

# United states?



**KALYPSO  
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puts her  
faith in the  
idea of  
Europe

In anatomising democracy in America, aristocratic democrat Alexis de Tocqueville was above all passionately concerned with the fate of Europe. While many of his friends passively bemoaned the ills of their times – centralisation, bureaucracy, atomisation of society – and hoped for a liberal restoration, de Tocqueville argued that the transition from aristocratic to democratic regimes was inevitable. Though appropriately sceptical about the possible emergence of a truly democratic engaged citizenship, looking around Europe during the age of upheavals in the 1840s caused by rising expectations clashing with old regimes apparently incapable of reform, he could see that the clock could not be turned back; democracy was inevitable in the old continent.

The European Union today may be facing such a Tocquevillian moment; poised between its technocratic aristocratic past and an uncertain but irrevocable future where citizens enjoy the power of their collective veto over the grand and not-so-grand designs of their political masters. Heightened expectations for what Europe could be can, at the moment, neither be fulfilled nor ignored, so the French and Dutch publics resolve just to say 'No'. We are in a transitional phase, which can look bleak, and it could last our lifetimes. But it is also just possible that Europeans might learn to define a renewed 'EU-topia' compatible with their multifaceted fears and desires. And just maybe, provided Britain becomes more European, this might come to look evermore like a British Europe.

Is such a prospect credible? After all, most continental Europeans believe that the Brits rejoice in the death of the European Constitution and the continued momentum of EU enlargement for the same reason: their unabashed pragmatic belief in a minimalist Europe, a continent-wide free trade area securely open to Anglo goods and services and no less securely closed to the prospect of something called 'political union'. It is time for Britain to prove them wrong.

Tony Blair's agenda for Europe is no Tory Euro-speak. The dramatic shift over the summer from a constitutional

to a pragmatic agenda – talking 'value-added' ahead of 'values' – should not hide the breadth of his ambition for Europe. Jack Straw's unflinching support for a European destiny for Turkey is part and parcel of a vision of Europe's global role which may still be too daring for many on the continent to contemplate. What is still missing is a plausible shared 'idea of Europe'. An idea that can overcome our worst travails: indifference, complacency, distrust, parochialism. An idea equidistant between absolute utilitarianism and a new Euro-nationalism, and belonging to the wise majority of pragmatic idealists. This idea must find its roots in principles dear to the humanist tradition and (still?) central to British politics – liberalism, pluralism, secularism.

The beauty and drama of Europe is that it must have Europeans without having 'a European people'. The EU is a community of others founded on the mutual recognition of each other's different identities. The EU has established itself as a new kind of radically plural political community: one that is defined not by a uniform identity, but by the persistent plurality of its peoples. A 'demoi-cracy' in the making.

If 'Unity in diversity', the EU motto, is to be something more than window-dressing we need to protect the European diversity of languages and cultures, but also of social contracts while preventing diversity from becoming a pretext for exclusion. It means that we can have different ideas of what the EU actually is in the landscape of political animals – a community of communities, a union of sovereign states, a federation – so long as we agree on a common space to discuss them.

It is about recognising that how we implement our shared liberal principles across states depends on our different understandings of the 'good society'.

With such diversity, what is the glue that binds us together? The answer here must be old-fashioned liberal: the desire to be European: that's it. All the while knowing that we will never agree

on a definition of what it means to be European. Some of us believe that Europeans are bound by a shared cultural heritage, others by a common belief in institutions and the rule of law. Some see Europe as a community of identity, others as a project. For some Europe is about politics, economics and security; for others about ethics and art. Some think the European idea means keeping alive the spirit of Dante or Erasmus: others that it must constantly be reinvented in our common spaces, from the football pitch to the Internet.

As a French and Greek citizen with German and Spanish ancestry working in and married with Britannia I have an obvious stake in such a vision of Europe.

My rational self wants an EU defined narrowly as just 'the rule of law' thank you very much, while my emotional self dreams of a fantastically ambitious Europe, the global mediator of our 21st

century. I wish for an EU that is more responsive to its citizens' existential queries and yet enthusiastically embraces the project of bringing Turkey into our midst. Do we need to choose? Should we not apply to the Union the ironic wisdom of these children of the first European civil war, the surrealists, who believed you should change your ideas as often as your shirt if you want to keep them clean. Would they not in turn appreciate the incongruous idea of a British Europe? Surely, today's European politics would appeal to their fondness for paradox. As would the proposal that to achieve something like European common purpose we must stop obsessing about ourselves, radically increase our efforts to listen to the world beyond our borders and invent a new kind of post-colonial universalism in the language of our non-European others. We are not quite there yet. ■

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**'What is still missing is a plausible shared idea of Europe'**