

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88084-8 - European Union and the Deconstruction of the Rhineland Frontier

Michael Loriaux

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Myth and geopolitics of the Rhineland frontier

What is European Union about?¹ Referenda in France, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Denmark have spawned doubts about the EU's future. The union's champions had been wagering for decades that once Europeans experienced its benefits they would gratefully ratify the project at the polls. In the words of former EU trade commissioner Pascal Lamy, "the people weren't ready to agree to integration, so you had to get on without telling them too much about what was happening."² But as it turns out, the "people," not having heard too much about what was happening, are now demanding greater clarity about what they are being asked to ratify. The question "what is European Union about?" has become, for the first time in a half century, a topic of public debate. Although the EU's success is undisputed – peace in Europe is secure, the economy sound and in spots dynamic, and the EU a force to reckon with in international economic affairs – sympathy and support for the European Union have been eroded by uncertainty and frustration regarding its aims and purpose. Debate is often oppressively technical. The European federalist ideal no longer stirs the imagination with its vision of a more humane instance of political life. But the specter haunting the European Union is one not so much of failure as of loss of moral horizon. It is the specter of tedium, of ossification as the EU becomes merely the local manifestation – *cum* welfare – of global capitalism. "In more than thirty years of polling," a public opinion analyst remarked, "indifference [toward the EU] has never been as apparent as in the early years of this century."³ For another observer, there are grave

¹ The European Union has known several "aliases." Unless the context requires a historically more appropriate denomination, I will use the terms "European Union" or "European project" throughout.

² Quoted in Cris Shore, *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 18.

³ Nicolas Weill, "En trente ans, l'euroscpticisme n'a cessé de croître sur tout le continent," *Le Monde*, April 8, 2005. Of those surveyed, 31% were "decidedly uninterested," 13% "critical," and 9% "opposed"; 47% were either sympathetic or strongly in favor.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88084-8 - European Union and the Deconstruction of the Rhineland Frontier

Michael Loriaux

Excerpt

[More information](#)

questions regarding the EU's legitimacy, which are, "by far," the greatest obstacle to the union's success.⁴

In this book I try to recover the political and civilizational possibilities inherent in European Union by evoking its original purpose: the deconstruction of the Rhineland frontier. By deconstruction I mean something more than "dismantling" barriers to travel and commerce. I mean interrogating myths of self and other, and, through that interrogation, the discovery of new possibilities that are more powerfully mobilizing and legitimating. But that interrogation does not come readily. EU debate, from the beginning, has occurred within a linguistic framework of named spaces, named peoples, and the "naturalness" of the frontiers that separate them. This discursive frame has had the effect of hiding, or of distracting deliberation from, European Union's original purpose. Commonsense discourse, habits of speech and thought, cramp and confine reflection and leave undiscovered representations of European space that could prove more powerfully mobilizing. To recover the worlds of political possibility that European Union opens up, one must therefore free discourse from the constraints of habit. To do so, I propose to trace the principal representational elements of EU discourse to their first emergence, when what today is common sense was still radically innovative, even whimsical. Awareness that the terms we use so casually are rooted not in "nature," but in the poetic imagination, has the effect of freeing deliberation and debate from a vocabulary of obfuscation, and reveals in the narrative of Rhineland geopolitics – the geopolitics that engendered European Union – the contours of a Europe that is not simply about using markets to tame frontiers, but about deconstructing frontiers so as to bring to light a civilizational space that is, like daily life in today's Europe, intensely urban, cosmopolitan, multilingual, and less hierarchical than in the past.

Deconstructing the Rhineland frontier

A mere hundred kilometers from its source in the Alps the Rhine is drafted into the task of demarcating political space. It separates Switzerland from Austria and Germany. Past Basle, it divides Germany from France. Downstream from Karlsruhe it traces the edge of the historically contested left bank, "fanning out," delta-like, to include, as "frontier," the buffer states – Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxemburg – which emerged from the 1815 Treaty of Vienna. From 1870 to 1945, this Rhineland frontier was

⁴ Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 19.

a geopolitical tinder box. The Franco-German War, in 1870, occasioned the collapse of the second French empire and the creation, in Versailles’ Hall of Mirrors, of the second German empire. It engendered two of Paris’ most politically charged monuments: the Mur des Fédérés in the Père Lachaise cemetery – place of execution of the Paris insurrectionists and pilgrim shrine of the French Left – and the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur, expiatory offering for France’s political sins and, for many years, pilgrim shrine of France’s anti-republican and Catholic Right. Unlike the monuments, the war’s political progeny, the Second Reich and the Third Republic, were short-lived. The Second Reich met with destruction in 1919 at the hands of the French, and the Third Republic in 1940 at the hands of the Germans. The Great War (1914–18) killed 10 percent of the two countries’ working population, left 10 percent disabled and unemployable and 30 percent handicapped. Peace was marred by economic and political decline, which fueled right- and left-wing extremism. Civil conflict hastened the outbreak of a second “world” war that caused the collapse of both the Third Republic and the Third Reich and the death of another 200,000 French and 3 million German combatants. European Union was formed in the wake of this war to pacify this unstable Rhineland frontier.

This frontier region has no name, so I refer to it simply as the “Greater Rhineland.” The Greater Rhineland, topographically, is the area drained by the Rhine and its tributaries, the Neckar, Main, Ruhr, Moselle, and Meuse (see figure 1.1). It covers two countries (Belgium and Luxemburg)



Figure 1.1 The Greater Rhineland

and important parts of four others (Netherlands, France, Germany, and Switzerland). Despite the fact that the Greater Rhineland is criss-crossed by international frontiers, it is the site of the European Union’s core regional economy. EU literature portrays it as a “golden triangle,” defined by vertices at London, Milan, and Frankfurt (see figure 1.2). Roger Brunet describes the Greater Rhineland as a “megapolis,” an area of high urban

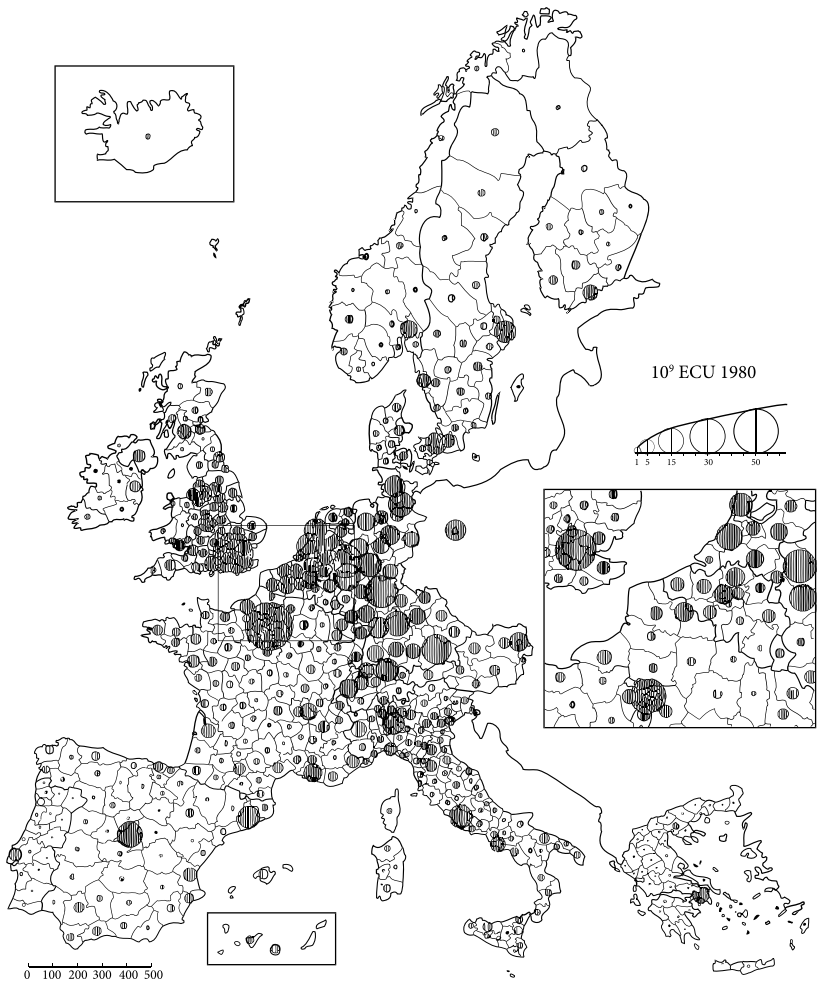


Figure 1.2 Industrial value added, 1980

Source: Priscilla de Roo and Jean-Paul Laborie, *Atlas de l'aménagement du territoire* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1988), p. 191.

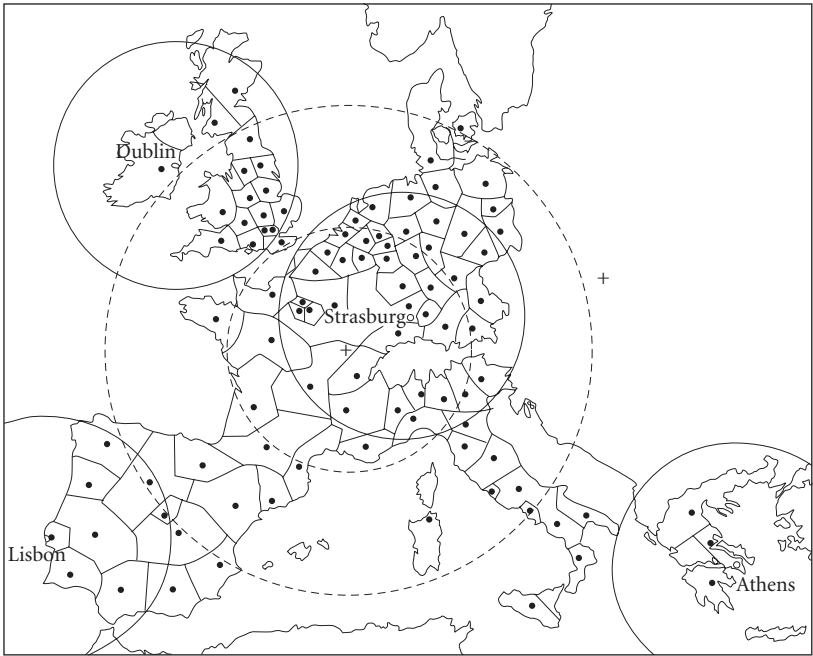


Figure 1.3 Population density, 1990
 Source: John Cole and Francis Cole, *The Geography of the European Community* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.56. The distribution of population in the EC shown by 100 dots, each dot representing 1 percent of the population of the EC in 1990.

and population density that extends east from London, follows the Rhine south, then jumps the Alps into northern Italy, straddling what was historically and remains today the principal commercial axis between the Mediterranean and the North Sea. Jacques Lévy ascribed the region's economic importance to its placement at the heart of an urban network that includes many of Europe's greatest cities (see figure 1.3).⁵ From ports at Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Antwerp, the Rhine reaches out to the North Sea, the Baltic, and the Atlantic. In the south, through Alpine passes – the Simplon and St. Gothard – it draws Milan, Turin, and the Po Valley into its economic vortex. The Greater Rhineland, reaching out to southern England and northern Italy, boasts a world-class concentration of economic power: finance in Frankfurt, Zurich, and London; industry in Milan, Essen, and Stuttgart; ports in Rotterdam

⁵ Roger Brunet, *Territoires de France et d'Europe* (Paris: Belin, 1997); Jacques Lévy, *Europe: une géographie* (Paris: Hachette, 1997).

(the world's busiest), London, and Duisburg (the world's busiest inland port). Navigable by ocean-going freighter from Rotterdam to Duisburg and by barge train from Duisburg to Basle, the Rhine itself flows through the megalopolis like an artery and a nerve, drawing Brussels and Antwerp, Stuttgart and Amsterdam into its web of activity. At its core, western Europe's aging coal-and-steel heartland extends from the Franco-Belgian province of Hainaut to the Ruhr, passing through Lorraine, Luxemburg, and Saarland.

Though densely populated and highly urbanized, the Greater Rhineland exhibits a pattern of urban organization that is peculiar to it. Smaller cities typically relay larger ones, both geographically and functionally, along axes that link metropolitan centers, as is the case in North America and Japan (see figure 1.4). But in the Greater Rhineland small and medium cities are eccentric to any such axis. The distance separating large and/or medium-sized cities in the Greater Rhineland is

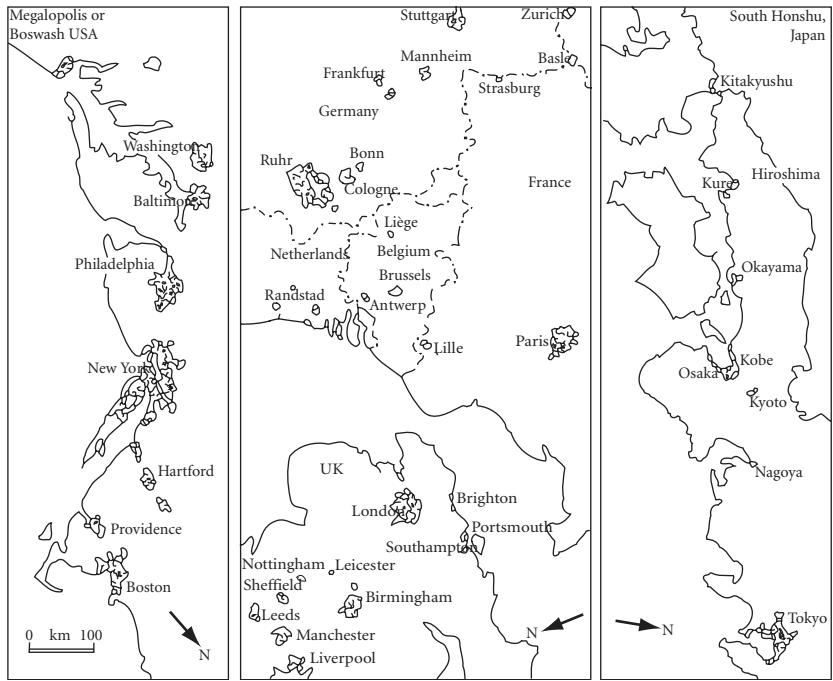


Figure 1.4 The Greater Rhineland urban network compared
Source: John Cole and Francis Cole, *The Geography of the European Community* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.60. A comparison of major urban centers in the USA, the EC, and Japan. All three maps are on the same scale.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88084-8 - European Union and the Deconstruction of the Rhineland Frontier

Michael Loriaux

Excerpt

[More information](#)

small, and the functions they fill are similar and competitive rather than complementary and hierarchical.⁶ This peculiar pattern of urbanization reflects the historical development and political specificity of an urban network that arose independently of, and indeed prior to, the emergence of London, Paris, and Berlin as metropolitan centers by virtue of their status as nation-state capitals. From Roman times to the present, the principal activities of the Rhineland cities have been those of a commercial and industrial core economy, which the rise of the nation-state only subsequently relegated to the “frontier.”

Physical geography enabled this peculiar pattern of Greater Rhineland urbanization. The Rhine flows longitudinally across a continent deployed latitudinally. The Northern European Plain extends from St. Petersburg to Dunkirk at the foot of low (3,000–4,000 feet) hunch-backed mountains and plateaus: the Ardennes and the Eifel, the Hunsrück and the Taunus, the Vosges, the Black Forest and the Swabian Plateau. These highlands trap moisture drifting inland from the Atlantic and turn it into fluvial battering rams that force their passage to the sea. The Elbe, Moldau, Weser, and Oder, the Meuse and the Moselle, the Seine, the Loire, and the Danube all have their source in these highlands and flow into the Baltic, the North Sea, or the Black Sea. Where the rivers meet the sea rise northern Europe’s port cities: Nantes, Le Havre, Bremen, Hamburg, and Danzig. To the south, however, the high Alps bar access to the Mediterranean and its ports. Rivers rising in the Alps, such as the Po, the Rhône, and the Inn, flow south to the Mediterranean or north to the Danube and the Black Sea. Access to the west and north by these Alpine rivers is obstructed by the middle band of low mountains and plateaus. The Rhine is unique in that it rises in the Alps but empties into the North Sea. In a geological past it followed a more compliant course through the valley of the Doubs to the Rhône and the Mediterranean, but at some point in its history it turned its currents north, breached the highlands, cut the picturesque Rhine gorge, and provided the North Sea coastlands with direct access to the Alpine passes. Its geographic peculiarity enriched both the Swiss cities – Berne, Zurich, and Lucerne – that guarded the passes, and the lowland (“netherland”) cities – Bruges, Antwerp, Cologne – where Rhine River merchandise was transferred to sea-faring vessels (see figure 1.5).

⁶ Coal and steel engendered a similar network in northern England. The Rhineland network goes back to the Roman conquest.

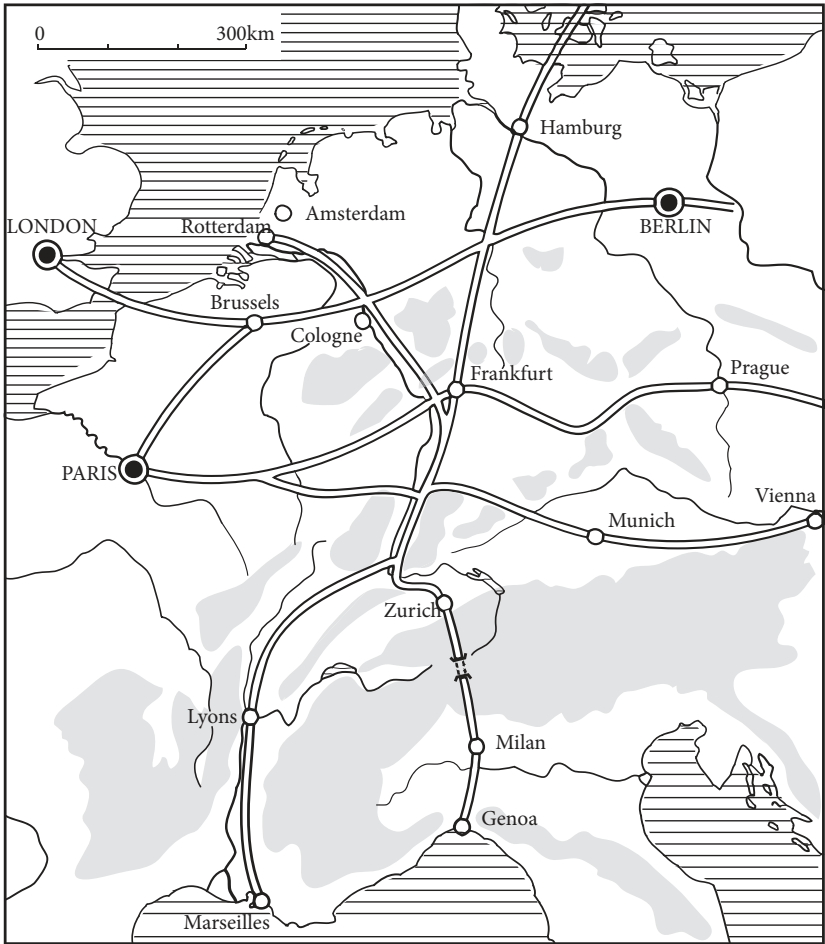


Figure 1.5 The Greater Rhineland crossroads
Source: Etienne Juillard, *L'Europe rhénane: géographie d'un grand espace* (Paris: A. Colin, 1968), p.15.

This is not to say the Rhine cannot serve as a “frontier.” Like half a dozen rivers flowing into the North Sea and the Baltic, it is eminently capable of slowing armies advancing along the east–west contours of the northern plain. But the power to obstruct east–west circulation distinguishes the Rhine from its neighbors less than does its capacity to move traffic north and south, from sea to sea. Superb strategists, the Romans erected a system of fortifications to secure the crossroads of this north–south highway. Those fortifications have become today’s

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88084-8 - European Union and the Deconstruction of the Rhineland Frontier

Michael Loriaux

Excerpt

[More information](#)

cities: Cologne, where the Rhine meets the northern plain and land routes west to the ports of Flanders; Koblenz, where the Moselle joins the Rhine and gives access to the Burgundian plateau and its rivers flowing west and south; Mainz, opposite the plain formed by the Rhine's confluence with the Main, giving access to the Elbe, the Hessian plateau, and the Baltic; Strasburg, with its passage to the Swabian plateau and the headwaters of the Neckar and the Danube; Basle, where one leaves the Rhine for the Alpine passes via the Aar and the Neuss or, alternatively, the headwaters of the Saône via the Doubs.⁷ Albert Demangeon and Lucien Febvre depict the Rhine as "a street along which, leisurely or hurriedly, worried or carefree, merchants and militaries, travelers and students pass by in an endless parade."⁸

Rhineland geopolitics has been marked by the anxious coexistence between the Rhine-as-frontier and the Rhine-as-conduit to the Mediterranean. Rome's Rhine frontier flourished commercially, but met with destruction in the third and fifth centuries as its economic dynamism attracted barbarian armies. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Greater Rhineland flourished again, not as frontier but as the heartland of a new "Roman" empire restored by the victorious barbarians. When Carolingian commerce collapsed and deprived Baltic Sea populations of revenues, a new wave of invasions swept the Greater Rhineland. But its towns and cities rose again from their ruins, and, by the thirteenth century, rivaled those of Italy in prosperity and cultural achievement. In the sixteenth century, however, religious strife weakened the towns while the expansion of agrarian monarchies on the periphery of this urbanized, economic core revived "ancient" claims on the Rhine as a customary, even "natural," frontier. The Treaty of Vienna, in 1815, conscripted the Greater Rhineland into the emerging nation-state system by ratifying France's border on the Rhine and by establishing the Netherlands (which included present-day Belgium and Luxemburg) as a buffer between France and Prussia (which the peace settlement installed on the Rhine to oppose French expansionism). But the settlement did not prove durable. The industrial era had dawned, and with it the exploitation of coal and iron, riches that had hitherto played a secondary, though not insignificant role in the Rhineland's prosperity. By the end of the century, the mineral wealth and industrial development of the Ruhr

⁷ Etienne Juillard, *L'Europe rhénane* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1968), pp. 13–18. Cf. Albert Demangeon and Lucien Febvre, *Le Rhin* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1935), pp. 33–5.

⁸ Demangeon and Febvre, *Le Rhin*, p. 75.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88084-8 - European Union and the Deconstruction of the Rhineland Frontier

Michael Loriaux

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and other Rhineland provinces had catapulted Germany, unified in 1871, ahead of Great Britain as Europe's premier industrial power. And in an age when wars were fought with steel and chemicals, Rhineland industry helped turn Germany into one of the most formidable military powers in the world.

Thus we arrive politically and economically at the power competition of two powerful nation-states, Germany and France, separated by a system of frontiers that shunted Rhineland resources into the production of national military might. To rid itself of this threat to its *national* security, the nation-state called France sought to move the frontier east, to "undo" German unification and create a client state in the Rhineland. The nation-state called Germany, by the same logic, sought to move the frontier west, to enclose the Rhine and its resources within the boundaries of a unified empire. Neither state prevailed. The only solution found to defuse the contest was to dismantle the frontier and place the nation in question. The Greater Rhineland states (with Italy) launched the "European" project to "deconstruct" this frontier.

The EU has pursued this project of frontier deconstruction not merely by sweeping away the barriers to movement that it erected – commonplace liberalization – but by sweeping away the barriers separating legal and policy spheres by unifying policy space. Contrary to much theory about the EU, policy unification targeted the most exemplary competences of the sovereign state: coal and steel as defense industries, money, and today (with some hesitation) military security. More than half a century has passed since French and German soldiers fought one another. Today, they train side by side in an integrated military division. People, goods, and money cross the Rhine as freely as they cross the Mississippi. France and Germany collaborate in high-technology research projects, many of which have military applications. French and German currencies have been replaced by a common European currency. The government of each is formally represented in all the various ministries of the other. And it is estimated that about 80 percent of French and German law is of EU origin, and thus commonly held.

Of course one might concede that the EU was once about deconstructing the Rhineland frontier, but object that the EU of twenty-seven member states is about something else, and something more. In response to this objection I document, in chapter 8, the enduring centrality of Rhineland geopolitics to EU construction up through the adoption of the common currency. But the argument I advance here is not primarily a causal one.