

Telling Another Story of Europe

A Reply in Favour of Politics

LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR

All three discussants note the rich use of language in *De passage naar Europa*, but without linking it to the book's discourse analysis or its alleged scarcity of social science. Words are not innocent, however; in political battles, even theoretical concepts are constantly being co-opted. To escape from existing connotations, we can either examine a vocabulary's use (a well-known practice in intellectual history), or introduce new words (as I do with 'passage' or 'sphere'). For good reason, history, political philosophy and law are the disciplines chosen to tell this story of Europe. The focus is neither on the Brussels institutions, nor just on Member States and national interests. Rather, it is the story of the *ensemble* of European states trying to become the political expression of the continent: of its birth and metamorphoses, its efforts to fill a space and find a voice.

In a recent speech on European integration, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble maintained that speaking with clarity about the impact of European decisions is not a duty for politicians only: 'Jeder sollte sich fragen, wie er über Europa spricht und welche Auswirkungen dieses Sprechen auf die Meinungsbildung über Europa hat'.¹ For this veteran politician – he was Kohl's negotiator of German reunification in 1990 – it is self-evident that the way we use words not only moulds our thinking, but also shapes political reality. As Schäuble delivered this major address at the Sorbonne, it is quite possible that he wanted his point to impact the academic community as well.

The three distinguished readers whose comments on my *De passage naar Europa* [The Passage to Europe] I had the privilege to receive seem all surprised – pleasantly surprised, in two cases – by the book's style. 'A great read', says Gerrits; 'his writing is sensitive and inspired', Van Hecke concurs, whereas Klemann – in a footnote – characterizes it as 'artificial and

1 Rede des Bundesministers der Finanzen Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble an der Universität Paris-Sorbonne, 2 November 2010.

sometimes extremely bombastic'.² Strangely enough, none of the authors links my style to the critique of European discourses with which the book opens, nor with a scarcity of theoretical concepts, which they do notice. Gerrits openly wonders why reading this 500-page book on a well-known subject 'is such a rewarding experience'. Even Van Hecke, who is most sensitive to the epistemological potential of style (granting the author 'an abundance of metaphors ... illustrious language that sheds new light on such classic concepts as representation, unanimity and the right to veto') considers the discourse analysis a 'detour'.

Since the three discussants underestimate the importance I attach to language, a little confession seems to be in order. The author of *De passage naar Europa* has tried to write well, not because of any literary ambition, but mainly for *theoretical* and *political* motives. In this reply, I will mainly deal with the theoretical reasons, but the two are linked. The question of language thus is a good point of entry to take up the other main issues raised by the discussants and to make more explicit some of the book's choices.

Battles about Words

First of all, words are not innocent in politics. Let's take a simple example close to the subject matter. For the developments in European politics since 1950, a handful of terms have been routinely used, such as 'integration', 'construction', 'unification' and 'cooperation'. Although these terms pretend to be descriptive and scientific, they all have their own connotations. 'Integration' refers to a shock-free, almost chemical process, ending in complete fusion. 'Construction' makes one think of a building project on an empty plot. 'Unification' leaves it unclear whether its actualisation is achieved voluntarily or by force. 'Cooperation' emphasizes the autonomy of the constitutive states. The choice of a word thus also reveals something about the type of analysis; social scientists see processes and speak of 'integration', whereas historians see actions and events, and thus are more inclined to talk about 'cooperation'. However, the choice may also reveal political preferences. It seems no coincidence that the Dutch government, a longstanding advocate of European 'integration', changed course after the painful 2005 referendum and in official communications now systematically refers to European 'cooperation'.

2 To return the compliment: in his footnote, Klemann lists a series of subtitles to prove his point. He forgets that most of these terms are taken from the historic material (cf. 'the empty chair'). Moreover, in translating the Dutch word 'geest' with 'ghost', Klemann spectacularly misses the point: as is obvious in the chapter in

question about a ground-breaking 1963 ruling of the European Court of Justice, the 'geest' in question is a 'spirit': none other than the 'spirit of the Treaty' which the judges themselves invoked to make their case. So we are not in the world of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, but of Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois*.

Since such words carry a certain political meaning that even the most strenuous efforts at neutrality, impartiality or objectiveness, cannot transcend, other approaches may be needed to shed new light on Europe. One approach is to question the existing vocabulary, to examine who invented a word, who is using it, and for what motives. These are obviously familiar questions within intellectual history and the history of political ideas. For example, the '*historische Semantik*' by Brunner, Conze and Koselleck; the Cambridge School of political thought (Pocock, Skinner), or the 'linguistic turn' in American philosophy of language (Rorty and others). In *The Passage*, instead of delving into this body of writing, I offered a quote from Michel Foucault as the motto for the Prologue (15), hoping it would alert the informed reader:

Le discours n'est pas simplement ce qui traduit les luttes ou les systèmes de domination, mais ce pour quoi, ce par quoi on lutte, le pouvoir dont on cherche à s'emparer.³

For it is clear that the EU's history is full of battles about words: battles partly enshrined in law, battles which *The Passage* partially recounts. For instance, it took the European Parliament officially until 1986 before it was allowed to call itself 'Parliament', although its first attempts to get rid of the name 'Assembly' date from the 1950s. French President De Gaulle successfully resisted this parliamentary self-coronation; British Prime-Minister Thatcher, who years later adopted the same stance, had to concede defeat. Were these no-nonsense *Realpolitiker* suddenly transfixed by irrelevant semantics? No, claims to power start with words, and it is no surprise that the Iron Lady (another Tolkien character!) and the General understood this.

To escape from existing connotations, a second approach is to introduce from time to time a new word, or to bring an old word into a new context. This is what I do with 'passage' (or 'sphere', but I'll come to that one later). The term 'passage' is intended to point at an historic whole, while helping us to stay away from the usual suspects ('integration', 'construction'). It evokes at least three things: a general direction, the passing of time, and the idea of a metamorphosis (cf. *rites de passage*, 187-188).⁴ It can refer both to the process as a whole and to a particularly meaningful moment within that process; this is why there is no juxtaposition, as Van Hecke argues, between the one 'passage' in the title and the seven 'passage moments' listed in an annex (499; in fact, there could have been more). After all, the French Revolution, too, consisted of moments that were more 'revolutionary' and historically important than others.

3 Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris 1971) 12.

‘What is Politics?’

The emphasis on style and attention to language, then, gives *Passage* a coherence insufficiently recognized by the discussants. Still, there is the second and related issue of the alleged scarcity of social scientific theory in the book’s main theses. It has not enough political science (Gerrits, Van Hecke) or not enough economics (Klemann). And indeed, it is political philosophy, history, and law which are the main disciplines I use to tell this story of Europe – and for good reason.

As regards political theory, the book’s focus is *not* on current debates within the EU literature. It never pretends otherwise. Instead, it is theoretically driven by the more fundamental question, ‘What is politics?’. Europe is then taken as a marvellous case. The book is less concerned with such questions as the opposition of ‘hard power’ to ‘soft power’ (Gerrits) or the finesses of ‘multi-level governance’ (Van Hecke) than with such classic categories as foundation (cf. the ‘beginning’ of the subtitle), change, representation, legitimacy, responsibility, events, freedom.⁵ One reason to avoid reliance on the contemporary theoretical concepts advanced by the discussants is that such concepts are immediately co-opted by the political actors themselves for their political ends. This is especially true for notions such as ‘supra-nationalism’ and ‘intergovernmentalism’. The multi-level-governance theories, which Van Hecke suggests could enrich the book, are consciously cultivated by the Brussels institutions: as such, they are part of the *explanandum*, not left out, but dismissed, in my account (492-493). Instead of dealing with theoretical

4 Readers who would have preferred literary motives may appreciate the implicit reference to E.M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India*, to Walter Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk*, or to the short novel about timing and luck entitled *Le passage* (1994) by former French President V. Giscard d’Estaing, a protagonist in the book. The word does exist in EU discourse also: the shift from the national currencies into a single European currency was referred to in French as ‘le passage à l’euro’.

5 It surprised me that Van Hecke feels I underestimate the role of the actors’ freedom in the chains of historic events: this topic informs not just the book’s concluding sentences (as he rightly notes) but its very approach to political acting – a reason why more than one active politician has characterised *Passage* as ‘an ode to politics’. Both Gerrits and Klemann assume that the ‘high politics’ of war and peace is the author’s central interest (it only appears in part II), while Van Hecke, on the other hand, maintains that I write ‘essentially nothing’ about the European Defence Community, even though I devote ten pages to it (204-214).

concepts which risk containing political motives anyway⁶, it seemed useful to look at the movements of the political actors who shaped and worked in European politics themselves – diplomats, judges, commissioners, ministers, ambassadors, heads of government, parliaments, voters.

To bring order to an abundance of material, a multitude of historical and legal facts, partly well-known and partly untold or forgotten, the book prefers to draw on *older* political thought; on classical thinkers who allowed themselves to ask fundamental questions, and who cannot be claimed by any discourse currently *en vogue*. The three main parts of *The Passage* deal with three forms of politics: politics as decision-making and law-enforcement (I), as the capacity to act in the contingency of time (II), and as the effort to link state and people (III). Leading theoretical notions are taken from respectively Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau on the majority decision (I); Machiavelli on action in changing circumstances (II); H. L. A. Hart and J. L. Searle on social facts and Dewey and Arendt on the public (III). Thus the book places itself in a longer tradition of political philosophy; it orders and adds facts of experience, and opens new horizons – as well as inviting anybody to further explore this ground.

Right at the start, in the foreword, *The Passage to Europe* claims that the European Union is deeply political (8) *and* stresses that political decisions cannot be understood outside their place in the succession of events (7). To make this double point, I decided not to repeat this thesis over and over again (as a political scientist might be tempted to do), but rather to *show* it (as a historian). How does one show the importance of a succession of events for a protagonist? Humankind has a venerable intellectual instrument for this: the telling of a story! As the American historian Joseph J. Ellis writes in his inspiring *Founding Brothers*, telling a story – linking the anecdotal to the historical and the arbitrariness of events to the creativity of the human will – is the best way to capture the truth of politics. Therefore, telling *this* particular story, a story about an ensemble of states in its passage through time, is my way of making clear that political Europe affects us all.

6 Gerrits suggests that I could have explained why no theory is used. Indeed, and it is something I attempt to do in this reply. However, in declining theory as such, one risks becoming entangled anyway in a web of theory. Cf. the following quote from Rorty offered in the preface: 'I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics'.

In turning to Klemann and the other allegedly missing discipline – economics – one is almost tempted to wonder whether this correlation also works inversely, in the sense that the reader who least appreciates the book's narrative style also seems the one most uneasy about the fact that Europe is political.

Klemann is surprised that it is possible to write 500 pages about Europe without underlining the importance of economic integration. I do not underestimate the role of the economic infrastructure in the EU's internal cohesion. However, notwithstanding my two-year experience in the private office of the European Commissioner for the Internal Market, I decided to write *another* story (as Van Hecke generously appreciates): a story about political decision-making and the metamorphoses of our character.

The relationship between the European economy and its politics is certainly a real question. And at this fundamental level, Klemann and I are not merely in different fields, but in disagreement with one another about what the story of Europe in essence is. Most revealing in this respect is his side-remark on the Euro as being 'introduced in the first place for its symbolic value, but in fact a very dangerous economic experiment'. Here, the economist in him trumps the historian. The Euro is indeed an economic experiment. So was the coal and steel community which started it all in 1951. However, like it or not, these economic experiments were taken for political reasons, having to do with war and peace.

The Euro was an old idea of the 'interior sphere' (it would neatly complete the integration of the market), but it was also the result of 'high politics'. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a potential moment of conflict between Germany and her partners, the statesmen of 1989 – Kohl, Mitterrand, Delors and others – seized Europe as an anchor and accelerated the plans for a single currency. Going back one chapter, one could cite the famous intervention by Helmut Schmidt in front of the *Bundesbank*, pleading for the launch of the European Monetary System, the forerunner to the single currency, in the 1970s. The two main reasons why the Chancellor wanted to convince the reluctant bankers to go ahead were, in his own words, 'Auschwitz' and 'Berlin' – the need to stay friends with the neighbours and to overcome the division of the country. Not a word of economy in that. To describe a country's attempts to secure in one single move both its own place within Europe and the stability of the continent as a whole as 'symbolic' is to deny the profession of history many of its subjects. Unless we are to pity all those who see in a marriage not only the dowry, but also the rings (symbols!), the wedding cake, the guests, a genealogy, high politics (as in, 'Bella gerant alii, tu, felix Austria, nube!') and – who knows – love.

Public Legitimacy

The issue of the Union's public legitimacy is treated at length and, I think, rather innovatively in *The Passage*. Whereas Van Hecke does not say much about this part of the book, Gerrits misinterprets it by linking each of the three European discourses to one of the strategies for winning over the public, although this link is nowhere suggested, and is contrary to the argument and tone. Klemann, relying on the economic benefits of European integration, seems to consider the Union's lack of public legitimacy as a self-inflicted wound: politicians should stop talking about flags and parliaments and stick to market liberalisation. However, as I explain extensively, this 'Roman' strategy of results always has its down sides. An opportunity for one person means more competition for another. Not every citizen applauds the free movement of labour (Polish plumbers in the street!). In some countries, France not least, the Union is *opposed* precisely as the vector of economic liberalisation. This public discontent is a political fact that cannot be discarded.

The Role of the 'intermediate sphere'

By way of conclusion, let us take up the recent public debt crisis in Greece to illustrate *The Passage's* central claim about the key role of the 'intermediate sphere' in European politics. The incapacity of the Greek government to finance itself, manifest late in January of 2010, was unexpected. It was one of those 'events', in the sense of Harold Macmillan's reply to the question of what he most feared for his government ('Events, dear boy, events'). The 27 Heads of State and Government agreed as of February that action to safeguard the stability of the Euro zone as a whole would be undertaken in the last resort.

This was a textbook case of an 'agreement of the intermediate sphere'. Why? To solve the problem, the two roads of legal orthodoxy were blocked. On the one side, there was an obstacle on the road of the 'outer sphere', i.e., of traditional diplomatic means, or – translated to this case – of monetary trouble: the IMF alone. Some of the European protagonists felt that the involvement of a Washington-based institution would be an insult to the EU (although in the end technical IMF-involvement was accepted). On the other side, the road of the 'interior sphere', i.e. of Treaty-based action by the Brussels institutions, was also blocked. The so-called 'no-bail-out' clause of the EU Treaty, dear to the heart of Germany, explicitly forbids Member States from stepping in for the debts of their partners; moreover such momentous decisions on vital issues (money!) required the full legitimacy of national parliaments. With these two roads eliminated, we could be forgiven for thinking there was no escape. But in fact, the Member States used the way out: taking *collective* political responsibility for action, yet outside the Treaty; not as Union, but as its constituent parts. This is something which, politically

speaking, only the European Council of Heads of State and Government can decide to do. With this principle agreed, the European Council asked the other institutions (Commission, Ministers of Finance) to elaborate a concrete solution, thus transferring the movement, once the shock was absorbed, to the inner sphere. Indeed, as Van Hecke rightly points out: political action cannot just be in the moment, it also needs to take care of the follow-up, *le suivi*.

The discussants seem to underestimate the originality of the *legal* analysis underlying the identification of the ‘intermediate sphere’ as the place of the ‘Member States collectively’, in their existence outside the Treaty framework.⁷ It is not the ordinary mechanics of any supranational institution, as Klemann suggests, nor just legal subtlety. The intermediate sphere may help us to overcome the conceptual confusion between, on the one hand Europe as a continent, with its history, its culture, and on the other hand the European Union as a political entity. It helps to span a bridge between the geographic and cultural ‘Europe’ and the political ‘E-U-rope’. That’s why the book’s focus is always on the result of all the different national interests, motives and unexpected twists; on the ensemble of states trying to become the political expression of the continent; on how this political body in the making was born, how it changes shape, fills a certain space, tries to find its voice, suffers from a lack of public oxygen.

My objective has been to find the language to tell that story which affects all of us today. And I am very grateful to André Gerrits, to Steven Van Hecke and to Hein Klemann for having compelled me to explain some of these motives: to them, to myself, and to our readers. ◀

Luuk van Middelaar (1973) is a political philosopher and historian. He trained in Groningen (RUG), Paris (EHESS) and Amsterdam (Duitsland Instituut UvA), and currently works in the private office of the President of the European Council. In 2009, he published his PhD thesis *De passage naar Europa. Geschiedenis van een begin* [The Passage to Europe: History of a Beginning] (Groningen 2009; French, Polish and Hungarian translations forthcoming 2011), and in 2008 ‘Spanning the River: The Constitutional Crisis of 1965-1966 as the Genesis of Europe’s Political Order’, *European Constitutional Law Review* 4:1 (2008) 98-126. Email: luukvm@gmail.com.

7 Cf. an early and brilliant early analysis by J.H. Kaiser, ‘Das Europarecht in der Krise der Gemeinschaften’, *Europarecht* 1:1 (1966) 4-24, who concludes, in the context of the Empty Chair crisis: ‘Die Gesamtheit der Mitgliedstaaten steht über den Gemeinschaften.’