

The Wide-Eyed Continent

Brian Riley Prize 2021 Submission

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I've been here before. Three years ago, I stood right here, and I told you something that I really believed. I spoke about how much I feared the European Union. I was sure that ever-closer ties could only lead to acculturation – the gradual convergence of cultures on our continent – with an inevitable result being the loss of the European cultures which I loved so much. Looking back at that speech after these years at Pembroke, I'm acutely aware of several things. Most often when I think about that day, I think about the faces of the judges when they saw my speech was written on the back of a Rice Crispies' packet. But more importantly, I realise now that I was completely wrong. My argument was based on assumptions which I hadn't even realised I had – assumptions that I suspect we all hold, and which are all but impossible to shed. What I want to do today is to show you why I changed my mind.

I've always found that often the best way to analyse a belief is to take it to extremes. That's how I ended up on the Britain First website at 4am last week, watching a short documentary about my glorious British heritage. Between comparing every British landmark on the A303 to the Great Pyramid of Giza, party leader Paul Golding had one persistent theme. "We are most certainly not a nation of immigrants, as the left-wing education system, and the fake news media claims. We are a nation of native inhabitants, we are the true British people, and this is our ancient homeland". His insistency showed how key the pledge was: without it everything his party stood for fell down. But even his carefully curated video was forced to acknowledge something that we all know. Invasion after invasion has transformed the population of the British Isles, with the Normans joining the Anglo-Saxons, who had joined the Romans, who had joined the Celts. Culturally too Britain was transformed with each wave of new population. We gained bathhouses, a new language, and new values. Everything we have in Britain has come in from outside at some stage – a point nicely illustrated by the famously English lion on Britain First's logo.

Europe is just the same. Parties like the AfD, Vox, and National Rally vow to protect the 'real', 'native' citizens of their country, and even mainstream parties vow to protect Europe and 'European culture' for the Europeans, putting up a fence around the continent as though the people inside it were somehow different. Politicians like our current Prime Minister talk of Europe as a sacred thing, descended from the great roots of Classical civilisation. But it's all wrong, it's all a lie. We are not autochthonous – we did not spring from the earth fully formed in all our whiteness and sense of superiority. We are a continent of travellers and refugees.

It doesn't take us much reflection to realise that humans have always lived in Europe. Homo Sapiens began to arrive from the near-East about 45,000 years ago, gradually replacing the Neanderthals who had lived here ten times as long as Homo Sapiens has been around since. DNA analysis of prehistoric inhabitants suggests there were other great waves of population influxes through the Near East. Greece – from whose culture many European nationalists suppose us to descend – was a nation of tribes from elsewhere. Thucydides tells

us of how they constantly moved around as they fought over land, and archaeological analysis suggests that they entered Greece itself through the Balkans. Homer doesn't even have a specific word for the Greeks as a collective, as it was not an identity that they had yet drawn for themselves. And Greeks extended at least to Turkey, and maybe as far as the Afghan Hindu Kush depending on your definition of Greekness. Greekness is not European.

So too with Rome – the favourite call-card of European identity politics. Rome's foundational myth had the city being populated by outcasts and refugees, with Romulus himself being descended from the Trojan Aeneas – with Troy being an 'Asian' city. When we think of the Roman invasion of Britain we might think of Italians, but Septimius Severus – who famously died in York – was an African, born and raised in modern Libya. So too was my favourite Roman historian, Tacitus. The Roman Empire eventually split, and the surviving half based itself in Byzantium, now known as Istanbul. There was no 'European Roman race'.

Our culture has been even more variable than our population. Almost every language in Europe is descended from Proto-Indo-European, spoken by a nomadic tribe somewhere near Kazakhstan in 4000 BC, and comparison with Classical Indian literature shows that many of our myths, legends, and poetic traditions are passed down from here. Our writing systems were all descended from Phoenician in modern Lebanon, which itself was developed using Egyptian hieroglyphics. The 'christliche Kultur', or "Christian culture" that the AfD fetishizes on its website as a hallmark of German culture is based on a religion that arose in the Middle East. That's the very same Middle East that the AfD posit to be an enemy of German civilisation.

Even the name "Europe" is not European. Our best guess for its origin is that it relates to Europa – a Phoenician princess. The Greek words which might form it – "εὐρύς and ὤψ" – mean "wide-eyed" or "broad-faced".

That's just what we are. A continent of many peoples, cultures, and characters, that has been formed through constant movement of populations into and around the continent, and integration between those populations over time. We're wide-eyed: diverse in our origin and outlook by the breadth of cultures that formed us.

So what should we think about all this? It's not the case that we are experiencing an unprecedented era of cultural conservatism and xenophobia. History is littered with stories of European states wide-eyed with worry about the loss of their culture. The Spartans let no-one into their state until population decline wiped them off the map. And the Romans lost Italy because they refused to allow some German tribes to immigrate. What happened? Hundreds of years later, the 'Holy Roman Empire' continued their legacy out of that same Germany – the very place that had been considered so 'un-Roman' that resisting it warranted putting the entire state on the line. If we follow some in considering the EU to be today's Rome, it may as well operate out of Asterix and Obelix's camp.

The assumption I had been guilty of all those years ago, was that there is such a thing as an 'original culture'. Somehow, I had imagined that cultures rose up out of pre-history fully formed. I could understand that they might develop, combine, or disappear, and I feared the consequences of that for the cultures that I loved so much. But I could not

understand that this is what they have done since the dawn of humankind. How could anyone imagine that British culture is perfect, and must be protected from every foreign influence, when it has been not just altered, but in fact completely formed by foreign influences. Should I be arrogant enough to assume we have reached the acme of the development that interaction and population movements can bring? No. That just doesn't make sense.

If I love European cultures today, I love them because of how constant movement, integration, and interaction have made them what they are. It's only logical that if these can continue as they have since humans first arrived here, if I can help them to do that, if I can promote movement and integration around our continent, I will love them even more.

I came to Pembroke to learn about Classics. Now I'm on my way out, I see that this college has done far more for me. Events like this one have prompted me to understand how little I understood. It's made me see how arrogant I've always been in my view of the world. And how separating humans with borders and laws is not only impossible, but also stupid. I see that as the world tackles the most profound challenges that face it now – the climate crisis, the pandemic, and their fallouts – we must all acknowledge our shared identity as humans to solve them. As I go off into the real world, I'm scared about how we might ever solve these problems, angry and tribal as we are. But I'm comforted by what this college, and this prize have shown me: that in the end, integration always wins.