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Knocking about the ruins

by [John Gross](#)

The fourth in a series on “The future of the European past,”

The only amusing thing I ever heard Hannah Arendt say—admittedly I only met her once or twice—was at a seminar in Princeton. The speaker was Dwight Macdonald; his subject was the inanity (or worse) of popular culture, and as he warmed to his theme, the counter-example he increasingly invoked was that of Europe. On the one hand Masscult and Midcult; on the other hand Athens, Florence, Paris, Weimar ... He drifted on in this vein for about five minutes, until Arendt, who was sitting in the front row, permitted herself a very audible whisper: “Ach, Dwight, I could tell you a thing or two about that old Europe of yours.”

No one in his right mind would want to defend the European past *en bloc*. In the twentieth century, Europe’s gifts to the world have included Nazism and Communism, and even before that, Europeans had quite as much to be ashamed of in their history as Asians, Africans, or any ...

John Gross's most recent book is *A Double Thread: Growing Up English and Jewish in London* (Ivan R Dee).

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