
H-France Review Vol. 20 (May 2020), No. 83

Stuart Sweeney, *The Europe Illusion: Britain, France, Germany and the Long History of European Integration*. London: Reaktion Books, 2019. 384 pp. References, bibliography, and index. £25.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-78914-060-6.

Review by Eric O'Connor, The Seven Hills School.

Readers of H-France can easily imagine France as a hexagon. Now imagine Europe as a triangle. Not geographically, but figuratively. On the three points of the triangle label Germany, Britain, and France. At certain points in European history the triangle is complete; all the edges are traced, and all points connect. This signifies the uncommon historical scenario in which all three countries are cooperating in relative harmony. More often in European history, however, lines are missing and only two points connect to each other, signifying that two of the three countries are cooperating, mostly likely in opposition to the third country. This is the model Sweeney constructs to understand the last 400 years of European history in his wide-ranging new book, *The Europe Illusion: Britain, France, Germany and the Long History of European Integration*.

Today Britain is that third country, plotted alone on the geometrical plane of Europe while the Franco-German alliance strengthens. Sweeney casts his historical analysis on countless political, economic, and cultural topics over the last four centuries to show that Europe's triangular arrangement has constantly fluctuated in a two-against-one model. For instance, it was often the case that Britain and France aligned against Germany or that Britain and Germany shared a common interest against France. But despite the ever-changing arrangements, one lesson is clear: being too radically outside the European triumvirate rarely ends well. This is the historical warning that Sweeney conveys most persuasively. Brexit Britain must be cognizant of the danger of striking out on its own while France and Germany remain deeply connected within the European Union.

While Britain can certainly make Brexit a success--indeed Sweeney notes that it appears to be a benign pattern of European history for two of the three countries to develop closer relationships while the third acts somewhat independently, maintaining a balance of power of sorts--Britain should be mindful of the dangers of trying to become a unilateral European power. As for the EU, Sweeney believes that a closely integrated federal Europe is still possible and perhaps even desirable now without the recalcitrant British. Britain, for its part, can perhaps now "play to its strengths" outside the European Union, Sweeney says, by "exploiting her imperial, liberal, unitary, and pragmatic past" (p. 14). Sweeney ends the book by recommending that Britain remain "'semi-attached' to the European game," as a critical part of Europe but not tied to it (p. 348). For Sweeney, that's the sweet spot for the British relationship to the EU. Despite the

positive opportunities Brexit presents, however, the overall weight of the prodigious history Sweeney presents in his book leads the reader toward a view of post-Brexit Britain that I would characterize not as cautious optimism, but rather of cautious pessimism.

Buying into the book's premise at the outset requires accepting his simplified model of modern Europe as a three-headed continent. Given the book's colossal ambitions—to essentially compare ideas and events in Britain, France, and Germany (and its predecessor states) in terms of politics, economics, empire, and religion in light of European unity since the Thirty Years' War—it is probably for the best that he limited his study to only three countries. Plus, there can be little doubt that Britain, France, and Germany most directly influenced Europe's destiny over the last 400 years, with the possible exception of Austria or especially Russia, which plays a role in Sweeney's framework as a fourth power and occasional common enemy. While Sweeney often presents these countries as singular entities, often referring to them only as their capital city, thus erasing internal competing views, his model provides a useful framework for the analysis he seeks to accomplish.

The bulk of Sweeney's evidence lies in the major milestones of European interstate political, economic, and cultural relations analyzed with an eye toward European unity, all structured within his two-against-one framework. Sweeney is constantly noting the realignments. Britain and Germany were occasionally aligned against France from the early modern period through to the end of the Napoleonic era. In the age of empire, Britain and France often shared more in common, leaving Germany as the odd country out. In terms of identity, however, Sweeney notes that Britain was exceptional in the era of empire compared to the other two by more often conceiving of itself as spread out across the globe while France and Germany more commonly viewed themselves as centered in Europe. In the realms of economics and religion, France and Germany often differentiated themselves from Britain by their higher comfort levels for state economic intervention and the popularity of Christian and Catholic political parties. The founding of the EU and its predecessor institutions in the early 1950s witnessed Germany and France cementing durable connections, leaving Britain behind. Then there are of course the obvious examples of one country violently separating from the other two: France during the French Revolution and under Napoleon, Germany during both world wars.

There were also moments when all three countries were more or less aligned, but this was less common. Qualifying for this category are the Congress of Vienna, the Crimean War, the League of Nations, and the last forty-seven years of the European Union. Sweeney also points out, with an implied wink, that the Munich Agreement of 1938 counts as moment when all three countries were aligned, however briefly.

The highlight of the book is Sweeney's eye for historical patterns. While comparatively little of his evidence addresses post-1945 topics, he often makes short but intriguing connections to present-day issues. One wishes that Sweeney developed these interesting historical parallels more substantively. He notes how the EU today has adopted a version of the French strategy for financing state projects through private banks, a strategy the French honed in the late nineteenth century as it industrialized and invested in new colonies. Sweeney compares the all-encompassing intentions of Napoleon's legal code to the goals of the busy bureaucrats in Brussels. He identifies parallels between Franco-Prussian War reparations, post-WWI reparations, and the divorce bill Britain will have to pay to leave the EU; will the cycle of reparations indignation continue? He ominously notes that Germany joined the League of Nations late in 1926 and left early in 1933,

setting a dark precedent for Britain's experience of joining the EU late in 1973 and leaving early today.

Sweeney addresses the contemporary issue of migration in Europe by noting that extra-European migratory routes leading to Europe are often still influenced by Britain and France's colonial pasts. But who today is tackling the challenge most thoroughly? "Germany [is] paying for the sins of the two colonial peers," Sweeney writes (p. 199). But this could come at a high cost for both Germany and the EU: "Now Germany is looking to pick up the pieces, but in so doing she risks undermining the very integration project that brought the three powers together again" (p. 276). While Sweeney generally seems sympathetic to the EU, the free movement of people is a tenet that he believes has potentially undermined the project.

Sweeney also cannot hold back his disdain for the austerity movement of the last decade. With a scolding gaze at today's political class in Europe, Sweeney shows that Germany successfully emerged from a stock market crash in the 1870s by holding tight to social welfare programs and increasing public investment. He contends that austerity in Britain in the 1930s was a mistake and that the austerity measures the British forced upon Egypt led to economic ruin in the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century.

Throughout, Sweeney emphasizes the ideas and events that fostered both cooperation and conflict, or as he often refers to them, integration and disintegration. Sweeney deploys the term integration to denote any shred of shared interest or interdependence between two states. Even shared Franco-Russian banking and security interests in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in Sweeney's expansive use of the term, qualify as "early integration of sorts" (p. 158). European states competing to increase their railway capacity during the Industrial Revolution also counts as "European integration of sorts," creating the "same subliminal sense of competitive European capitalism" (p. 138). Bismarck's unification of Germany would soon prompt "European disintegration" (p. 62).

The loose analytical precision of the concepts of integration and disintegration is a departure from current scholarly practice. Scholars who utilize the concept of European integration almost always now refer to *institutions* that foster European unity, usually under some type of federal structure. This is how, for instance, Patrick Pasture uses the term in his recent monograph that, like Sweeney's, examines the long history of European integration but with a tighter focus.^[1] Referring to European integration outside of any institutional contexts stretches this important historical concept beyond its scholarly limits.

More broadly, Sweeney does not engage or cite any European integration historiography. The vast literature built up over the last few decades on the topic is untapped. This may be because Sweeney's primary historical interests certainly lie in the pre-1945 period. The post-1945 era in his hands resembles a mirror upon which to reflect aspects of the pre-1945 history that keep popping up. But it is still jarring to read about the economic history of European integration without reference to Alan Milward, the history of Britain's relationship to the EU without reference to N. Piers Ludlow, or the history of Christian democracy as a magnetic force for European unity without reference to Wolfram Kaiser, and so on.^[2]

Although Sweeney includes a list of wide-ranging English-language references and notes at the end of the book on the major topics of European history, Sweeney's decision not to include any

historiographic discussions may have been intended to keep the text moving along. In that he succeeds, but perhaps to the extreme. At times the chapters feel more like a European history textbook than a monograph on European integration. Throughout, Sweeney discusses a topic, such as the impacts of the Thirty Years' War, the British in India, the League of Nations, or Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* for a few paragraphs and then moves on. The pace is relentless. While Sweeney displays expertise in an impressive number of areas, especially regarding interstate political and economic relations, no issue is discussed for more than a few pages. There are times when his extensive scope strengthens the book, such as when he makes clever connections between historical events and ideas across eras and countries. But at other points the analysis feels like a blizzard of European history in which the snow settles thinly everywhere—a mile wide and an inch deep, so to speak.

So who is the book's intended audience? It's certainly not for historians of European integration, who will undoubtedly wonder why they were excluded. Graduate students are taught to engage historiography, so it is probably not a good model for them. It is also probably not for most undergraduate students. Sweeney often references events and ideas without properly explaining them first, such as Napoleon's Continental System or the Seven Years' War. John Merriman's textbook on modern Europe, although much longer and without Sweeney's keen eye on the present, covers much of the same material in a more thorough and accessible manner.[3] The book's title, *The European Illusion*, may be intriguing to historians of modern Europe who recognize the "illusion" motif that runs through the last century of works on European unity, but the author does not develop those connections.[4] The book should appeal, however, to a segment of the general population who have a strong background in European history and are seeking historical precedents to current European issues, especially Brexit.

At its core, the book succeeds in impressing upon the reader the tremendous achievement of European integration in the first few decades after WWII. Sweeney often uses words like "evolved" and "developed" (for example, on p. 330) to describe European integration over the last 400 years, but it is hard not to see the immediate post-WWII period as a break from previous history. While Sweeney intends his evidence to demonstrate continuity between pre- and post-1945 events and ideas, it often elicited the opposite in me—a deeper appreciation for the change that took place in the immediate post-WWII period. Stuart's book reinforced the lesson that post-1945 European integration needed to overcome generations of rotten conflict and poisoned relations, and that all the historical scrap material that the EU's founding generation had it at its disposal—countless failed schemes and ideas—had proven inadequate to the task of enduring integration. Despite the occasional alignment of national priorities or the dreams of a small number of politicians, philosophers or social scientists, European unity before the late 1940s was a nebulous force without a realistic or concrete plan, swimming against the rip-roaring current of national competition. Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, Paul-Henri Spaak, Alcide De Gasperi and others assembled an entirely new machine made up of pieces from older contraptions that had fallen into disrepair. The weight of the evidence Sweeney presents in favor of conflict before 1945 speaks to paradigm-shifting nature of European integration in the immediate post-1945 period.

Yet one can easily agree with Sweeney's view of the present and future. Now is a precarious and perilous time for Britain and the EU. While I believe that the immediate post-WWII period was something of a historical anomaly, European relations have fallen back into familiar, disturbing patterns, and patterns are Sweeney's specialty. He warns against Britain rebuilding the "archaic

arrangements” of old (p. 330). Sweeney’s historical analysis suggests that a long period of stability can arise after Brexit, so long as Britain does not stray too far from its fellow members of the European triumvirate. We can also be certain this this current arrangement of Europe will not be its last. Sweeney raises the possibility that France and Britain will one day develop a shared interest in reining in Germany’s dominant economic might, demonstrating the ever-changing nature of Europe’s triangular arrangement once more.

NOTES

[1] Patrick Pasture, *Imagining European Unity since 1000 AD* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[2] Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000); Ernst Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968); N. Piers Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); N. Piers Ludlow, “Us or Them? The Meanings of ‘Europe’ in British Political Discourse,” in *The Meaning of Europe: Variety and Contention Within and Among Nations*, ed. Mikael af Malmberg and Bo Stråth, 101-24 (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002); Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[3] John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2019).

[4] See for instance Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (London: W. Heinemann, 1933); *La Grande Illusion*, directed by Jean Renoir (1937; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 1999); Tony Judt, *A Grand Illusion? An Essay on Europe* (New York: NYU Press, 2011). Sweeney briefly discusses Angell’s views on the futility of European war in the text, although Angell does not appear in the book’s index. Sweeney does not discuss or cite Judt but his views align most closely to him in that he is sympathetic to the project of European unity but concerned about the future. Sweeney uses the concept of “illusion” in the text in multiple ways, including in reference to a one-size-fits-all federal Europe (p. 330) and the notion that any one of Europe’s three major states could successfully make it on its own completely separated from the other two (p. 348).

Eric O’Connor
The Seven Hills School
Eric.oconnor@7hills.org

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172