6 Europe in the Mirror of the Orient

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The theme of this chapter is the idea of Europe as an expression of western civilisation. One of the central contentions of this book is that the idea of Europe found its most enduring expression in the confrontation with the Orient in the age of imperialism. It was in the encounter with other civilisations that the identity of Europe was shaped. Europe did not derive its identity from itself but from the formation of a set of global contrasts. In the discourse that sustained this dichotomy of Self and Other, Europe and the Orient were opposite poles in a system of civilisational values which were defined by Europe.

It should now be clear to the reader that the cultural and political reference points on which the idea of Europe was focused failed to provide the basis for an enduring and culturally homogeneous European identity. To briefly overview these: Language in the form of Latin ceased to be a unifying *lingua franca* by the late sixteenth century when it was replaced by French and later national vernaculars. Religion was a source of division since the schism of the Latin and Greek churches and the Reformation which split Christendom. The geographical idea of Europe, as we have seen, is as arbitrary as any other and was closely associated with its eastern frontier and the confrontation with Islam. Consciousness of a shared history was an impossible criterion: the divisions and discontinuities in European history were too great to produce a unified European identity. The divisions between eastern and western Europe and the internal struggles between the nation-states made the articulation of an immanently constructed European identity extremely questionable. As an aesthetic category, Europe had some reality in so far as it referred to material and aesthetic culture, but this could never be the basis of a European identity except for intellectuals. So it was in adversity that European identity was born. The idea of Europe was subordinated to national chauvinism within the European context, but viewed in the global context, European consciousness emerged in the context of a clash of world civilisations and was closely linked to racism and the imperialist mission of the West.

The value in looking at western views of the Orient — and more generally the non-European world — is that they can tell us a lot about the nature of European identity, for the Orient was to a significant extent the mirror, albeit
a very distorted one, of the West. What I principally wish to point to, however, is the way in which the idea of Europe became tied to processes of bipolar identity formation. In the encounter with the non-European world, the idea of Europe served as a cultural model of reference for the formation of what I have been calling European identity projects. These postulated the universality of European values and the identification of civilisation with European modernity. Underlying this was a strategy by which Europe succeeded in foisting an identity on the non-European world which was identified with its perceived negative aspects. The core component of secular European identity was race, with which the idea of Europe became linked. In order to sustain the hegemonic strategies underlying this, the monolithic construction of the Orient served as a distorted mirror image of the West, its surrogate otherness. The universal validity claims of European modernity tended to cohere around the idea of a European civilisation and its racial myth, which functioned to provide a normative model of evaluation against which other societies could be judged. By creating a one-dimensional vision of the Orient, the identity of Europe as a universalising and unifying worldview was secured.

At this point in the book I hope to be able to demonstrate how the idea of Europe, by becoming embedded in regressive forms of identity, ceased to be merely a cultural model and became the regulative idea of universal ethical culture. This had the inescapable implication that the idea of Europe itself became a self-postulated norm. The ethno-culturalism that this resulted in had a distorting effect since cultural spheres of reference are not in themselves universalisable; they cannot claim absolute validity; they are merely cultural resources of meaning. The idea of Europe is not then a normative model and its continued association with universal ethical claims is an invasion and reification of the moral space, which is not the privilege of any single culture.

Europe solved the age-old problem of the universal versus the particular by consigning the sphere of the particular to the relativism of national cultures while the idea of Europe was designated to be the realm of the universal. Culture was seen to be relative and embodied in national histories, while civilisation was universal and transfixed in the crucible of Europe. Europeans thus evolved the capacity to hold two kinds of identity: one national and the other European. Europe is thus subjectively experienced as national identity. This dual identity was a specifically European phenomenon.

The idea of Europe can be seen, in fact, as an expression of the universalist project of nationalism and the unfulfilled claims of the nation-state to universality. This was a universality that had to be sacrificed for the particularism of national culture. The legal framework of the nation-state had to