

Reinterpreting Europe through the Eyes of Catalunya

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(**The Distorted Past**, A Reinterpretation of Europe, Josep Fontana. Translated by Colin Smith. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, UK. Pp. 220.)

Europe—the place, the history and the people—has been the envy and the object of scorn of peoples throughout the world for five hundred years and more. Europe is one of those mysteries of the mind that comforts many, pails into irrelevance for still others and for a few of us it stands as a disturbingly incomplete yet imposing consciousness. Europe is an attitude, a consciousness and a way of thinking, but it remains an undefined place still unformed. For scholars like Josep Fontana Europe is a modern distortion that obscures the diverse cultures of the region.

The eminent Catalan historian Josep Fontana challenges the conventional image and idea of Europe as the dominant, and the superior reality for modern life. From the Catalan perspective, steeped in an ancient culture reaching three thousand years into the history of the western Mediterranean, Fontana draws on his thirty years as an historian to examine the many ways Europe as a consciousness and Europe as an identity has been distorted only to tarnish and diminish the identity of ancient cultures throughout the continental peninsula. He describes how a fictive European identity has repeatedly been attempted as if to submerge the identity of ancient cultures like the Catalans, the Alsacians, Firzians, Irish, Wallacians and Slovenians. Fontana describes how the Christian Church has played a role in creating the fiction of European identity and repeats his assertion that all such efforts are distortions of the past and the present. These efforts at distortion worked to conceal the existence of the true cultural identity of peoples throughout the land.

The evidence of Fontana's thesis is revealed through the author's examination of the many ways that a "Europe" has been reflected in mirror images throughout the ages. In some instances a "Europe" is reflected as a culture that is superior to other peoples in the world, yet Fontana demonstrates that the cultures of distinct nations are confiscated and then offered as a single European culture. This distortion of fact only helped create an illusion that stood as a reflection without substance. In yet other instances a "Europe" is reflected as a spiritually superior collectivity projecting a Christian image. Fontana sees this as one of the most grievous distortions because of the rich non-Christian spiritual traditions rooted in the depths of ancient cultures throughout the region.

Catalunya, a country in Spain's northeastern and France's southeastern regions on the Mediterranean Sea stands as a powerful witness to the childish assertion of European identity. An ancient nation predating virtually all states in the area, Catalunya has been occupied by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Goths, surrounded by the Moors and occupied by the Castilians as well as outlawed by the Francisco Franco dictatorship. In the face of all these occupations Catalunya would repeatedly submerge and then reemerge when the occupations were over. Sometimes 400 years and 700 years would pass as outsiders would claim Catalunyan territory. Despite their subordination to invading peoples Catalans preserved their culture hidden away in the caves of Catalunya. Just as Catalans had done before, when the occupation came to an end, the country of Catalunya reemerged in 1980 after the death of Dictator Franco and began to resume its identity.

Fontana is clearly conscious of this powerful tradition among the Catalan. He projects this consciousness throughout his analysis of the **Distorted Past** and the fictive Europe. He reveals the illusion of European identity, and consequently reveals the reëmergent identity of the ancient cultures of the region. He reveals what this writer would call the Fourth World nations of the

region.