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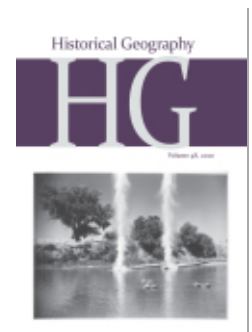
*The Europe Illusion: Britain, France, Germany and the Long  
History of European Integration* by Stuart Sweeney (review)

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*The Europe Illusion: Britain, France, Germany and the Long History of European Integration.* Stuart Sweeney. London: Reaktion Books, 2019. Pp. 384, notes, index. \$40.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-1-78914-060-6.

Analyses of Brexit have tended to portray it as an unprecedented rupture, a reversal of the process of European integration. Stuart Sweeney's premise in *The Europe Illusion* is that these debates are underpinned by a condensed view of history that treats European integration as a post-1945 phenomenon, and that we need to greatly expand our historical range in order to put the events of the present in perspective, and thereby to understand the forces at play in the *longue durée*. Sweeney's book provides a history of European integration from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia to the present day, and asks how this history illuminates the contemporary geopolitical situation. The vast ambition of this undertaking is tempered only by the choice to limit his focus to Britain, France, and Germany as the dominant powers controlling the fate of Europe in this period.

Two overarching arguments are threaded throughout the book. The most explicit is that differences between British, French, and German attitudes toward European integration may be explained by their differing histories. There is a well-worn theory that their differing experiences in the twentieth-century world wars convinced Britain of its self-sufficiency and convinced France and Germany, for different reasons, of the necessity of European integration. Sweeney follows this logic but argues that it ought to be pursued by pushing the historical frame far back, and that in fact Britain's "semi-detached" stance toward European entanglement has been cultivated over centuries, as has French and German enthusiasm for European engagement.

Behind these rather static generalizations, Sweeney provides a more nuanced and dynamic analysis of the ever-shifting patterns of alliance that have united and divided the three powers as their fortunes have waxed and waned over the centuries. He contends that alliances between two of the three powers have often ostracized the third and that this situation is the norm, while the forty-seven years that Britain spent as a member of the EC/EU alongside France and Germany constitute a rare—and unstable—period of harmony uniting the three. Seen this way, Sweeney argues, Brexit "does not undermine the strong forces

tending to European integration. It simply spells more pragmatic and variable geometry in Europe" (11).

The book is structured by way of four successive thematic histories, each running from 1648 to the present. The first two substantive chapters tackle the diplomatic history of the interrelationships of Britain, France, and Germany. (Sweeney treats "Germany" as being represented by the Holy Roman Empire up to 1740, and by Prussia from 1740 to unification). Sweeney's contribution here is to interweave a diplomatic history of states and alliances, in the manner of British diplomatic historian A. J. P. Taylor, with a history of the utopian schemes to unite Europe. The third and fourth chapters offer an economic history of the interrelations of Britain, France, and Germany, drawn in terms of the long wrestle between Anglo-Saxon *laissez-faire* and continental mercantilism and cameralism. The fifth and sixth chapters focus on the differing imperial histories of the three powers, advancing the broad argument that while Britain has tended to prioritize empire over engaging with Europe, for France "empire was often a means to European aggrandizement," and Germany's own enthusiasm for European aggrandizement is a product of her "relatively empire-free" history (198–99). Lastly, the seventh chapter looks at the history of how religion (and secularism) have divided and united the three powers. A key puzzle that Sweeney poses is why it is that right-leaning Christian political parties have played a key role in supporting European integration in France and Germany, but not in Britain.

Sweeney adopts a conversational tone throughout, aimed at capturing and retaining the interest of the general reader, and aside from a few familiar names (Said, Fukuyama, Huntington), references to scholarship are relegated to endnotes. He is most successful when the task might be thought hardest: in the economic sections and those that pertain to modern EU mechanisms, which are all fluently explained with a lightness of touch no doubt honed in Sweeney's prior career working in the banking sector. The prose is organized into manageable sections, which may frustrate readers pining for more sustained engagement with any one topic, but allow Sweeney to keep moving through the vast range that his task demands.

Apparent historical echoes across the centuries are frequently pointed out. Indeed, Sweeney's approach to history dwells less on elaborating

horizontal context and more on providing vertical historic perspective to recent events. For instance, Quesnay and Smith's eighteenth-century debates are seen to reverberate in Thatcher's Common Agricultural Policy rebate (121), and the Commission of Debt established in 1876 to oversee Egypt's Suez Canal repayments is compared to the European troika's management of bailouts stemming from the 2007–8 financial crisis (220–22). Much will hang on whether you find these sorts of comparisons and juxtapositions generative or are irritated by their anachronism.

Geography is in some ways omnipresent, yet it is only ever invoked explicitly in a rather thin manner. Sweeney allows for geopolitical logic, arguing for instance that “by the late nineteenth century Britain needed a land-based power to complement her naval strength” (67), but he has little curiosity about the contingency of “Europe” itself. Worse still, states are too often depicted as they are in the anonymous 1814 French caricature used for the dust jacket cover: as geopolitical personalities that think or feel in the singular, and are embodied by their leaders. It is telling that Henry IV of France is given full credit for the Grand Design concocted by his minister the Duc de Sully many years after Henry's death. The book is hampered by Sweeney's failure to engage with modern scholarship that has sought to move past the catalog of great men, famous thinkers, and established watersheds that underpin his narrative, and to transcend the national categories that structure it.

In his conclusion Sweeney addresses the titular *Europe Illusion*, gently puncturing the notions that a one-size-fits-all EU is possible, that the EU is a hopelessly utopian project, that Europe is the center of the world, or that Britain (or indeed any of the “big three”) can ever fully detach from Europe. This is characteristic of a book that creditably blunts the hyperbole that surrounds contemporary political debates around European integration. It succeeds at providing a readable historical perspective on these debates, but is rather too blunt to access the insights that contemporary transnationally minded history or historical geography might have offered.

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