Introduction

Europe's diversity and the multiplicity of its political units make it particularly interesting as an object of comparative sociology. Taking the continent (or sub-continent) as a whole, the contrasts and comparisons between East and West, North and South, have been a regular focus of attention; the same goes for many of its component states (North and South in Italy or England, for example, or East and West Germany, both as separate states and, since 1990, as regions of the enlarged Federal Republic). For the past few centuries, reversing previous patterns, the North and West of Europe have tended to dominate the South and East culturally and economically; this disparity was both counter-balanced and reinforced in the period 1945–1989 by Soviet political domination of much of Central and Eastern Europe. The communist era in the 20th century, lasting seventy years in the USSR and forty-plus in Europe, China and Southeast Asia, has rightly been put in historical comparison with the Eurasian empires at the beginning of the first millennium.

Historically, what we know as European civilization spread from the south and east of the sub-continent (including North Africa, the Levant and further east). The Renaissance was perhaps the last major example of this directional movement (unless one counts the spread of the “Mediterranean diet” to Northern Europe in the late 20th century). For the past two or three centuries, however, corresponding to the establishment of sociology (see Outhwaite 2011a), European discourse has been substantially shaped by what Edward Said (1978) called Orientalism, as applied both to the rest of Eurasia and within Europe itself. What came to be called modernity was identified more with the north-west of Europe. The image of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great, working for some months in the shipyards of Holland and England at the end of the 17th century to learn the trade, and building a model city and port at Saint Petersburg at the beginning of the eighteenth, is exemplary of this pattern of modernization, running through to Mikhail Gorbachev’s towards the end of the 20th century. The French Revolution, which removed one of Europe’s most powerful monarchs at the end of the 18th century, also set a model for political modernity that has shaped the world.

Comparative sociology has to engage with and question these patterns and assumptions, both within Europe and in relation to its place in the world (Bhambra 2007; Outhwaite 2008). Some contemporary writers argue that the term modernity is irrevocably contaminated by Eurocentrism; an alternative approach is to replace “Western” or “European” with a more abstract notion of modernity and a complementary, more concrete notion of plural or multiple modernities, developed by S.N. Eisenstadt and other historical sociologists (Wagner 2012). In other words, Europe has not retained a monopoly on modernity any more than Britain retained a monopoly on industrialization (Delanty 2004, 176).

To think about Europe, then, at least the Europe of the last half-millenium, is to think, however skeptically and critically, about modernity, and this inflects the notion of the West. Since around the 17th century, Europe has come to see itself and portray itself to the rest of the world as “Western” in an evaluative sense, and its neighbors and its own eastern or southern regions, and parts of its populations, as less western or less than western, echoing the ancient Greeks’ view of their world as superior to what were later called “oriental despotisms” in the east. This is an approach appropriately described and rightly condemned as Eurocentric in relation to the rest of the world and western-centric or occidentocentric within Europe. It is of course integrally linked to imperialism and to the processes, within Europe itself and its component states, of “internal colonialism” (Hechter 1975).1

Within Europe, the East-West “wall in the head” (Schneider 1982, 117) is not confined to Berlin. Most fundamentally, the East-West divide has been shaped by ideologies of European (and, within Europe, Western) superiority which continue to influence such concrete issues as EU enlargement negotiations. The North-South division is also salient both in Europe as a whole and in a number of its component states—notably Germany, Italy and France. In all three it is historically more of an
Early Comparative Views of Europe

Early sociology was essentially comparative. The Scottish Enlightenment—whose leading figures included Adam Smith, David Hume, Adam Ferguson and John Millar—was arguably driven by an awareness of the contrast between the civility of life in Edinburgh and Glasgow and the primitive conditions of much of the rest of the country. Alexis de Tocqueville went to North America to see what democracy had in store for Europe (and for France in particular). He is also remembered for prophesying the eclipse of Europe in the world by Russia and America; in the Cold War era of NATO and the Warsaw Pact this had particular resonance. Marx and Engels were of course internationalists, anticipating theories of globalization a century later. Max Weber devoted the greater part of his published work to what in a classic comparative essay he called “the economic ethic of the world religions”, starting with the question of the alleged contribution of ascetic Protestantism to the emergence of “rational” capitalism in Europe.

A comparative emphasis is, however, much less prominent in the sociology which flourished in the mid- to late 20th century. There were a number of reasons for this. First, there was a shift in the center of gravity of sociology to North America, where the USA is sufficiently large to sustain an imperial consciousness that discourages comparison with other parts of the world. Second, the polarization between what C. Wright Mills called “grand theory” and “abstracted empiricism” discouraged middle-range comparative work. Third, sociologists rely substantially on statistics, which have traditionally been collected on a national basis and are most often not directly comparable. Finally, the linguistic diversity of Europe meant that probably only a minority of its sociologists, mostly continental European and Nordic scholars, regularly worked with foreign-language material. For one reason or another, what the great historical and comparative sociologist Norbert Elias called “the withdrawal of sociologists into the present” was matched by a withdrawal into the container of the national state.

Elias' own work on European manners and state-formation was an exception, and his book on The Germans (Elias 1989) also put Germany in a comparative perspective. Two influential collections of essays on contemporary Europe were edited by Margaret Archer, who had earlier co-authored a historical comparison of educational systems in England and France (Archer and Vaughan 1971), and Salvador Giner (Archer and Giner 1971, 1978). On the whole, though, European Studies tended to be polarized between slender if often stimulating essays on the one hand, and the “normal science” of European integration studies on the other.

A further handicap was the tendency to discuss “Western” and “Eastern” Europe separately, with the east largely left to area specialists. Even now, a book with “Europe” in the title cannot be reliably expected to include post-Communist Europe as a matter of course. There were East-West comparisons, such as Brzezinski and Huntington (1964) and Bronfenbrenner (1970) on the USA and USSR, and rather more, for obvious reasons, on (and in) the two German states (see Krejčí 1976). These comparisons were also drawn in general terms by Raymond Aron (1963, 1965) and other theorists of “industrial society”.

A few European or North American sociologists studied (other) European countries and sometimes drew comparative conclusions (Smelser 1959 and Calhoun 1981 on historical developments in Britain,