones than in the cold ones.

Research on the origins and spread of humanity on Earth is providing new insights into the chronology of the different species that modify previous theories that date back to the human presence in Europe. Increasingly older dates have also been made for the different species. But the consensus remains on the African origin of humanity. Several species of humans have successively populated the European space for almost 900,000 years, that of Homo Antecessor (Atapuerca, Spain), Homo Neanderthalensis, about 230,000 years ago during the fourth ice age and extinct about 28,000 years ago. Homo Sapiens, our direct ancestors, have their ancestors in Africa like all humans. They have been present in Asia for about 100,000 years and in Europe for at least 46,000. Homo sapiens replaced the Neanderthal, but there is evidence of hybridization between the two species and the survival of part of the Neanderthal genome among modern Europeans.

The entire world population has been the result of miscegenation, including the inhabitants of Europe. During historical times numerous migrations are known over the European territory and in all directions, from the north to the Mediterranean, from the east, including the Asian plains to the west and from the south to the north. In many cases they have been presented as invasions by different peoples who imposed or replaced populations previously settled on the same territory. Violence has frequently been present in many migrations, but not all of them have always been violent. There has been no European or non-European people that is not the result of miscegenation. The intentional exterminations, the great genocides, are contemporary.

Romanticism has helped spread mythical origins to today's European nations. In addition to the Greco-Roman cultural roots, which are not ethnic, Celtic, Germanic, Nordic or Slavic nations are mentioned. These national (nationalist) myths have no scientific basis. Archeology and especially genetics have dismantled the existence of alleged ethnically differentiated populations at any time in the past. The Mediterranean has always been a place of communication and exchange. The contribution of the Greeks and Romans to history are, above all, Hellenism and Romanization. Miscegenation was present from its origins and made cultural diffusion possible.

The vast majority of the inhabitants of Europe speak Indo-European languages. The existence of linguistic affinities has been commonly confused with ethnic and even racial identities. The linguistic hypothesis of the existence of a proto-Indo-European language that spread from the steppes between southeastern Europe and central Asia about 4000





years ago, from where it spread to India and mainland Europe, is plausible but not supported by evidence. material tests. In any case, it would be more of a process of acculturation by assimilation of pre-existing populations than of substitution, although there may have been violent events with the annihilation of some populations. Among these linguistic families, in addition to the Greek and Latin languages, the Celtic, Germanic and Slavic languages have had a notable influence in Europe.

Beginning in the year 3000, a migration began from the Caucasus area to the north and west of populations identified as pre-Celtic. The first true Celtic culture is associated with the iron metallurgy of Hallstatt (1200 before the era) superior to that of other Neolithic peoples or with bronze culture that until then populated Europe, and seven centuries later that of La Tène. The Celts did not constitute any kind of state, empire or kingdom. More than a "conquest" it was a superimposition and assimilation of pre-existing populations with cultures that used Neolithic and bronze technology; an acculturation process. The European Atlantic coast, from Scotland, Ireland and Wales to the west of the Iberian Peninsula, were the last territories assimilated by the Celtic culture and the last ones in which it survived until the Middle Ages. For several centuries, the cultural elites of Western Europe assumed that their peoples had supposed origins in biblical figures or in classical Greco-Roman culture. European romanticism abandoned that tradition, replacing it with Celtic or Germanic origins, in a movement parallel to the rise of nationalism. Currently, many inhabitants of Western Europe identify themselves and feel they are heirs to the Celtic culture. This identification is more emotional than material, even among the small populations that preserve a language of Celtic origin.

The Germans are also an ethnolinguistic group of peoples whose origins are usually located in the south of the Scandinavian peninsula, on both shores of the Baltic. The first news that has reached us of them has been through the Romans. Publius Tacitus made a description of the Germans in the first century. About the populations settled north of the Danube and east of the Rhine with second-hand information, he never traveled through those territories. He presents them as a uniform group, although in reality they were quite diverse peoples. They did not form a political unit. Tacitus with a moralizing story, he attributed to them the virtues to contrast the image of the "noble savage" against the moral decadence of his compatriots, which he intended to criticize. From the fourth century the great Germanic migrations took place, crossing the borders of the Roman Empire. About twenty peoples arrived in the West: Suevi, Vandals, Goths (Visigoths and Ostrogoths), Franks, Burgundians, Thuringians, Alemanni, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Lombards and others. At times they allied themselves with the Romans and with Romanized populations and frequently clashed with each other.

The romantic idealization of some of these peoples as the germ of contemporary European nations ignored the processes of acculturation. The most relevant was that they soon assumed the official religion of the Empire, Christianity. And, even, it seems that the King of the Franks Clovis had Gallic (Celtic) ancestors and not only Franks. In the most intensely Romanized territories, Latin prevailed over the Germanic languages





(present-day Spain, France, Italy and Portugal) while, in the northernmost, less romanized territories, Celtic languages were maintained and the Germanic ones expanded (present-day United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Germany...), in addition to the Scandinavian varieties in the Nordic ones.

The Slavs constitute the largest ethnolinguistic group in Europe: more than 250 million people. Its origins are supposed to have been located between the Baltic Sea and the Carpathians. Their great migrations began around the 2nd century and their diversification into different families from the 3rd century onwards due to the interference of other peoples (Goths in the 3rd century, Avars in the 6th) who propitiated their migration towards the West, up to the Elbe river. and the Saale, and southwards through the Balkans, to the Peloponnese and Asia Minor: Western Slavs (Czechs, Moravians, Slovaks, Poles...), Southern Slavs (Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Bosnians and Bulgarians) and Eastern Slavs (Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians). These peoples also experienced a process of cultural fusion, adopting Christianity: Due to Byzantine influence, most adopted the Orthodox or Eastern religious version and the Cyrillic alphabet, derived from the Greek, while they adopted the Roman or Catholic version (Croats, Slovenes, Czechs). , Slovaks and Poles) use the Latin alphabet.

In the words of Benedetto Croce, all history is always contemporary, because it always answers questions that we ask ourselves from the present. We are interested in knowing the genealogy of our problems because we are concerned about the future. History is a dialogue with the past to build the future. Hence, local stories make sense, when we ask ourselves about the next, national and global stories. All of them are always interpretations, based on evidence, but reasonable and argued interpretations to know and understand ourselves. Europe is a cultural construction in which many millions of people believe, being aware of its plurality. Searching for an approach to a history of Europe is consistent and compatible with other approaches at different scales.

Disclaimer

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

