

# The universal is back

Denis Guénoun, *About Europe: Philosophical Hypotheses*, trans. Christine Irizarry, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2013. 352 pp., £65.00 hb., £20.99 pb., 978 0 80477 385 0 hb., 978 0 80477 386 7 pb.

Europe is an old continent. Yet only 20,000 years ago, Scandinavia and much of Britain were almost totally covered by a thick ice sheet. The Alps were solid ice and sea levels were so low that Ireland and Britain were joined to continental Europe. Where there once were glaciers is today the middle of the North Sea and the English Channel, demarcating where Continental Europe begins. Denis Guénoun does not ask where Europe begins. Posing Europe as a question, he begins in the middle of a great sea, at a mid-point between the idea of Europe and universalism.

Guénoun reminds us that the sea is not flat. It is movement and transportation, on which nothing can stay in one place. 'Europe is not a patrimony of native people but of passengers, which it carries on board or on its deck.' Europe is in flux. It is in progress – a passage, a traversing or crossing. His 2014 Algerian family history, *A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria*, narrates a personal journey from Algeria to France. Thinking about Europe in terms of the Southern Mediterranean and its crossings is a way of thinking through continentality. In *About Europe*, the author describes his ancestors' passage moving around the Mediterranean. Born in the Maghreb, Guénoun crossed from Africa to Europe, when 'Europe took me away' to France.

Guénoun's reading of history and philosophy is exhaustive. Among *About Europe's* many strengths are the book's overabundance of anecdotes, concrete examples, and a series of numbered hypotheses and schematic diagrams, which depict Europe as this movement of the universal. He begins the book with 'hypothesis zero': that Europe is non-originary, intermediate and a work-in-progress. It is not, therefore, an attempt at a chronological history of European thought. Guénoun does dedicate plentiful space to some pre-eminent men of European thought: Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Hegel, Marx, Herodotus, Plato, Jan Patočka, Guy Debord, Étienne Balibar and Jean-Luc Nancy. Reading *About Europe*, one could mistake Europe for a continent devoid of any female figures. There is one particular woman, however, around whom Guénoun's narrative revolves. A recurrent trope is Princess Europè in the myth of Europè. In the legend, the princess is seized from her birthplace in the ancient Phoenician city of Tyre. After dreaming

that she will be taken away from Asia to a nameless fatherland in the West, she is abducted by Zeus disguised as a magic white bull. Zeus carries Europè across the sea to Crete. The idea of Europe is born out of this passage to the West from the shores of Asia. 'It plainly seems', Guénoun writes, 'that Europe designates *the thing toward which one travels, the area where one lands when coming from the shores of Asia.*'

One interesting dimension of Guénoun's book is the challenge it makes to the notion that Ancient Greece was in Europe. 'Europe' is a Greek word, yet the word occurs only a handful of times in Greek antiquity. The idea that Europe was born in Greece as the rise of the universal, Guénoun deems a teleologism. Guénoun prefers to think history against its ending. 'One should think of Europe as a moment, or era. As a crossing. Traversing and getting across it – to get out of it.' In fact, the name 'Europe' was not applied until the end of the Middle Ages. Before Europe, there was 'simply the universe', the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church. Universe comes from 'versus', meaning 'turned'. For Guénoun, the universal undergoes a turning movement. After the Roman Empire, Europe turns around the universal or gives figure to the universal as it returns to itself. Just when you think the universal has reached its zenith, it turns around back to itself. Like a call and a return, the figure of Europe appears at the middle of turning back. The universal at this point is not a kingdom, an empire, a church or a people. The universal is two stages of movement: expansion and return. First there is a moment of enlargement, extinction and expansion, as the universe grows. The growth stops and there is a moment of retraction. A turning back movement gives way at a stop point. The figure of Europe makes an appearance at the middle of this turning. Ancient Greece was not in Europe, and nor could the universal have been born in Greece. This is because there is no origin, no beginning – only a stop point. That point is the figure of Europe. Guénoun graphically illustrates the figure of Europe as a point sketched along drawn loops. Schematics give movement to the universal's turning around and returning to itself, as Europe returns to itself as figure.

When it comes to the French Revolution, the stop point is war – the point when revolution turns to

war and brotherhood turns to questions of boundary. 'The war brought the return, just as clouds bring a storm.' What comes back in the return of revolution? Does the revolutionary reversal from kingdom to nation actually bring back a kingdom that is the same as the one it overthrew? Guénoun sees the same (as self-same) produced as identity in the space of the return. France and Germany in their unity are merely stages in Europe's historical process or progress. He conceives of their national identity as an imaginary naming of their own phase of the process.

When Gayatri Spivak questions national identity, she draws a distinction between the Latin root of 'identity', *idem*, translated as 'same', and the Sanskrit word, *idam*, meaning 'not exactly same'. *Idam* is not one self-same sameness. Rather than marking unique characteristics of a same thing, *idam* denotes what is not unique.

This is a useful distinction because, in its singular-plurality, *idam* is an identity of what is alike in multiplicity. It is the opposite of national or personal identity. Guénoun follows this thinking, as he winds up with a confrontation between two Europes, neither of which is possible. One Europe is world globalization itself, thus dissolving the need for its very self. However, when this 'world as world' is born, Europe will clearly be no more. Another Europe is a continent of nationalities and identities. But in turning itself around, it sees itself as Europe. Not a self-same, but a multiple-same. In the universal's movement of self-figuration, Europe images itself as

its other. This other is Islam. Europe's identity faces Islam and represses it. Islam is not an external other, constantly fended off of Europe's borders. Islam may seem external, but its exteriority marks its proximity. Islam was an alternative – an internal exteriority. 'Repressing Islam, for Europe, is repressing the gesture that forms it.' As the Roman Church and Empire fell apart, invasions that sparked internal difference formed Europe's core.

Taking over from Rome, Europe becomes the new empire of world capitalism. Guénoun bases a kinship between the Roman Empire and capitalism founded in imperialism on worldwide capitalist globalization. To justify the relation, he argues, the world presents itself as image. Recalling Marx's 'world of commodities', world commodification creates the commodity as an image. Guénoun closes out part four with a close reading of Marx, before *returning* to his first hypothesis and the myth of Europē. Guénoun achieves the non-teleological historicity he sets out to do, making this a difficult book to write an ending for. Published in French in 2000, *About Europe* leaves us with a range of questions about the future: about Islamophobia, jingoism, the desire to colonize and twenty-first-century wars. This is one of the book's successes, and not a failure. Readers expecting a history of philosophy or a philosophy of history will be intrigued to find Guénoun challenges the very notion of a beginning of philosophy. *About Europe* marks the end of the beginning of philosophy.

Carrie Giunta

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