

EU debate: Professor Nicholas Boyle examines the benefits of strength in numbers



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As the referendum campaign enters its closing weeks, one issue rarely being discussed is that of the European Union as an alternative to the concept of the nation state. But in years to come could the EU act as a counterbalance to the commercial clout of global business?

In my previous article (“Fantasies of freedom”, The Tablet, 23 April 2016) I argued that Europhobia is a symptom of a specifically English crisis of identity. Once freed from the distorted perspective imposed by the Reformation, and by the associated rise and decline of the British Empire and of the United Kingdom, we can see that, as part of Europe, England is part of something not only far bigger, but also far older and far richer in promise than the dead end into which Europhobia wants to drive us.

Europe is not, of course, the same thing as the European Union, but only through the EU can modern England have access to its greater European identity. If the EU is not at present fully adequate to its inheritance and its mission, that is due, at least in part, to an English failure of imagination and commitment.

European civilisation is one of the two oldest continuous civilisations in the world and its origins are only a little more recent than those of China. Much of Europe’s origins are now known only as the

background to the literature of ancient Israel.

Moses (perhaps 1300 BC) and David (perhaps 1000 BC) may be figures in whom history and legend are as difficult to distinguish as in the earliest Chinese emperors, but they and their successors are the principal points of reference for a set of writings, now known as the Bible, which for nearly 3,000 years has provided successive polities in the Middle East, and ever further north and west, with a historical framework for their own particular stories. In the pre-Christian Hellenistic period, Judaea's religious tradition began a relationship of both giving and receiving with the languages and cultures of Asia's western promontory, entering first into Greek literature and philosophy through the translation of its sacred books, known as the Septuagint, and then into the Latin world of politics and administration through its adoption, in the form of Christianity, as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The confluence of the Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman cultures created the concept of Europe as the geographical focus of a world history that embraced successively Jerusalem, Troy, Athens, Rome and whatever was thought to be the contemporary equivalent. Probably first formalised in the chronographies of Eusebius of Caesarea and John Malalas, this world history remained the common property of every Christian nation until, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the seaborne colonial empires made extensive contact with China and revealed the enormous difficulty of reconciling oriental and occidental timelines.

Political continuity has taken very different forms in the world's two enduring civilisations. In East Asia, the power struggle between the centre and the periphery of the single, self-sufficient Middle Kingdom of China has been constant for three millennia. In the West Asian arena, a different battle has been fought since the fragmentation of the Roman Empire, first into Western and Eastern, and then into Christian and Islamic successor states.

Individual kingdoms have interacted with one another in trade and war and art and learning while remaining aware of belonging to a varyingly tangible overriding system, varyingly known as the Church or the (Holy Roman) Empire, as Christendom or as the *ius gentium* observed between the comity of nations or latterly, once the colonial empires had brought into focus those outside the system, as Europe.

In Europe, until the twentieth century, nations have always been parts of a larger whole: the word *natio* itself originally referred to local or linguistic groupings within a larger institution, such as a university. Europe has always meant variety in unity, in an interactive, reciprocal relationship. Only when they

became empires with overseas possessions did Europe's nations succumb to the lure of self-sufficiency.

The empires that sprang from the European states, and that by the early twentieth century controlled 84 per cent of the Earth's surface, gave political shape and order to the most far-reaching and most successful movement of economic globalisation the human race had so far experienced. However, their competitive quest for self-sufficiency and their inability to conceive of political collaboration within a truly global framework led to catastrophe in 1914. Between 1918 and 1945 the attempt to base a world order on the newly invented nation states encouraged protectionism, depressed global economic activity and provoked humanity's most destructive war.

In the decade following that disastrous experiment, a series of unprecedentedly creative institutional innovations – a number of them inspired by John Maynard Keynes – created a new international and intergovernmental order. The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (later subsumed into the World Trade Organization) may now be taken for granted but they all owe their existence to a moment of vision when the nations, into which the old empires were to be broken down in the process of decolonisation, were reimagined as parts of a system that for the first time encompassed the whole planet.

The Treaty of Rome was motivated by more than a desire for the mutual benefits of trade, more even than a determination to make another European war impossible: it was an attempt, in the new planetary spirit of the UN and the Bretton Woods agreements, to recover the old sense of the European nations as defined by their belonging to something bigger than themselves. As economic globalisation has resumed, that vision has become more necessary, not less, and for reasons that are not merely visionary but thoroughly practical.

Economic globalisation has political, cultural and demographic consequences that dissolve national borders, whether ancient or recent, along with local peculiarities and traditions. As the world becomes richer it becomes both more homogeneous and more difficult to govern from local centres of decision.

Global enterprises such as Google or Starbucks can evade national corporation taxes, and online traders on eBay can avoid nationally imposed VAT. Pharmaceutical giants can impose their prices on impoverished or even on quite wealthy National Health Service providers, cyber criminals can locate themselves outside the national jurisdictions in which the effects of their actions are felt, and every day foreign currency exchanges turn over more than the entire annual GDP of an economy such as the United Kingdom. These are signs not simply of the power of global capital or of the global reach of the

internet, but of the weakness of global governance and of the necessity of strengthening it.

The decisive factor in the financial crisis of 2007-08 was not that banks were too big to fail but that regulators were too small to control them. For unlike the worldwide capital market, the regulators had their scope defined and restricted by the boundaries of those failed experiments of the mid-twentieth century, the nation states. Only by recognising that they belonged together before they were ever divided can the “nations” of Europe hold their own in negotiation with the global behemoths.

Left to themselves, the nations will be fobbed off, as the UK has been, with the odd £130 million from the small change in Google’s very deep pockets. By contrast, in 2008 the EU forced Microsoft to abandon various anti-competitive practices and to pay a fine of \$1.4 billion (£680m), a record penalty at the time. In such confrontations, size matters.

The EU, according to the IMF’s calculation of nominal GDP in 2014, is the largest economy in the world, larger than the United States or China, and six times larger than the UK on its own. The political ingenuity that brought the union into existence was a response of appropriately global dimensions to the challenge of regulating an ever larger global market that was growing ever more deeply integrated. In my concluding remarks I shall consider the past and future of the UK’s troubled relationship with Europe’s new incarnation.

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This is the third of Professor Boyle’s articles about the EU referendum. To read his previous pieces go to www.thetablet.co.uk

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