

A Son of Europe Reflects on the EU's Nobel Prize

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The Nobel Committee should have named the U.S. and NATO as equal co-recipients for their role in transforming Europe 'from a continent of war to a continent of peace.'



Europe is always on my mind. After all, I am about as European as they come, born in the very center of the continent, with family history so typical of those ancient crossroads where Germans, Czechs, Jews, Austrians, Italians, Poles, Hungarians, French, Swedes, and Russians came to fight, settle, intermarry, live, and die. I had also lived on both sides of the Iron Curtain before it finally fell in 1989; I continue to be a frequent visitor to Europe's cities (including Brussels, Copenhagen, Geneva, Helsinki, London, Munich, Paris, Salzburg, and Zurich just in the past four months), a frequent rider of the continent's fast trains (TGV, InterCity, Thalys, AVE), and a diligent reader of Euronews in several languages

And after more than 40 years of living in North America (first in the United States, then in Canada) I think I also have a fair sense of real (and imagined) differences between the mores, attitudes, strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations of the two continents, differences conceived in simplified, idealized — and perhaps superficial — generalizations and abstractions. I am allergic to many of those perceptions and claims because of their ignorance and condescension.

Overwhelmingly unilingual America has a poor and warped foundation from which to understand Europe's complexities and nuances, and depends on CNN or Fox for rare bits of European news. Meanwhile, facilely multilingual European intellectuals' reflexive attitude toward America is elevated condescension.

With my background — my mother was born during the middle of World War I in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, I was born during World War II in Nazi-occupied Bohemia and am a refugee from the Evil Empire — I am a strong proponent of the idea of supranational Europe preventing war and guaranteeing and promoting individual freedoms. As a lifelong student of the Continent's history, a zealous reader of its classic and modern novels and poetry, and a tireless admirer of its great visual arts and splendid architecture, I appreciate those tangible and intangible foundations that justify the notions of its underlying commonalities, if not of a more exalted spiritual unity.

At the same time, I have intimate knowledge of many of the centrifugal forces that prevent the European countries from forming a truly coherent, cooperative, and like-minded whole and that condemn the quest for greater European unity to be a continuous work in progress. Those divisions exist not only in North-South culture and geography and the saving-spending clichés but, to an extent deeply underappreciated in North America, also within individual countries, with enormous and growing interregional disparities and smoldering separatist sentiments that make both new nations (Belgium) and ancient kingdoms (Spain) as precarious as ever. And the exasperation I feel because of the Continent's collective denial that the bill for excessive spending must eventually be due is now beyond words...

So what am I to make of the Norwegian's committee decision to grant the European Union (EU) the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize? Relative answers depend on the comparative metrics. Compared to Obama, who got the prize solely on a dreamy promise of hope unsupported by any tangible accomplishments, the prize is richly deserved: Undoubtedly, as the announcement says, "the union and its forerunners have for six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy, and human rights in Europe." And the EU is also infinitely more deserving than was the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change and former vice president Al Gore (the recipients of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize).

But the nomination's last sentence states that the EU represents the "fraternity between nations" envisaged by Alfred Nobel — during the same week when swastika-bearing Greek protesters were greeting German chancellor Angela Merkel in Athens; when the Catalan president Artur Mas was inciting the latest wave of European separation into a mosaic of economically bankrupt sovereignties; and when the International Monetary Fund criticized EU leaders yet again for a "critically incomplete" response to a deepening fiscal crisis, a failure that can be largely described as the very absence of fraternity between nations. And perhaps the richest irony is that the country whose parliament appoints the five-man committee awarding the Peace Prize would not even dream about joining that fraternity of nations — because it would have to share its oil and gas wealth!

Nobel Prizes in sciences are habitually divided among three recipients and, following this realistic precept (indeed, modern scientific advances usually entail contributions of scores to thousands of individuals), that is what the Prize committee should have done as they looked back across 60 years of peace and prosperity in Europe: Name the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as equal co-recipients fully deserving the Prize for their role in transforming "most of Europe from a continent of war to a continent of peace." Those who prefer a dreamy version of ahistorical political correctness would object, but those who know the history of modern Europe would find such a correction factually accurate and perfectly acceptable.