Reflections on the History and Historiography of European Integration

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Introduction

European integration is not the result of a preconceived plan. It rather consists of messy procedures and heated discussions. Ad hoc decision-making, crises and even utter chaos have been constants in the history of the European Union (EU). This complex reality has induced scholars to zoom in on its infamous ‘muddling through’ to better understand what is going on in European integration. Consequently, the primary focus of research has been on ways, means and outcomes: inter-state bargaining, and the resulting treaties and European institutions. However, this focus on institutional ways and means, and on the outcomes of inter-state bargaining, has implied that ideas about Europe’s future mostly have been treated as proxies of specific, rather one-dimensional, state, or institutional, interests. This leads to distorted images of history. If the recent crisis years made one thing very clear, it is this: that it proves quite complex to adequately analyse the multilevel, multipolicy and democracy muddling through that characterises the EU’s laborious management of crises and day-to-day politics and policies, let alone that a mere focus on institutional interests would be sufficient. Putting it even more strongly, existing theories to understand European integration, which were developed mostly during the heyday of integration, turn out to be insufficient to fathom the evolution of European integration, especially since the Treaty of Maastricht (1992).

Indeed, the Treaty of Maastricht redefined European integration afresh in terms of ‘deepening’ and ‘widening’ in the totally new, and largely unforeseen, situation of a post-Cold-War world order. Stylised images of conflicting national interests, archetypical antitheses between federalist Europhiles and...
patriotic Eurosceptics, or one-dimensional alternatives in terms of supranational versus intergovernmental integration proved insufficient to grasp the essence either of this plot of history or of its narrative, let alone to understand why and how European integration engaged itself in the highly risky undertakings of a single currency and an unprecedented enlargement process on ‘shaky foundations’, as the former German minister of Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, characterised the state of play in the EU in terms of institutional groundwork in 2011.

To get an answer to (revived traditional) grand questions like whether the Treaty of Maastricht was a crucial moment of metamorphoses of European integration or an episode of continuation, or what the ‘nature’ of the historical process of European integration in essence entails, research ought to delve into the history underneath the surface of European integration’s day-to-day institutional development. On that deeper level, we find that European integration is drawn from an ongoing ‘battle of ideas’ concerning what Europe may or should become in the future. Indeed, European integration is the product of never-ending battles among such plans, which have sprung from ideas (both causal and principled) as well as from ideals. In addition, these ideas and ideals often have been working across national frontiers, crosscutting member states, as well as political parties and conventional political camps within them. Rival designs and grand designs for Europe continuously usher in rivalling concrete proposals in various policy fields, which then become the subject of European negotiations on different levels. However, the continuous competition of concepts and plans this induces has often been hidden from public and scholarly view, also because ‘loser grand designs’ disappear in the ex post facto depictions that dominate the historiography.

European Integration: What It Is and What It Is about

After they had actively engaged themselves in integration through the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, the governments of the six founding members (Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) were able neither to escape the ongoing battles of ideas over the future of European

integration, nor to control what sprang from the widely popular idea of European unification. Instead, the new phenomenon of European integration penetrated domestic politics and caused deep splits within cabinets and parliaments, crosscutting conventional political camps, and stirring up national versions of heated debate between federalists, confederalists, Eurosceptics and others. At the same time, however, behind the scenes, the lack of national control of this process encouraged unorthodox coalition formation across national frontiers, bureaucracies and transnational lobbies and networks – as recent archival research and fresh investigations within the neo-functionalist approach underscore. Moreover, European negotiations encapsulated both state and non-state actors right from the start – including transnational lobbies such as Jean Monnet’s Action Committee and the Roundtable of Industrialists, but certainly also less well-known lobbies such as those organised in the world of churches and international banking, allowing for coalition formation across national frontiers and state and European institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament (then still in the making). Influencing the integration process thus presupposed a certain ‘transnationalisation’ of European policies right from its earliest days.

This all has been underrated in the historiography. And there is an empirical reason: the governments’ convincing but false claim to control the integration process. However, the idea of a striking match between the emerging integration and clear-cut national economic and/or geopolitical rationales essentially was an ex post facto depiction of largely unforeseen developments, in which ad hoc issue linkages and path dependences have been shaping forces. The situation was continually characterised by contested actor positions and unclear coalitions. This is the ‘normal condition’ in the unprecedented process of European integration. In such instances, ideas can facilitate institutional reform and/or radical policy change, for instance, through redefinition of actors’ interests as a result of ‘inter-elite persuasion’.

So far, research has had serious difficulties in the attempt to master these national ex post facto rationalisations. Moreover, state-centric and issue-specific subdivisions still hinder the design of projects concerned with ‘European’ path dependences and issue linkages from a more diachronic

perspective. In the exceptional cases in which these phenomena have been studied over a longer period, the scope has been limited to either path dependence or issue linkage. This is a serious shortcoming in the historiography, for instance because long-term institutional consequences may well have been ‘by-products’ of actions taken for short-term reasons inherent in specific issue linkages in earlier episodes.

During the 1940s the western quest for more international stability and coordination resulted in an institutional ‘system’ that the American political scientist John Ruggie famously described as the ‘regime of embedded liberalism’. ³ Although the scholars of embedded liberalism never really engaged with it, ⁴ European integration may have formed an integral and inspirational – yet subdued – part of this primary financial-economic dimension of the pax Americana. After all, if they were to stand a chance, plans of European integration had to be nested within the transatlantic institutional structures that were already in the making. Pre-1950 western multilateralism built a ‘laboratory’ in which different initiatives for European integration were developed and tested, long before the process of European integration took root. The evolution of ideas for a new order in Europe within this transatlantic world was shaped by ongoing – and still highly topical – debates about the ‘dialectics’ of free world capitalism, such as those between domestic and international stability and social cohesion and competitiveness. To a certain extent institutions like Land-Lease, Bretton Woods, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Trade Organization (ITO, later General Agreement on Tariffs and ‘Trade, GATT), the Marshall Plan, the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC, later Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD), the European Payments Union (EPU), the ECSC and the European Common Market were all part of the same quest for welfare and stability via resilient capitalism and democracy, with a special focus on Europe and/or western Europe. Regarding the latter, the fact that early common market grand designs were often inspired by Cold War and/or colonial geography has long been omitted in the existing literature. It is telling in this regard that the inter-linkage of the process of European integration with the history of

decolonisation has scarcely been researched as an integral part of European integration.\(^5\)

In more general historical terms, the evolution of the Common Market can be considered illustrative for the dynamics sketched out above. Europe’s market project has been offered detailed counter plans and nuanced alternatives ever since its inception. Starting from the treaty negotiations over the European Economic Community (EEC) during the mid 1950s, premature EEC concepts clashed with other plans, among others, plans for a European free trade area (which later became the European Free Trade Association, EFTA), a plan for an institutionalised Atlantic market and schemes for a (non-American) continental market. This can be considered a striking example of an ongoing battle of ideas, in the form of clashing grand designs for a future Europe of cooperation. Moreover, the above-mentioned EFTA and Atlantic market plan implied the membership of the United Kingdom (UK), whereas the EEC concepts were very sceptical about this, and continental schemes argued in favour of widening towards eastern Europe, instead of in Atlantic directions. Moreover, traditional historiography paid little attention to the neo-colonial undertones that were very present in the first plans and practices concerning the European common market, and connected this project to a history that stretched back far beyond the Second World War and the twentieth century – it is only very recently that historians of European integration have begun to take this dimension and its imperial and racial features more seriously as an integral part of the history of European integration (see below).

The crucial point here is that the existing historiography merely deals with the EEC extensively. The EFTA appears only at the margins. There is a simple reason for this. Plans and projects like the EEC and EFTA can be attributed to the conflicting ‘national interests’ of France and the UK, respectively. History has been bent accordingly, and a biased image of the history of the making of Europe’s common market may have been the result. The consequences thereof still resonate in (mis)understandings of what is going on in the Europe of integration until today, while European integration, in essence, is a history of many plans and ideas, not just one, as is so

often claimed and believed. Indeed, no idea, ideal, plan, design or grand design has ever been strong enough to continuously subordinate the alternatives to its institutional logic, despite the fact that post-war European integration did channel Europe’s (classic) drift towards unification within an unprecedented institutional framework of ‘community method integration’ and its self-reinforcing boundaries of integration–expansion (see, for example, Articles 38, 39 and 237 of the EEC Treaty).

If we want to better understand why things went how they did in European integration, we must do more work on the reconstruction of this unique episode in contemporary history that continues until today, by both broadening the conceptual scope (in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary ways) and deepening the historical perspective (by stretching European integration history, harking back to histories before 1950 and the Second World War). This is exactly what this Cambridge History of the European Union (CHEU) aims to do.

The Genealogy of Post-war (Western) Europe

The unprecedented stability and prosperity realized in (western) Europe in the second half of the twentieth century was neither ‘evident in 1945’ nor ‘an automatic consequence’ of the horrors of the Second World War. While the western Europe that was to emerge in the first post-war decades started to take shape in the mid 1940s, this ‘new Europe’ was not created during or after the Second World War. Instead, crucial pieces amongst the wreckage of the first decades of the twentieth century formed its central building blocks. The post-war developments in western Europe were strongly linked to the inter-war years, when, on the one hand, the juxtaposed processes of ‘de-globalisation’ and ‘nationalisation’, accompanied by a transnational ‘turn to private corporatism’, shook up the societal and political order, while, on the other hand, possibilities for ‘one-worldism’ and lofty pacifism were being explored in international politics.


After the unmatched horrors of the First World War, American President Woodrow Wilson’s call for a ‘worldwide settlement’ gained traction at the Paris Peace Conference. Hopes were high that, as the British commentator and writer H. G. Wells had put it during the first year of the Great War, this war would be ‘the war that will end war’.

At Versailles in 1919, the ‘Big Four’ powers – the United States, the UK, France and Italy – knew all too well ‘that there had never been an attempt at a worldwide settlement’; indeed, as the historian Margaret McMillan wrote in 2013, ‘there has never been one since’. While the post-Great War period was unique in that the populations of the warring states were ready and keen to embrace universalism and world peace, McMillan noted that, if anything, the Treaty of Versailles made the Great War into ‘the war that ended peace’.

In other words, the peace settlement of 1919 failed to ‘make the world safe for democracy’ (this is the phrase Wilson used on 2 April 1917 in a speech before Congress to obtain permission to declare war against Germany, which he obtained 4 days later) – quite the contrary. Moreover, this was the moment the United States became definitively involved in European and world politics. By the time Wilson was bypassed as presidential candidate for the 1920 elections, his ‘Fourteen Points’ outlining his principles of peace had already been dead in the water for quite some time. Wilson’s proactive and idealistic vision for world cooperation became buried under the essentially reactive and opportunistic cost–benefit reasoning enshrined in the agreements of the Versailles Peace Treaty. This was also ‘an illustration of how ill-defined Wilson’s ideas were as practical politics’.

The brute reality on the ground in Europe tore down the American-inspired aspirations for a better world and relegated them to naïve utopianism, ultimately symbolised by the fate of the League of Nations, which proved to be tragically dysfunctional in the inter-war years. Europeans turned a deaf ear to the politics of reconciliation touted by politicians such as Gustav Stresemann and Aristide Briand. What re-emerged was a Europe of conflict, violence, uncertainty and poverty. It was a Europe that was plunging into even greater darkness than before, transfixed by a feverish search for an escape. This was the Europe of the Spanish Civil War and of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), the mural-sized painting portraying the suffering of people.

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and animals during the bombing of the eponymous city by German and Italian aircraft. This was the Europe of rampant poverty and gloom, which the young American journalist Walter Lippmann had implicitly warned about in his coverage of the Paris Peace Conference. This was the Europe that was captured by the German-Swiss painter Paul Klee in his painting *Europa* (1933): a goddess still, but one of wild despair and expressionism.

A new generation of American descendants of well-to-do East Coast families came to know Europe while living there during the inter-war years as part of the twentieth-century American variant of the Grand Tour, often travelling together with the intellectual American *avant-garde* in Paris. It was this generation of Americans that fell in love with the struggling old continent, and it was this emotional attachment that partly explains why key figures among these Americans – who were to take up influential positions in government and business during the 1940s – pushed passionately for a brighter European future after the Second World War. Indeed, the outlook of their generation would carry the ‘American century’ along with an emerging, ‘altogether new, emblematic, Atlantic world, bound together in mind and deed’. 12 Politically, their activism often had its origins in the direct involvement of the United States in the post-First World War peace negotiations, then also labelled ‘America’s geopolitical coming-out party’, 13 where many of them had been present as diplomatic youngsters or journalists.

Indeed, the American point of view on the Second World War was that it was the Great Depression and the devastating inequality, nationalism and racism it had unleashed that were at the root of the extraordinary violence that ravaged Europe during Hitler’s war. This meant that the work of the many American diplomats, policy-makers, journalists, businessmen and politicians involved in the American mission of ‘building Europe’ entailed a dual battle against both poverty and the collapse in international coordination. This mission eventually culminated in the Marshall Plan in 1947 – the programme Wilson didn’t have.

It was crucial, however, that the Europeans themselves promote and defend the new transnational policies of international organisation, mobilising the commitment of their fellow Europeans to embrace a radically different post-war experience from the one 25 years earlier. To American analysts, it was immediately obvious that making this work would be no walk in the

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But whatever the ideas of politicians and intellectuals, one constant remained dominant in Europe’s realities: the ordinary people of Europe were not really interested in the grandiose plans of the elites. Matters of individual security, food, housing and clothing simply took precedence. Indeed, this was the most evident continuity in the lives of many Europeans. It made European societies fundamentally insecure, uncertain and desperate for stability and security. That was the case after the Second World War, just as it had been before that war had started.

The uncertainty that accompanied these parallel developments – the increasingly nationalist focus of governments in parallel with talk of a world government – did not arise in a historical vacuum. According to the Romanian-British policy expert and scholar David Mitrany – the father of functionalism and champion of post-war functionalist planning – it was during the nineteenth century that two political trends emerged that ‘moved on two and opposite lines’. The first line enhanced ‘the enfranchisement of the individual, the person becoming a citizen’ (anchored in the Renaissance, humanism and anti-totalitarianism). The second line led to ‘the enfranchisement of national groups through states of their own’ –

14 Nationaal Archief, Dutch National Archives (DNA), The Hague, 2.21.408 (Nalatenschap Beyen), B.2.2.2.1, 71; ‘Anglo-American Relations in the Post-war World’, Yale Institute of International Studies, May 1943, pp. 3f. See also Weisbrode, The Atlantic Century, p. 104.
a process that would radically intensify during the first five decades of the twentieth century, when Europe’s nation-states became more ethnically homogeneous, often as a result of very violent politics.\textsuperscript{18} Mitrany stressed that it was the task of post-war Europe ‘to reconcile these two trends’.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, this may have been the key challenge of the post-war era in western Europe, given that the uncertainty mentioned above persisted into the first post-war years.

This confronted the planners of the post-war West, and European integration in particular, with the dilemma endemic to the multilateral management of interdependence. The ‘two trends’ identified by Mitrany continued unabated in a geopolitical and geo-cultural context marked by unremitting ambiguity. On the one hand, this context was characterised by nation-states that were increasingly becoming culturally homogeneous. On the other hand, it was coloured by the phenomenon of economic, political and cultural ‘Americanisation’, especially in western Europe,\textsuperscript{20} where societies increasingly became spellbound by the United States and its films, its music, its automobiles, its stimulation of the senses, its money.\textsuperscript{21}

This cultural–commercial trend was mirrored in new political visions. The backdrop of Americanisation allowed the idea of an ‘Atlantic Community’ to win relevance in western Europe. But it had been the outbreak of the war against Hitler’s Germany that allowed this idea to truly catch the mood of the time, as the concept of the Atlantic Community could be easily linked to Allied cooperation, in particular to the politics and policies that sprang from the strongly intensified Anglo-American partnership but also to the drafting of plans for post-war Europe by the European exile governments in wartime London.\textsuperscript{22} Nonetheless, the translation of this ‘easy link’ into a concrete and coherent grand design ultimately failed. As a result, the visionary concept of an Atlantic Community was put on the back burner and turned into