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## Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism

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Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism

Enrique Dussel

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The Semantic Slippage of the Concept of “Europe”

Let me begin by underlining the change in meaning of the concept of “Europe.” This semantic slippage has generally been overlooked, making it difficult to address this issue in a productive manner.

First, the mythological Europa was the daughter of a Phoenician king and thus was Semitic.<sup>1</sup> This Europe that comes from the Orient bears little resemblance to the “definitive” Europe (the modern Europe); one should not mistake Greece with the future Europe. This future Europe was situated north of Macedonia and north of Magna Graecia in Italy. The future Europe was the home of everything that was considered barbaric (thus, in later times, Europe eventually usurped a name that did not belong to it). The classical Greeks were well aware that both Asia (the area that would later become a province in the Roman Empire and which corresponded to contemporary Turkey) and Africa (Egypt) were home to the most developed cultures. Asia and Africa were not considered barbaric, although neither were they considered wholly human.<sup>2</sup> What became modern Europe lay beyond Greece’s horizon and therefore could not in any way coincide with the original Greece. Modern Europe, situated to the north and west of Greece, was simply considered the uncivilized, the nonpolitical, the nonhuman. By stating this I am trying to emphasize that the unilineal diachrony Greece-Rome-Europe is an ideological construct that can be traced back to late-eighteenth-century German romanticism. Therefore, the single line [End Page 465] of development Greece-Rome-Europe is a conceptual by-product of the Eurocentric “Aryan model.”

Second, the West consisted of the territories of the Roman Empire that spoke Latin (the eastern border of which was the area between present-day Croatia and Serbia) and thus included the north of Africa.<sup>3</sup> The West was opposed to the East, the Greek Empire, which spoke Greek. The East consisted of Greece and Asia (the Anatolia province), the Hellenist kingdoms that reached the banks of the River Indus, and the Ptolemaic Nile. At that time, there was no relevant concept of what would later be considered Europe.

Third, beginning in the seventh century, Constantinople (the eastern Roman Empire) confronted the steadily growing Arab Muslim world. Here one should not forget that from that point on the classical Greek world—the one traditionally associated with Aristotle—was as much Arab Muslim as Byzantine Christian.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, the Medieval Latin European world confronted the Turkish Muslim world. Again, Aristotle was a philosopher considered to belong more to the Arab than the Christian world. Running against the grain of tradition and at the risk of condemnation, Abelard, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas drew upon Aristotle’s thoughts. Indeed, Aristotle’s writings on metaphysics and logic were studied in Baghdad well before they were translated into Latin in Muslim Spain; then, from Toledo, they arrived in Paris by the end of the twelfth century. Thus, for the first time, Europe differentiated itself from Africa (given that the Maghreb was Muslim and Berber) and from the Eastern world (especially from the Byzantine Empire and from the Middle East, thanks to the traders of the eastern Mediterranean). In this context, the Crusades can be seen as the first attempt of Latin Europe to impose itself on the eastern Mediterranean. They failed, and Latin Europe remained isolated by the Turkish and Muslim world, which extended its geopolitical domination from Morocco to Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Mogul Empire of northern India, the mercantile kingdoms of Melaka, and finally, in the thirteenth century, to Mindanao Island in the Philippines. Thus, Muslim “universality” reached from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Latin Europe was a secondary, peripheral culture and up to this point had never been the “center” of history. This also applied to the Roman Empire, which, given its extreme western location, never became the center of the history of the Euro-Afro-Asian continent. To consider an empire the center of Eurasian...

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