



The Europe Illusion: Britain, France, Germany, and the Long History of European Integration by Stuart Sweeney.

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What does Brexit mean for the future of British-European relations? In *The Europe Illusion*, historian Stuart Sweeney (Centre for European History, Univ. of Oxford) offers ambitious and intriguing but not fully realized answers. He draws on myriad examples from 1648 to 2018 to argue that we cannot understand recent stumbles in integration without grasping the historical patterns that inform them, particularly Britain's relationships with France and Prussia-Germany: "common trends and patterns driving European integration [are] tempered by historical and cultural particularisms" of these states and make "setbacks such as Brexit predictable and manageable" (9).

Positioning Britain's current detachment from the EU alongside similar historical patterns, the author reveals indirect connections that help explain recent developments. His book is best suited to a popular audience with some knowledge of European history and politics, particularly EU institutions. Academics will dislike the inattention to pertinent works on these matters.

The book comprises four thematic sections: (a) war, politics, and diplomacy in chaps. 1-2; (b) the economics of European integration in chaps. 3-4; (c) empires, migrations, and Europe in chaps 5-6; and religion and the "other" in Europe in chap. 7. Each taps both primary and secondary sources to illustrate its themes (somewhat impressionistically), concentrating on Britain, France, and German states. The quality of the discussion of economics and empires reflects Sweeney's long experience as an investment banker, his doctorate in economic history, and his affiliation with Oxford's Center for Global History.¹

The first section of the book describes a flexible balance of power between Britain, France, and various German states. Despite moments of opportunistic cooperation and incentives to use diplomacy to avoid war, rivalries were common and "stability through the triumvirate proved elusive" (17). Britain remained "semi-detached," willing to intervene on the continent but preoccupied with its empire, naval power, and external trade rather than European territorial concerns. Developments since the Franco-German Elysée Treaty (1963) have created an "inner core of two, which has been retained more or less ever since" (97).

This first section, with more than forty short narratives covering three centuries, suffers from imprecise terminology and theory. For example, a premise of chap. 1 is that "Germany" takes many forms during this period. But the book's three-power model equates "Germany" variously with the Holy Roman Empire, German-speaking peoples, the Austrian Hapsburg Empire, Prussia, and an intermittently unified Germany. Most readers will wonder what other historians² have made of these same patterns and what precisely Sweeney's contribution to their work may be.

1. His previous book is *Financing India's Imperial Railways, 1875-1914* (NY: Routledge, 2011).

2. E.g., Gordon A. Craig, *Europe since 1815*, 3rd ed. (NY: Holt, Rinehart 1971); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Univ Pr, 1975); and Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State* (Stanford: Univ Pr, 1978).

The second section traces economic aspects of integration and separation, characterized by an ongoing tension between “mercantilism” and “laissez-faire” tendencies (106). Britain’s laissez-faire particularism, driven by geography, demographics, and empire, often kept it at odds with French and German policies and limited its role in European economic integration. Sweeney’s thoughtful discussions of economic thinkers are strengths of the book, but he sometimes overreaches for connections. Recounting a dispute between Adam Smith and François Quesnay about the role of industry and commerce versus agriculture, he writes that

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see the legacy of these debates between Quesnay and Smith. London and Paris have pursued contrasting approaches to economics and business since that time. Indeed, these differences are obvious even in the recent history of economic integration in Europe, where Britain and France adopted opposing standpoints.... Most obviously, the manufacturing versus agriculture conflict has been a prominent cause of Anglo-French divisions.... Eventually, under Margaret Thatcher, some of the subsidy passing from British manufacturing industry to French agriculture, through the CAP [common agricultural policy], was overridden with the famous “rebate” from the EEC to Britain. (121)

This parallel is appealing, but the case for Britain’s rebate being a legacy of this earlier debate is tenuous. The EU’s founding moment in the European Coal and Steel Community, in fact, rests on French concern for industrial raw materials.

This section does show that French and German economic plans diverged from Britain’s in their emphasis on European markets and the eventual pursuit of monetary union. But the overarching arguments are again muddled by ambiguous terminology such as “mercantilism.” As Sweeney himself correctly notes, “mercantilism can be an unhelpful label for providing insights into European identity. Frustratingly, it may mean ‘all things to all people’” (107). He nonetheless proceeds with the theme without offering the necessary definition.

The book’s third part concerns the varied effects of imperialism on the three target states. Britain’s “semi-detached” stance toward Europe reflected its imperial ambitions and reliance on colonial trade. Germany’s late imperial ambitions paled compared to its European goals, and France’s considerable empire was “often a means to European aggrandizement” (198), making it comfortable eventually choosing Europe over empire.

Chapter 6 discusses the role of migration in labor shortages and colonial histories, its effects on cultural homogeneity and nationalist backlash, and the challenges these posed for the free movement of people. This is one of several richly detailed chapters that needed more in-depth analysis of nationalism as an ideology and collective political identity.³

The book’s fourth section argues that Europeans have often distinguished themselves by reference to a religious “other” such as Islam, and their resilient Christian identity is unlikely to disappear despite secular trends. The long history of Christian-Muslim rivalry has made it difficult to see Turkey as a potential EU member, for instance. Late twentieth-century European identity remained generally Christian, though open to integrative tendencies like Christian Democracy.⁴

The book concludes that “one size fits all” European integration will remain illusory because of the national particularisms, but that “federalists have momentum on their side,” as “allying and integrating became more rational and necessary” (330). Events like Brexit should be expected as

3. Sweeney cites Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (1960; rpt. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), but not Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1983; 2nd ed. 2006) or E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (NY: Pantheon, 1968).

4. Sweeney discusses ideologically secular and atheist movements, but downplays the overall decline of European religiosity.

Britain, France, and Germany try to shape integration in a Europe where “full detachment for any of the ‘big three’” is also an illusion (348).

The book’s strengths lie in the variety of examples and sometimes surprising parallels drawn among them. Even readers well versed in European history will learn from its lucid discussions of early visions of European unification and legacies of the French revolution. More problematic are its view of “integration,” which follows neither conventional definitions centered on EU institutions, nor any precise alternative.

Overall, Stuart Sweeney successfully clarifies relations among Britain, France, and Germany within an uncommonly long timeframe of analysis. He also makes a plausible case that Britain has been and is likely to remain “semi-detached” from, or, more optimistically “semi-attached” to Europe (348). Despite its limitations, *The Europe Illusion* is a rewarding and thought-provoking starting point for a deeper understanding of European integration.