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Cultural Relativism or Eurocentrism? An Historical Perspective

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Identity, History, and Travel

All around Europe historic communities are re-emerging, fighting for devolution, autonomy, and the right to be recognised as politically independent communities. Yet at the same time, a powerful sense of a shared European identity has prevailed: in 1991 'Ode to Joy' was played at Slovenia's proclamation of independence and the EC flag was waved by anti-Soviet demonstrators in St Petersburg. One is quick to associate these events with rapid political changes over the last decade. Yet the revolutions of 1989/90 which overthrew communism in Eastern Europe—knocking down the Berlin wall and, in December 1991, dismantling the USSR—complicated a much longer historical process whereby a 'European' identity was being conceptualised, debated, and redefined within many different nations. The parting of the Iron Curtain and the fission of Eastern states redrew political frontiers, redefined cultural boundaries, and removed the Cold War dichotomy between West/East which helped define 'Western' identity since the Second World War. Today it is more difficult for Britons to sustain a separate identity, without a politically and ideologically *different* nation on the other side of the Continent.

It was also in December 1991 that member states of the European Community agreed through the Maastricht Treaty on a course for future integration. With the idea of creating a new, 'unified' Europe emerged a schedule according to which an era of peaceful co-operation and closer political and economic union could be forged. The creation of a single European market was planned and the agency of the European Union was established. Barriers were broken down, free trade permitted amongst members of the Community, and legal restraints on travel—imposed after the Second World War—were loosened.

But when we review attempts to forge a new Europe, a pan-European nationalism, or a unified community growing towards a globalization of trade and political policy, some striking paradoxes are uncovered. Defining what might constitute a 'European identity' has been plagued by problems. Ironically, attempts to strengthen Europe through unification have been somewhat disturbed by the collapse of the Eastern states against whom the Western powers had initially desired to consolidate their strength. In post-revolutionary Europe, it becomes politically sensitive to feign a highly selective federated 'super-Europe' which sits snug against those 'outside' the community, the marginal or peripheral peoples who have recently re-discovered their historical, regional identities. Never defined easily through geographical reference, the Europe of today is becoming synonymous with concepts of homogenisation, political conformity, and economic standardisation.

A number of questions can be asked concerning the present condition. In what way does the political rhetoric of economic unification lend itself to new conceptions of European identity? Is there such a concept that can apply to groups less familiar to our political, economic, and historical narratives? Is sharing such an identity simply to involve trade and travel agreements? The quest for a unified, inclusive European identity is guided by arbitrary criteria that demarcate geographical boundaries, set 'membership' standards, and often ignore regional distinctiveness and national-historical consciousness. Struggling with concerns and problems over thinking of what it means to be European, however, is not new to the twentieth century. British perspectives on these issues have matured over hundreds of years of travel and foreign encounters, and since the eighteenth century, we find similar questions to our own expressed in travel narratives and contemporary public debate.

While always arbitrary in one way or another, concerns over who count as European—geographically or historically—have an intellectual, political, and artistic history. But the level of concern to define 'the European' seems to be proportionate to the degree of political power emanating from central Europe. For whom did it matter who or what was considered European? Questions of identity mattered most to those who never ques-

tioned their own status as such; to those at the ‘margins’—those whose identity was in question—these concerns or judgements were irrelevant, if even acknowledged. Problems of European identity have developed as Eurocentric problems, contemplated in similar ways by scholars from, for example, Britain, France, or Germany. How, then, does exploring the ways that Britons have characterised others around the Continent relate to broader themes in European history? One significant link is that the history of British perceptions of those who counted as European is also a history of the rationalisation of the classification of populations. Through the development of the sciences of demography, anthropology, philology, and natural history during the Enlightenment, taxonomies of human kind placed conceptions of ‘European-ness’ on new epistemological bases. From the eighteenth-century philologist Sir William Jones to the nineteenth-century social anthropologist James Cowles Prichard, individuals from Britain with a range of interests used the social-scientific route to the classification of human kinds to seek new evidence for their accounts of European ancestry.

In twentieth-century cultural studies, Western society has been criticised for its presumptuous naiveté towards other cultures, for its ethnocentricity, and for its cartographic biases and Eurocentric imagery. The ‘Other’ in Western civilisation has a long history of being pushed and prodded, explored and colonised, misrepresented and appropriated. While such critiques have forged new levels of cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication, we have also begun to see ways that cross-cultural encounters have been more dynamic and interactive than previously portrayed, and cannot solely be represented as a monolithic, imperialist conquest. Travellers in foreign territories witnessed different ways of life and lived in strange and motley conditions, and their travel diaries often revealed their anxieties. Not only recording the contours of the landscape, travel writers ineluctably left traces of their psychological journeys. As a result of what can be considered the ‘foreign effect,’ encounters away from home—given enough time and through the active interests of enough people—not only transformed the foreign into the familiar, but provided new perceptions of and reflections on life at home. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of his countrymen travellers, ‘We go to Europe to become

Americanised.’ Through the dialectics of travel and encounters with the other, both self and foreign identities have been, and are continuously, re-constructed.

Questions of how international identities have been historically treated are further relevant because they allow us to see how cultural relativity has grown to be part of the treatment of foreign, as well as one’s own, society. Whether referring to present concerns over human rights and environmentalism or historical concerns over imperial expansion, the distribution of disease, or rights to ‘citizenship,’ different nations have used cultural comparisons to distinguish the progressive society from the barbaric, the civilised from the uncivilised, the modern from the ‘traditional’ society. These categories, like all classification systems, have always had problematic boundaries. But through travel and the uses of Enlightenment ‘sciences of man’ to inspect foreign frontiers, strides were made to map the margins of the historical and scientific classification of populations—‘primitive’ or ‘enlightened,’ within a ‘European’ or ‘extra-European’ domain.

Studies of how scholars at different times and in different nations have represented the Other—foreign, distant, or culturally unfamiliar—have become a prominent feature of literary and historical scholarship since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Said explored how comparative linguistics, anthropology, travel literature, and museum artefacts were used by western Orientalists to construct representations of the exotic ‘Orient,’ the term being derived from travellers’ references to the land lying eastward, ‘the place of the rising sun.’ The literary traveller did not just move through foreign territories, but recognised a rich interplay between the diverse, natural geography and the different levels of civility of the people who occupied these territories.

From Enlightenment thinkers such as the German jurist and historian Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694) to the Scottish conjectural historians, the development of human civilisation was conceived as being an historical process that followed lines of progressive refinement of social courtesies and increasing cultivation of arts and sciences. In *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias described how different degrees of civility were marked by changes in the standard of behaviour in individuals of a society

and how this reflected changes in a society's psychical makeup. He charted different ways that societies at different stages in the civilising process have appeared to Westerners as 'younger' or primitive, and others 'older,' or maturer. Within an historical-sociological model, developed in the late Enlightenment, the measure of civility was used as a way of figuring who was advanced enough to be considered part of modern Europe. But while such measures were deployed to evaluate the status of many exotic groups around the world, rarely was it thought necessary to consider the measure or status of European civilisation. However, the ends and limits to cross-cultural comparison somewhere met the European frontier, and defining these boundaries became an issue relevant to many eighteenth-century political and scientific concerns.

Crises of identity precede as well as follow periods of revolution. The political critiques which followed the revolutions of 1789 present illuminating parallels to the intellectual enterprise of comparative cultural analysis that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution in 1789. This study examines how the activities of a variety of British travellers to the Continent informed cultural critiques of European nationalism and historical-biological identities in the years preceding the Congress of Vienna and the establishment of the 'Concert of Europe' in 1815.

Looking at Europe from Different Perspectives

Throughout the eighteenth century, growing imperial concerns brought on a surge of interest in continental affairs, as travellers busily mapped the civilising process and assessed the limits of modernity abroad. By century's end, central European states began to recognise in each other shared cultural values that differentiated them—as part of a similar intellectual, if not political, *community*—from non-European peoples as described by various travellers. One historian has recently summed up the development of a 'European self-confidence' during the Revolutionary-Napoleonic period.

These years witnessed the construction of a cultural and political concept of Europe which was structured fundamentally around

two perspectives. First, a European view of the extra-European world was consolidated which drew on earlier perceptions, but transformed them into a radically different unifying concept of European civilization and progress which allowed the classification, and justified the material exploitation, of the rest of the world. Secondly, a distinctive conviction was forged of what constituted the essence of Europe's superiority, based on a division of its land mass into nation states and the role of the rational state in furthering progress.

The perception of the 'rest of the world' from the point of view of a unified 'European civilization' here refers mainly to European imperial explorations of Asia, India, and Africa.

The present essay seeks to identify what might be considered the 'other side' of such common assumptions of 'European perceptions.' Following Edward Said, the historian quoted above continues to write that by the end of the eighteenth century, 'the European republic of letters had developed sophisticated tools with which to classify and understand extra-European societies.' The use of such analytical tools rendered intelligible 'for a European public the description of places and peoples which were *not only distant*, but often bordered on the fantastic.' I would replace 'not only distant' with 'not *always* distant' in order to point out how close to home and how ambiguous the perceptions of European frontiers were. In addition, by considering ways that Europeans looked at Europe, we can begin to see how the use of such analytical tools not only *did* allow for the possibility of a *shared* European view of the 'non-European,' but how classificatory projects could also work to support national claims to superiority. In other words, British travellers' reports about the state of Europe at times fed into nationalistic claims that Britain was more modern, civilised, and enlightened than her imperial rivals.

Eighteenth-century travellers and the readers and critics of their published narratives researched and reflected upon a range of questions. Where exactly was the 'outside' of Europe? What constituted an 'extra-European' world? In what ways could the enlightenment 'sciences of man' be used to classify populations? Did travellers' inspections of foreign

frontiers place more emphasis on natural or cultural conditions of life? To what was difference between populations attributed, and how far did similarities between diverse groups of people extend? Travellers' comparative studies of different peoples at the European frontiers helped provide answers to these questions, summaries of which follow.

My recent book, *Exploring European Frontiers*, traced the ways that travellers discussed the characteristics of the northern, eastern, and southern frontiers of Europe—but it is also helpful to consider other ways that travellers and commentators conceived of the similarities and differences of diverse European populations. Among travellers' concerns were geographical and topographical diversity, climatic variations, and natural historical distinctiveness of different areas around Europe. These were among the *natural* differences that seemed to affect conditions of life in harsh, hot, frozen, or barren places. They were the variable 'circumstances' or 'situations' beyond which one had to look in attempt to discern common 'natural characteristics' of the human species, 'constants' of human nature.

Much attention was also given to cultural variations amongst the peoples encountered. These included different diets, dress, political and educational commitments, artistic patronage, and social structures. Broadly speaking, we can observe that in attempts to map civilisation—in trying to distinguish degrees of European-ness—the further from the 'centre' the more attention was paid to the different *natural* conditions of life. Here, attention to natural resources provided the data for understanding the material underpinnings of more 'primitive,' topographically distinct, 'non-European' populations. As the travellers looked 'inward,' toward metropolitan locations, the categories used to distinguish European-ness relied more on assessments of *cultural* apparatus (from architecture to educational ideals). Thus, the question of what defined European status gradually became an assessment of what defined a certain *kind* of European. In particular, the evaluation of a European status was a matter of how Britons' assessed others' cultural achievements as part of a measure of what defined *modern* Europe. This ultimately contributed to a nationalist sentiment suggesting that Britain was *the* measure of all other degrees of modernity and civility.

British travellers assessed the three broad geographical areas that formed the 'boundaries' of Europe. They can be summarised in the following way. Scandinavia, principally appraised relative to the northern governments' economic stability, population health, and commitment to the promotion of the arts and sciences, was illustrative of a once enlightened land suddenly in cultural decline. The once promising pursuit of an 'alternative enlightenment'—epitomised by the early success of its natural philosophers and practical educational programmes—failed in the decades following the bloodless revolution of 1772. Russia, despite a century of spirited attempts from Peter until Paul, was still only half way up the civilising scale. 'Enlightenment' was never achieved in Russia, it was continually asserted. Worse still, the barbaric tendencies of the emperor who welcomed the nineteenth century looked—to some—to be putting Russia at risk of degenerating into as primitive a condition as its provinces.

Both of these areas, it was thought by British commentators, could *partially* be classified European—essentially due to their economic and military interactions with Britain. So could Greece. But here, a different rationale guided British perceptions of what constituted European civility. In the ancient lands, there was an historic association between the civilised status of modern Europe and the legacy of the country upon which the principles of modern government were first pronounced. There were also conflicting interests in this land, which formed the frontier for competing European imperial powers. Hence, British explorers of the ancient lands analysed historical civilisation, not to prove it inherently European, but to lay privileged claim to it by personally identifying themselves—as *British*—with what they hoped to appropriate as their heritage. Britons were sharpening their analytical tools used to explore the ancient lands in order to fight off competing claims to the right to possess and identify with the origin of European civilisation.

But, there are other ways to consider how British travellers conceived of European frontiers. In the brief account that follows, rather than re-approaching the three separate regions, we will look at areas around Europe as conceptual concentric spheres which embraced the frontier lands and gradually zeroed-in on a British centre, to see how travellers theoretically classified European and non-European populations. The

outer-most 'sphere' represents the ambiguous frontier—populated with primitive Laplanders and Tartars: 'human kinds' who were most readily classified according to natural characteristics such as physiognomy, climate, language, and migratory lifestyle. As the spheres enclose areas increasingly closer to home, however, new values were deployed to evaluate the degree of civility ascribed to those under inspection. Such judgements fell within the realm of political, cultural, ideological critiques. Thus, looking at how the frontiers were conceptualised reveals varying ways that populations were classified from primitive to culturally refined; how they were distinguished in degrees from barbarity to modernity.

The history and diversity of mankind was a subject of inquiry for a broad range of Enlightenment theorists across Europe—led foremost by writers such as the Comte de Buffon or Anne Robert Jacques Turgot in France; the Swiss physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater; William Falconer, David Hume, James Burnet (Lord Monboddo), Adam Ferguson, and John Millar in Britain; Samuel Stanhope Smith in America, Carlus Linnaeus in Sweden; Samuel Pufendorf and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in Germany; and the Anglo-German naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster—to list only a few. Travellers' writings were systematically combed for material to provide the detail in the larger maps of humanity. In an age of where the propagation of travellers' narratives was partially driven by a market demand for accounts of the 'weird and wonderful,' the Anglo-Irish traveller, orientalist, and numismatist William Marsden, for one, felt it necessary to advise philosophers to select carefully from only the most reliable reports:

Facts [must] serve as *data* in [philosophers'] reasonings, which are too often rendered nugatory, and not seldom ridiculous, by assuming the truths, the misconceptions, or wilful impositions of travellers. The study of our own species is doubtless the most interesting and important that can claim the attention of mankind; and this science, like all others, it is impossible to improve by abstract speculation, merely. A regular series of authenticated facts is what alone can enable us to rise towards a perfect knowledge in it.

It was a warning to which many eighteenth-century travellers from Britain as well as other parts of Europe also took heed, and increasingly refined their observations to more detailed, descriptive, and demonstrable forms of evidence. They thus increasingly contributed to debates regarding the origin, progress, and classification of modern civilisation. To this end, they shared not only information, but ways of discussing and representing extra-European populations. Certain widely-cited travelogues acted as models of how to travel, record information, and construct images of life at the frontiers. The Danish traveller Carsten Niebuhr's *Travels through Arabia* (first published in 1772 as *Beschreibung von Arabien*, English edition 1792) set one influential example of how a team of travellers should employ enlightened principles of disciplined observation and systematically gather statistics, specimens, temperature readings, and so on. The more particular the observations the better, so that the Swedish botanist, Anders Sparrman, wrote in his *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope* (Swedish, 1783; English, 1785), that 'every authentic and well-written book of voyages and travels is, in fact, a treatise of experimental philosophy.' A number of travellers already wrote with similar conviction, such as Alexander Russell, surgeon to the Levant Company, who included a comprehensive analysis of the history and distribution of disease in the east in his well-known and widely referred to *Natural History of Aleppo* (1756). A common analytical thread that was woven through these accounts of European frontiers was a philosophical inquiry into human diversity. The work of antiquarians, philologists, political and religious historians, medical men, and others, was being synthesised into new forms of inquiry now commonly associated with leading Enlightenment philosophers. As the Scottish philosopher Henry Home (Lord Kames) commented in the 1770s, 'natural history, that of man especially, is of late years much ripened.'

When travellers wrote about their journeys to the European frontiers, they at once contributed to a European-centred philosophy about the scientific and historical classification of human kinds, and used that philosophy to guide their descriptions. The images of the frontier that travellers constructed and the theories that made sense of life there were thus interdependent. At times it appeared shocking that more seemed to be known of geographically distant peoples—those in the South Seas, the

New World, or the Far-East—than those who lived in relative proximity to Europe. The frontier land was a blank on the map of civilisation. No one from the central states of Europe had accurately charted the land; no study of language had illuminated cultural relations between various populations; no one had even reported on the practicalities of life in the varied climatic conditions. As late as the end of the eighteenth century, there was little to distinguish between the cultures of the Lapps, Tartars, or Cossacks—they were grouped together into the general classification of ‘primitive’ nomads who lived in the ambiguous peripheral circle around Europe.

Different populations around the world were already generalised into groups and ranked on a broad scale according to what stage in the civilising process they were at. William Marsden made distinctions between different ranks of civil society, and classified different populations according to five classes: ‘republics of ancient Greece, in the days of their splendor ... France, England, and other refined nations of Europe’; ‘the great Asiatic empires’; select ‘states of the eastern archipelago’; ‘less civilized Sumatrans [and] newly discovered people [in the] South Sea’; and finally the ‘Caribs, New Hollanders, the Laplanders, and the Hottentots.’ In other systems the Laplanders were grouped with others at the European frontiers, more often than not being spoken about along side the Tartars, who were associated with the Asian Mongols and the Turks. When Clarke toured Lapland, he noted a number of similarities between the Lapps and the Tartars, from their appearance down to the custom of carrying their babies in strikingly similar cradles. He was not alone in speculating on a shared ‘oriental’ ancestry between the two groups—the philological studies already mentioned by William Jones or John Richardson being another example of new ways that these cultures were being analysed, categorised, and associated with a common point of origin.

What many commentators saw as a common denominator between these different groups that helped to classify them together was their struggle to survive in harsh climates. The environment, whether in Lapland, Tartar, or Cossack territory, was ‘rigorous.’ Some theorists, following lines of reasoning similar to Richard Phillips (discussed above), believed that it was the extreme environmental conditions that caused peo-

ple to look as they did: the environment stimulated physiognomic ‘types,’ further supporting classificatory groupings of people at the frontiers. An example of such reasoning is found in the 1787 tract by the American Presbyterian minister and professor at Princeton University, Samuel Stanhope Smith. In his *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, he argued that physical variety among people in different geographical areas was due to natural causes. He gave as an example the case of the Tartars and the Laplanders:

The whole Tartar race, except a few small tribes who have probably migrated into that country from other regions, are of a lower stature than their southern neighbours on the continent of Asia, or than the people of the temperate latitudes of Europe. Their heads are large; their shoulders raised; and their necks short; their eyes are small, and appear, by the great projection of the eye-brows, to be sunk in the head; the nose is short, and is not so prominent as the same feature in the Europeans; the cheek is elevated; the face, somewhat depressed in the middle, and spread out toward the sides; and the whole appearance and expression of the countenance is harsh and uncouth. All these deformities are aggravated as we proceed towards the pole, in the Laponian, Borandian, and Samoiede races, which, as Buffon justly remarks, are only Tartars reduced to the last degree of degeneracy. A race of men resembling the Laplanders in many of their lineaments and qualities, is found in a similar climate in America.

And so through further testimony and travellers’ observations came more data for the classification of types of populations around the world, where the same principles of environmental effect on physiognomy would apply. Because of the ‘rigorous climates’ in northern Tartary and Lapland, the inhabitants’ noses were short since they drew breath through their noses, whereby the cold air numbed facial muscles, which tended ‘to restrain the freedom of [that feature’s] expansion.’ Their foreheads were prominent features since the ‘superior warmth and impulse of the blood in the brain, which fills the upper part of the head, will naturally increase its relative

magnitude.’ Their eyes appeared small due to the ‘contraction of their lids occasioned by extreme cold.’ And so on. Europeans, by contrast—perfectly represented in the archetype of Greek physique—who lived in ‘the temperate zone,’ with the most agreeable warmth allowing for free and easy muscle expansion; their features had ‘the most pleasing and regular proportions.’

It should be noted that Smith was writing in opposition to a different theory, such as maintained by Lord Kames. In his *Sketches on the History of Man* (1778), Kames argued that climate could *not* account for physiognomic differences between humans. If different races were generated by climatic conditions, then how, he asked, could one account for the differences of appearance amongst different populations who live so closely together in northern Scandinavia? ‘Lapland is piercingly cold, but so is Finland, and the northern parts of Norway, the inhabitants of which are tall, comely, and well proportioned,’ so he had read.

The further subtleties of the debates over the possible effects of climate on physiognomy are irrelevant to us. It was mentioned here to point out that in either philosophical system, the data accumulated through travel and foreign encounters was used to construct classification systems of types, or ‘kinds’ or ‘races,’ of non-European peoples. But at the same time, the accounts and classification systems were used to create, reflexively, the classification of the European—not only in terms of similar physiognomy (in distinction to the features of those at the frontiers), but in terms of similarities between European locations (whether that being responsible for ‘creating’ the European or the European was divinely created for that location).

The debate over what role the environment played in shaping the physical and social identity of those at the frontier was further relevant to understanding the historical identity of Europeans. In Smith’s model, the correlation between environmental conditions and the ‘state of society’ had significant implications regarding theories of the progress of civilisation. In his scheme, those classified by Europeans as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ were not inherently so, but were equally capable of becoming civilised peoples (as defined by European standards), through physical adaptation to different, more ‘favourable,’ environments. In other words, it

was conceivable that those at the European frontiers provided glimpses of modern European ancestry. The eighteenth-century equivalent to L.P. Hartley’s bon mot that ‘the past is a foreign country’ might have read: ‘a foreign country is our past.’

Perhaps never more so than at the immediate European frontiers were travellers’ observations so relevant to reflections about the constitution of a European identity. Reaching agreement about how best to classify those outside of Europe provided further criteria for the delineation of a European (‘civilised’ and ‘symmetrical’) ‘environment.’ The shared uses of cultural categories and terms of reference facilitated thinking of oneself as European, in the context of the classification of types of populations. But the closer those populations were to Britain, France, or Germany, for example, where those who invented the languages of population classification lived, the more we find that the concept of a common European identity was difficult to sustain. Classifying European-ness turned from the seemingly obvious grouping of those who were in a state of civilisation, to groupings of how people of different nations *act*—who was best suited guide the *civilising process*.

As Lucien Febvre has shown, the evolving uses of the term ‘civilisation’ in French and British discourse gradually created the conception of various and competing ‘European civilisations,’ nationally orientated. In France in the 1760s, to speak of civilisation was to speak of a continuing process of refinement—of developing social laws and government, in opposition to ‘barbarity.’ So in Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger’s posthumous *Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages* (1766), we have the statement: ‘When a savage people has become civilised, we must not put an end to the act of *civilisation* by giving it rigid and irrevocable laws; we must make it look upon the legislation given to it as a form of *continuous civilisation*.’

By the end of the century, the concept of guiding a ‘savage people’ to a civilised condition was laden with different theories of what ultimately constituted ‘civilisation.’ Such a status came to refer not only to the maintenance of social order (through policing and government), but to sustained wealth in philosophic, scientific, artistic, and literary culture. To speak of the act of civilising—to civilise a population—became attached to the concept of moral, social, and cultural progress. Thus, ‘the European’

was the civiliser—the creator of the state civilisation. Refining the classification of European civilisation also refined the category of ‘the European.’ So, European visions of extra-European society were also laden with different nationalist expressions of what best ‘to do’ about those populations.

In the Europe of post-Revolutionary France and early-Industrial Britain, reflections on how best to think of European identity were imbued with notions of who best represented *the civilised*. This was the underlying issue at stake in the contest between Britain and France over the imperial and historical frontier in the Levant. Control over that land and exclusive rights to its ‘historical memoirs’ was tied to debates over the proper constitution of a ‘free government,’ the benefits of artistic patronage of the arts, and Britain or France’s respective mastery over ‘orientalism.’ These concerns cast light on the emerging claims to identify a British—as opposed to a French, or broader European—civilisation.

The same concerns applied to reflections about the degree of European-ness of the Scandinavian states or Russia. Hence William Coxe’s published views on the spread of enlightenment in Russia and the attention to the rate of their ongoing civilising process: ‘their progress toward civilisation is very inconsiderable’; ‘it is impossible even for a monarch ... to diffuse a love for the works of art among a people who must first imbibe a degree of taste’; ‘the cultivation of a numerous and widely dispersed people is not the work of a moment, and can only be effected by a gradual and almost insensible progress,’ and so on.

The shared vocabulary that gave birth to ‘civilisation’ also invented Eurocentrism. But at the same time, debates over who best embodied and applied the principles of enlightenment and civil duty to social improvement further refined the categories of the European to a specific national level. Eurocentrism turned into ‘enlightened nationalism.’ The discourses of a ‘European’ or a ‘British’ identity were not self-evident. Particular kinds of intellectual work were required to create these reflexive references. To be ‘British’ relied, in this context, on the self-nominated and self-justified qualities that distinguished the interests of Britain above and beyond other European states. Similar claims were made from other nations. Thus the ‘limits of Europe’ were not merely geographically de-

fined, but relied on distinctions between culturally created categories tracing varying degrees of social refinement, enlightened rule, and civility. The boundaries, like classification systems, were pliant. As John Richardson observed of the problems involved with general attempts to classify populations:

Men totally dissimilar are grouped together, under one indiscriminate character, merely because they are known in Europe by one general name; whilst, among their numerous nations, a difference of character may prevail, not inferior perhaps to that which marks an *Englishman* from a *Frenchman*, a *Hollander* from a *Portuguese*.

The problems involved with classifying populations and of assigning boundaries (whether geographical, historical, or biological) have never gone away. But by exploring and exposing the diversity of life at the frontiers, and pointing out the inherent insecurities in mapping civilisation, eighteenth-century travellers took the first steps in a two-hundred year journey destined to reconstruct European identity.