

# *Declaration of the European Academy of Yuste*



*“What All European Schoolchildren  
Should Learn About Europe  
Towards An Interactive Curriculum On  
European Civilization For HighSchool  
Students.”*

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# **WHAT ALL EUROPEAN SCHOOLCHILDREN SHOULD LEARN ABOUT EUROPE**

## **Towards an interactive curriculum on European civilization for high school students**

In the past half century, a peculiar political construct has emerged from the combination of European states: The European Union is more than a confederation, but less than a federation; more than just a free trade zone, but not quite an economic whole; almost a world power, but one without an army or an effective foreign policy of its own; with a common currency, the euro, but with coins that reserve a different verso for each member state. And yet, taken together, in less than a lifetime, these are major achievements.

The Europeans do not speak the same language and hence do not understand each other well enough to differ or agree. But quite apart from the confusion of tongues, opinions everywhere are shaped within separate national frameworks. What is passionately debated in one country is often not even an issue in adjacent countries where a different agenda prevails. In many respects, however, the debate on the European constitution represented a turning point in the formation of European public space. Not only did the proposed constitution evoke intense exchanges in each member state, it also elicited a vivid interest in the discussions going on in the other member states. No matter how contested, a common agenda held sway over the audiences in the countries of Europe.

During those discussions it became apparent once again that Europeans have an often vivid but usually vague image of what European identity and European civilization stand for. This is hardly surprising. A European history of Europe is as yet in the pioneering stage at the academic level, textbooks of European history at the high school level are still extremely rare, and the few that circulate have been produced and introduced within a national framework.

And yet, if Europeans are to understand their similarities and differences, they must be able to refer to a minimal but shared understanding of European civilization. Such a common base of knowledge must be conveyed at the most advanced stage of education that is still attended by - almost - all youngsters: the last years of high school, the age of sixteen and beyond. These young adolescents represent the target audience for a curriculum conveying what all European school children should learn about Europe.

But pointing out the necessity of such an endeavor does not equal a demonstration of its feasibility. There are many obstacles on the road toward a shared European syllabus and that road is littered with the remains of failure.

The European Union now counts 27 member states, some of them only recently liberated from a totalitarianism in its latest phase of exhausted authoritarianism. In these countries nationalism can be expressed for the first time after a lifetime of communist dictatorship, often preceded by a period of an equally

oppressive fascist regime. The present pressures of globalization and Europeanization reinforce a chauvinist inward turn, even in many member states that have been democracies for most of the past century. The member states do not share a common history, and if they were part of the same events at all, it often was on different, hostile sides. They all have ministries of education and school boards that determine the curriculum, but these are quite unlikely to allow an outside agency to meddle with it, least of all the European Commission, which lacks the legal authority to do so in the first place.

There is an added complication. Even in single member states, there may be controversy between the national center and the periphery, quite often striving for greater autonomy, also in a cultural sense. The search for such a regional identity usually begins with a revision of the history of the nation. After all, national unification more often than not meant regional defeat. Nevertheless, in most countries, students and teachers from every region do rejoice in the fame and glory of their national heroes and geniuses.

On a European scale, things may be very different. Imagine a European canon of, say, fifty items... It would be a conservative bet to estimate that at least half of those items would have originated in France, England or Germany... very few great feats will have been taken from, say, the Baltic, the Balkan or even the Scandinavian countries. This is partly due to a parallax: the ethnocentric view of historians in the core countries, forgetful of the accomplishments, geniuses and great events of the countries at the margin. In part, this is the consequence of the marginal position of these countries for the largest part of their history, which prevented them from developing the centers of learning and culture that are a necessary condition for such great achievements. Yet, it may be difficult to accept for students and teachers in these nations that there is little mention of what their ancestors did accomplish during the past centuries.

Thus, if we are to circumvent national closure, the arrogance of the core and the resentment of the periphery we must adopt a radically different approach to the dissemination of an idea of European civilization among young adolescents. A single canon of European history is bound to further ignite nationalist sentiment and regional reproach. It will be viewed as an alien imposition by the educational authorities of the member countries, and it is sure to be widely rejected before long. A canon, fixed, closed and imposed, runs against the very notion of the variety of European civilization it is meant to convey in the first place. In stead of this canonical perspective, we need an approach that focuses on the connections between scholars, reformers and artists across the continent. We must show the networks of correspondence and conversation that linked these innovators together and carried new ideas and practices across large distances. For each particular theme we should trace the contacts between people in different locations, linked by a common fascination. They wrote one another to share their ideas and traveled to meet and learn from one another. They left home to gain an audience for their inventions and learn about the innovations by their foreign colleagues. They returned home and

introduced new ideas and practices in their own country.

In this approach, European civilization is not portrayed as a homogeneous process of dissemination from a few peaks of excellence towards the endless plains of mediocrity, but rather as a network of networks of correspondents and travelers, engaged in an ongoing and open conversation about the topics that made up this multifarious, diverse and yet coherent evolution of ideas and practices.

Since we are dealing with young people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the teaching materials must be not only verbal but also visual and auditive. The highly abstract ideas that take up the concept of civilization must be made more concrete by choosing specific examples that appeal to the youthful imagination and yet have parallels in their own environment.

Let us begin with an example. No doubt, one of the defining episodes in the present approach to European civilization was the turn towards empirical science. Scholars no longer mostly limited themselves to a discussion of the biblical sources and the masters of antiquity, but began to experiment, manipulate instruments, and investigate nature. A critical moment came with the discovery of the techniques to grind lenses and assemble them, in telescopes that served to observe the vast celestial expanse, and in microscopes with which 'God's creation may be discovered in a droplet of water.' Lenses are very familiar to contemporary youngsters, they wear them to improve their eyesight and they carry them in the cameras of their mobile phones. The fundamentals of optics are not too hard to understand. At the time, lens grinding was a craft that allowed gifted young people without means to make a living and work together with the great minds of their day. Before long, all over the continent scholars and craftsmen were experimenting with the construction of telescopes and microscopes. Thus the theme of experiential science can be taught by discussing the lens as a *pars pro toto*.

We need not deal with each and every aspect of European civilization, if ever that were possible. There should be a dozen themes which together cover the major aspects of civilization in Europe during the past five hundred years or so and which connect with the disciplines being taught at the high school level. In each case, the presentation will focus on the interaction between innovators in many parts of Europe. It is not necessary to make an exhaustive inventory of all the inventors and discoverers who participated in this exchange of ideas and techniques. The subject of instruction is the network of innovators, but the method of instruction may follow the same pattern: teachers and students in the many countries of the Union may themselves contribute their account of events that occurred in their own area. In other words, as we present these historical conversations about major themes of civilization, we invite our young contemporaries to join a conversation about those conversations.

If ever the medium was the message, it is in this case. We are living at the dawn of the age of the internet. We certainly must start with a text, with an elaborate

presentation of the project, in writing. This may well grow into a booklet, describing the basic ideas and briefly outlining each of the themes to be presented. But the outcome we should work toward will be more like a very large website. The project can only succeed if it uses the potential of electronic communication to the fullest extent. At its heart is a website, where the programs devoted to each theme are available for downloading. These must be captivating and inspiring audiovisual documentaries of, say, forty-five minutes each, produced with the highest level of professionalism and sophistication: 'the state of the art'. Translation should be available in all the official languages of the Union. But yet, all these programs are 'unfinished': Each one presents a particular theme of European civilization as an enduring and wide-spread conversation between scholars, reformers or artists. But at the same time it poses a question to its audience: What happened in your area during that epoch, what contacts were established, who participated in the invention, the dissemination and transformation of these ideas and practices? Each program also is an ongoing invitation to participate and reciprocate, to 'upload' texts and images that may enhance the original program and add to the overall picture of innovation and dissemination.

Why should teachers and their students want to participate in this grand scheme? First of all, the website contains precious teaching materials in many subjects. Teachers may download the material and use it in their classes as they see fit. No educational authority, no school board need to be involved. At most, the principal and other teachers may be consulted. Thus, the teacher of physics may adopt the program on the lens and experimental method as a teaching aid for a few classes on the topic. Students may consult the site on their own to harvest the material for their assigned papers. On the other hand, the entire series may be used for a full course in 'the history of European civilization', or as exercise matter in English class.

The project has an added, an interactive dimension. Students, or teachers, or even schools may take up the challenge and do research on the local antecedents of one or even all of the themes. They may use locally available material in encyclopedias, history books, archives or hold interviews with the experts. Next, they may upload their work for publication on the website. An editorial board will check these contributions, evaluate them and either include them as attachments to be downloaded with the main programs or allocate them without endorsement to a special contributors' department. The challenge for teachers and students is to show to a wider audience on the web what was achieved during preceding centuries in their particular area as part of the encompassing European panorama. Their motivation may hold an element of chauvinism: 'We, too, played a part in the grand scheme of European civilization'. But there is a dialectics to it: 'we, too, were and are part of that same grand scheme..

In embarking on this project, this is what we are betting on: the readiness of students and teachers to use the material offered and to add to it by composing their own accounts. We can only hope that they will be enticed to participate in an all-

European project, showing their peers what their part in the overall scheme has been and in doing so creating their own part in the present.

The list of themes is tentative, provisional and essentially open. We need not draft a definitive inventory of European civilization, we must propose a dozen themes that may inspire and provoke, and prompt others to propose additional themes to be presented according to the formula outlined here. Just as the introduction of the optical objective transformed the concept of space, the idea of time was profoundly altered by geologists and biologists who went out in the field to study rock formations and the variety of species. In this case, too, we should concentrate on the explorations by 'naturalists', on the supporting crafts (seafaring, taxonomy) and innovative techniques.

At this point one may suggest many other themes, such as 'polyphony' to be illustrated by the vicissitudes of the piano (its predecessors and its descendants, such as the electronic keyboard, so familiar to the youth of today). Another theme to be considered is the evolution of painting as it developed from murals and ceramics to the transportable and tradable object of the easel painting on linen. Still another theme might be the popular novel ('colportage roman'), a genre that emerged with the spread of type-setting and printing.

Seemingly abstract themes such as the evolution of representative democracy and the rule of law may be presented by focusing on the ideas and techniques of popular elections and the curbing of royal prerogative, e.g. through habeas corpus. Or again, the twin themes of the market and civil society as relatively autonomous spheres could be illustrated by tracing the spread of money and the emergence of voluntary organizations such as political parties, peasant and labor unions.

Whatever the themes, they must be made to appeal to young people and their teachers all over the continent by focusing not on great men, great discoveries and great events, but on the enduring continental exchange of ideas and techniques. We must select concrete objects and practices that were disseminated across the continent and that still constitute a recognizable element in the lives of today's young students. Admittedly, this is quite a challenge. That is why we need all the expertise and inventiveness of the Academy of Yuste, its members and its friends. But in its own small way, this project mirrors the richness and the diversity of that assembly. Precisely for this reason, the Academy of Yuste with its commitment to individual excellence and a shared dedication to the European ideal, may be best suited to initiate the present project.

We are in no position to impose teaching materials upon the schools of Europe. Nobody is. Since we cannot dictate we must seduce. The subject matter must be presented so attractively that teachers will be swayed to adopt them in their classes. Possibly the entire series will be used in English class, or for that matter in the history program or in courses patterned after the American 'civilization 101' syllabus. For that, teachers do not need a decision by the national ministry of

education or the regional school board, they may decide on their own, or as the case may be, after consultation with their principal and their peers.

We do not need to take up all themes at once, in stead a few themes may be adopted and elaborated on a tentative basis. If the formula (because that is what it is) turns out to be successful, it is quite conceivable that others will adopt it and use it to produce programs of their own that may be disseminated as widely. And, of course, we can only hope that teachers and students themselves will contribute original and useful material to the project.

Where do we go from here? In the Declaration of the Academy, to be read at the awards ceremony of June 18<sup>th</sup> 2008, we might propose a brief version of the present plan. That proposal will be elaborated into an essay to be distributed among interested parties in Europe to elicit comment and critique. At some point, it may also serve as the basis for a grant application to begin work on the project, i.e. two or three audiovisual productions each devoted to a particular theme and to be disseminated through the internet.

In one respect, we must not compromise. The basic text and the audiovisual productions must be translated into as many languages as possible. This is a costly and fragile operation. But technically it is easy to run a great number of translations on DVD's and on the internet.

Quite a few essential questions remain to be raised and resolved.

What time frame should be adopted: should we start in Antiquity or even Biblical times? Or could we begin at the end of the Middle Ages, the beginning of the Renaissance? One might begin around 1500, select the starting point that best fits a given theme and wait to see how far back contributors want to go.

The same applies to geography: the most obvious point of departure is the EU in its present configuration. But for some themes, the story may go beyond those confines, and contributions may come in that deal with areas beyond the present Union.

The solid support that chronology provides to the teaching of history is abandoned in this project for a 'polythematic' approach, in which the course of each theme is traced separately from the others, often meandering from one area of Europe to another. At some point the need will arise for essays that may connect the various themes and provide a common chronological framework and an encompassing interpretation.

How do we deal with topics that remain as contentious as ever, but cannot be ignored: religion, for example, or politics?

Should we remain silent on 'the dark side of Europe' and leave out the sadder sides of the history of European expansion, i.e. colonialism and imperialism, slavery and exploitation. How are the devastations of capitalist production to be dealt with? Can we at this point provide an account of totalitarianism, i.e. communism, national socialism and fascism? Can the diffusion of racism and xenophobia be dealt with as one more 'theme', or for that matter, the episodes of deadly mass warfare and

genocide? How could these subjects ever be presented satisfactorily, so as to reach the youngsters of so many European countries with so many and such divergent memories of suffering? Posing the question is answering it: At some point, even the dark side must be dealt with. But we need not do it all at once. We may learn by doing. Other authors may come up with a feasible approach, so that at some point these most difficult topics may be introduced within the framework outlined here.

We need not solve all problems at once, we need not complete the project in one stroke. In stead, we may try one step after another and see where it leads us. Thus, the website could become a gift from an older generation of Europeans to the youngest. No assembly is better suited to realize this project in a collaboration of its members and their friends than our most diverse and knowledgeable *Academia Europea de Yuste*.