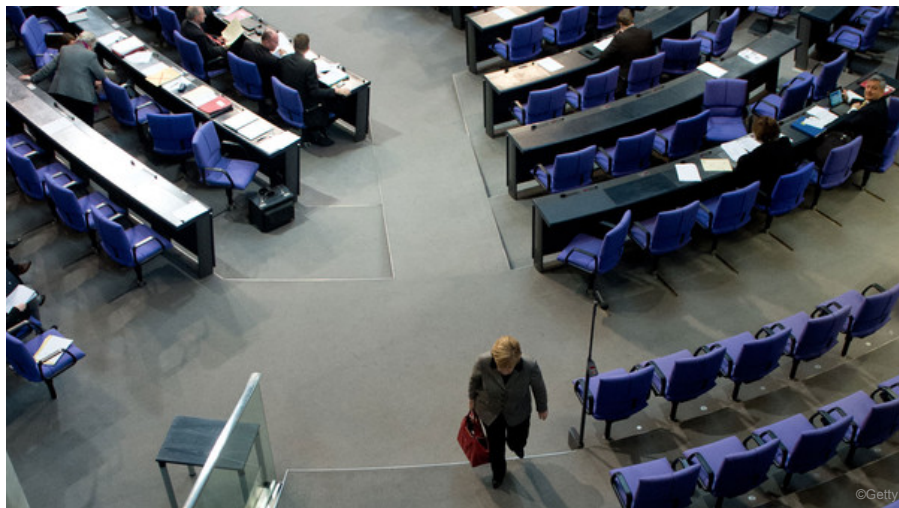


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Berlin or bust

By Tony Barber

Can a Europe chafing under German leadership do more to connect with its people? Tony Barber reviews ‘The Passage to Europe’, by Luuk van Middelaar, ‘The Lost Continent’, by Gavin Hewitt and ‘German Europe’, by Ulrich Beck



Angela Merkel leaving Berlin's Bundestag on the day of a December 2012 EU summit

The Passage to Europe: How a Continent Became a Union, by Luuk van Middelaar/translated by Liz Waters, *Yale*, RRP£25/\$40, 352 pages

The Lost Continent, by Gavin Hewitt, *Hodder & Stoughton*, RRP£20, 368 pages

German Europe, by Ulrich Beck/translated by Rodney Livingstone, *Polity*, RRP £16.99/\$19.95, 120 pages

To Americans or Asians, it is self-evident that Europe must get its act together if it wants a secure place at the world's top table. The longer Europe wrestles with how to save its monetary union and restore a sense of collective purpose to its politics, the more non-Europeans interpret the continent's struggle as symptomatic of a profound crisis.

Europe's ability to sustain its social and economic model, and to preserve its influence in a world of existing and emerging great powers, is unquestionably being subjected to an intense test. But the notion that Europe is losing its way is nothing new. In a 1975 report to his fellow European leaders, Leo Tindemans, the then Belgian prime minister, wrote: "The European idea is partly a victim of its own successes: the reconciliation between formerly hostile countries, the economic prosperity due to the enlarged market, the detente which has taken the place of the cold war ... Europe today is part of the general run of things: it seems to have lost its air of adventure."

Today's policy makers and commentators construct similar arguments to explain Europe's uncertain sense of direction. Democracy, prosperity and peace – the historic conquests of the post-1945 era – are reasonably well-established across most of the continent, west and east. But where, some lament, echoing Tindemans, is the "air of adventure"? The sobering truth is that the prospects for a more deeply integrated Europe, capable of inspiring two or three dozen nations with a common vision, appear to be remote. Doubtless a crisis can serve as a catalyst

for change. For now, however, it is proving difficult even to construct a “Europe” limited to the 17 nations that share the euro.

Three new books – one by a Dutch historian and political philosopher, one by a British foreign correspondent and one by a German sociologist – diagnose Europe’s troubles with a realism and clarity that suggest a long and arduous road ahead. The most impressive is Luuk van Middelaar’s *The Passage to Europe*, originally published in Dutch in 2009 and the winner of several European literary prizes. It is a discerning, balanced, gracefully written book, flavoured with the insights of political science but filled with the meat of European Union history over six decades.

Van Middelaar, an adviser to Herman Van Rompuy, the Belgian politician who in 2010 became the EU’s first full-time president, writes with refreshing bluntness about the national impulses that drive the European policies of the Union’s big three powers. “France looks to Europe for a reincarnation of itself. Germany seeks (or has sought) redemption from guilt. Britain wants ‘a seat at the table’ whenever the others meet.”

EU member states, especially the eurozone nations, do share a considerable amount of sovereignty. A set of landmark European Court of Justice judgments, dating from the early 1960s, established the primacy of EU over national law. Governments have gradually accepted that they belong to a political entity in which they can, on specific policy issues, be outvoted – even if achieving consensus is the preferred method. But unlike the 13 American states in 1787, Europe has never had a “foundational moment” from which to emerge as a federation that derives its legitimacy from the consent of the European people as a whole. In fact, van Middelaar writes, “the singular use of ‘people’ is taboo” for most national leaders.

At the Convention on the Future of Europe, which drafted an EU constitution in 2002-2003, some politicians pushed for a pan-European referendum to endorse the document. The idea was to demonstrate that the constituent power underlying the EU’s new institutions would reside in Europe’s citizens as a collective mass. This was an audacious attempt at proclaiming a US-style, “We, the people of Europe” breakthrough. It might have turned the EU from its habits of intergovernmental co-operation and towards something more federal. But the initiative got nowhere: there was simply no appetite for it among most governments. The proposed constitutional treaty, meanwhile, crashed in flames when Dutch and French voters rejected it in national referendums.

Equally, attempting to build a European identity from above, in the manner of 19th-century nationalist politicians and thinkers, is a doomed endeavour, van Middelaar contends. Eugen Weber, the late US historian, wrote an influential book, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976), in which he showed how the modern French identity arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries from economic transformation, military conscription and the spread of literacy and republican political values by means of mass education. But as Jan-Werner Müller, the Princeton university professor, once incisively put it: “Where today are the provincial illiterates who, voluntarily or not, need to be ‘Europeanised’?”

Common history textbooks for European high schools would be an experiment fraught with risk, as van Middelaar reminds us in recounting the fate of a book in which historians from 12 countries each wrote one chapter. The EU-inspired project was dropped because the chapter on France referred deprecatingly to the “barbarian” rather than “Germanic” invasions of early medieval times, and a Spanish author appalled the English by branding Sir Francis Drake, the Elizabethan maritime hero, a “pirate”.

As van Middelaar says, the EU yearns to connect with a “European public” in the way that politicians connect at national and regional level. Instead, millions of Europeans view the Union as largely irrelevant to everyday life, the exceptions being those interest groups selected for generous endowments and subsidies. The task for the EU, van Middelaar sensibly concludes, “is to allow the voices of the national electorates – first the parliaments, then the



voters that stand behind them – to be heard in European democracy. This is a far from simple challenge, but the member states do not have a great deal of choice.”

The eurozone’s debt and banking crises barely figure in van Middelaar’s book but they are the big theme of *The Lost Continent*, a work of lively reportage by Gavin Hewitt, the BBC’s Europe editor. He travels from Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain to France, Germany, Italy and the UK, showing a perceptive awareness of how the political and economic dramas vary from one country to the next.

The origins of Greece’s collapse lay in a culture of political patronage and tax evasion that long predated the euro’s birth in 1999. By contrast, one interesting question in France is why a country that boasts world-class businesses and a sense of universal mission for mankind should be so leery of globalisation.

Few political leaders emerge with enhanced reputations from Hewitt’s account. But at least the beer-soaked conviviality of Brian “Biffo” Cowen, the former Irish prime minister whose political enemies accused him of running the country into the ground from a bar stool, was less eye-popping than the sybaritic excesses of Silvio Berlusconi, Italy’s billionaire ex-premier.

It should surprise no one that the first instinct of Angela Merkel, a Lutheran pastor’s daughter who rose to become Germany’s chancellor, was to grasp for a moral cure of the eurozone’s debt-fuelled ills. “Member states face many years of work to atone for past sins,” Hewitt quotes her as saying at a summit in March 2011.

Other German voices were more insolent. As Greece received its first, €110bn rescue from Germany and other international creditors in 2010, the German tabloid Bild suggested: “We give you cash, you give us Corfu.” This prompted an indignant Greek pensioner to tell a radio show that, when the ancient Greeks were carving beautiful statues, the ancestors of the Germans were “living in caves and growling like dogs”.

Hewitt ends on a judicious note, commenting: “The crisis has confirmed Germany as Europe’s indispensable nation and therein lies a great irony. The currency that was intended to bind Germany into Europe has ended up with the coronation of Germany as the dominant power. It has not sought this role and is not yet entirely comfortable with it.”

Ulrich Beck, a left-leaning social scientist at Munich university and the London School of Economics, would broadly agree with Hewitt, but also delivers a crisp, sometimes sharply critical assessment of Merkel’s style of leadership. In *German Europe*, Beck contends that Germany’s rise to pre-eminence in the euro crisis owes much to what he calls Merkel’s “art of selective procrastination”.

By this he means that while the chancellor is prepared to approve financial rescues for individual debtor countries, she will not throw her weight behind grand schemes for accelerated European integration. In pursuing such a strategy she does just enough to keep the euro going, to retain the trust of German voters and to extract solemn promises from debtors that they will imbibe Germany’s economic and fiscal “stability culture” in return for loans and guarantees.

Beck coins the term “Merkiavelli” to suggest that Merkel displays certain qualities, such as an unsentimental, tactical adroitness, that Niccolò Machiavelli, the Renaissance political philosopher, made famous in *The Prince*. “The Prince, Machiavelli believed, must only stick to what he said yesterday if it brings him positive advantages today. Transferring this to the present situation would produce the maxim: today you can do the opposite of what you proclaimed yesterday if it improves your own chances in the next election.”



As an example, Beck cites Merkel's U-turn on nuclear power, which she executed just after Japan's 2011 Fukushima disaster and just before an important election in Baden-Württemberg. There is something in what Beck says, but it is hardly a watertight theory: after all, Merkel's Christian Democrats lost that election.

Beck's more important point is that, "the German policy of austerity has yet to show any successes – quite the contrary, in fact. The debt crisis now threatens to engulf Spain, Italy and perhaps even France ..."

In the light of mass unemployment and persistent recession, Europe's policy makers are quietly recasting austerity. But it remains unclear how far the Germans will ease the pressure on what they view as overspending, semi-reformed partners. On the whole Germany's leaders seem utterly convinced that their economic diagnoses and prescriptions are correct. Yet, as Beck remarks, "Merkel has absolutely no interest in going down in the history books as the chancellor who presided over the demise of the euro." In that, for the moment, lies Europe's hope of happier days to come.

Tony Barber is the FT's Europe editor

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