

A continent astray

by Dr. John Godfrey
Walter Laqueur, *A Continent Astray: Europe 1970-1978*

A century ago, it was fashionable to talk of Turkey as "the sick man of Europe". Now, according to Walter Laqueur, the disease has spread to the whole continent.

Laqueur sees the 1970's as a period of major crisis for Europe. He contrasts this decade of unease with the twenty years which preceded it, years of security, well-being, and self-confidence. His first chapter sets the tone: "Abulia or the State of Europe". "Abulia", in case you were wondering, is not a leading character in *The Thousand and One Nights* nor is it Serbo-Croat for Europe. "Abulia" was a term coined by the French psychologist Charcot meaning "paralysis of will". Europe, says Laqueur, has lost its sense of destiny and its will to resist and survive.

At first glance, this may seem an overly-dramatic prognosis. After all, Europeans have never been better off materially than they are today. Peace reigns on the continent. The British pound, the Deutschmark, and the Swiss franc are all doing better than the American dollar and much better than the Canadian dollar.

But beneath this prosperous, peaceful surface there are plenty of signs of trouble, and Laqueur's book provides an excellent check list for everything that has gone wrong in Europe in the 1970's. A chapter on "Euro-economics" chronicles the post 1973 recession, which led to a startling 2% decline in the Gross Product of the European Economic Community in 1975, as well as increasing trading deficits, energy shortages, unemployment, and above everything, inflation. Turning

to individual countries, Laqueur points to the virtually ungovernable nature of England because of the power of the trade unions. He describes the political and economic woes of Italy, where the increase in political violence is eerily reminiscent of the situation before Mussolini's coming to power. And while progress towards greater European unification has broken down, Laqueur points to a concomitant rise in regional nationalism with the Scots and Welsh in Britain, the Basques in Spain, the Bretons and Corsicans in France, not to mention the continuing strife between Walloons and Flammands in Belgium and Catholics and Protestants in Ireland.

And if all of this were not bad enough, Laqueur believes that the Russians are taking an increasingly active role in undermining Western Europe. He is deeply suspicious of Eurocommunism in Spain, Italy, and France. Deep down, Laqueur thinks that they are the same old Communists playing the same old games. Laqueur says that *détente* is a bit of a fraud, and that the Russians are essentially insincere. He marshals an impressive amount of evidence to show that Russia is once more on the move in Europe, citing, for example, the increasing arms buildup and the increasing pressure being placed on the Scandinavian states both politically and militarily.

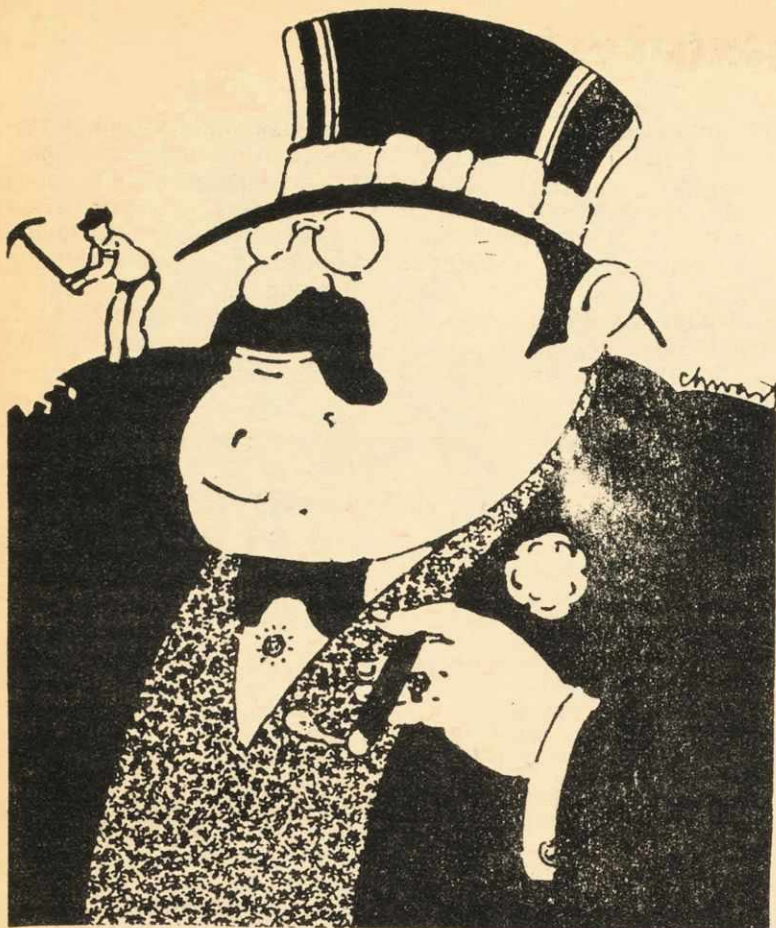
In the face of such pressure, Europe seems weak, stupid, decadent. The President of France scolded Jimmy Carter for speaking to Soviet dissidents while seeing nothing abnormal about the leader of the French Communist Party going to Moscow to talk to Brezhnev. In the most interesting chapter of the book, Laqueur devotes a surprising amount of space to Finland, or, more precisely, the process of "Finlandization"

whereby a supposedly independent country will make any compromise, commit any hypocrisy to accommodate a powerful neighbour. Laqueur dwells at length on Finland because he clearly sees it as a model for future spineless European states who lose the will to resist Russian power.

Laqueur ends his book by advancing a number of alternative hypotheses for Europe's future. He fears the rise of a variety of authoritarian regimes, since democracies seem so ill-suited to deal with current economic, social, and political disorders. Democracies are also not much good at standing up to external blackmail, at least not initially, as he reminds us.

This, then, is a bleak book. It is also a frustrating book to read because it does not hang together very well. What is the primary cause of European abulia—lack of will? Is it psychological? Economic? Political? Social? The Russians? Each chapter ("Eurocommunism", "Eurosocietalism", "Euronationalism") seems to live an independent life, virtually on non-speaking terms with its neighbours.

Part of the problem may be that Walter Laqueur is a good old-fashioned political analyst. It is revealing that he did not write the second chapter on Euro-economics. It is also regrettable, since a thorough understanding of the post-1973 economic crisis in Europe is a vital precondition in any interpretation of European politics after that date. Nor does he feel much at ease with other possible lines of approach: "About the cultural crisis little need be said except perhaps that it is not a specific European phenomenon. . . .". Christopher Lasch's new book about America, *The Culture of Narcissism*, as a reminder of the usefulness of such a cultural and psychological critique of contemporary societies.



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