

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Did Covid-19 transform the European Union into a ‘community of destiny’?

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*Pandemic: Saving Europe*, by Luuk van Middelaar. Agenda Publishing. 199 + vii pp. £18.99

Luuk van Middelaar argues that the European Union’s initial response to the ‘life-and-death struggle’ that began when Covid-19 reached an ‘inattentive continent’ was ‘slow’ and ‘feeble’. He finds support for this argument in ‘military columns bearing Lombardy’s Covid coffins’ and in ‘lifeless Madrid care homes’ whose staff had abandoned the residents. He also notes that the former President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, sensed in the crisis a ‘deadly danger’ to the EU itself. These features of the crisis lead van Middelaar to identify Pandemonium, the capital city of Hell in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as an apt reference point when explaining the impact Covid-19 has had on Europe. But while he argues that the pandemic threw Europe into a ‘hellish’ ‘state of emergency’, he urges proponents of integration to find in the EU’s response grounds for optimism. This is because the crisis has ‘brought Europeans ... a deepened awareness of a ... *res publica*’ (a ‘shared public realm’ in which democratic impulses find expression). As we will see later, this is a point that van Middelaar could have pressed further.

While van Middelaar’s exposition is optimistic in thrust, he states that the EU’s initial ‘public health response’ to the pandemic ‘fell short’. He finds support for this point in ‘face-mask and vaccine debacles’ that tell a story of ‘powerlessness and ineptitude’. While van Middelaar is sharply critical of the EU’s performance in these areas, he notes that public health is ‘not an EU competence’. However, he recognises that many citizens of the EU expected it to oversee the rapid delivery of a vaccine. Against these aspects of the EU’s response to the crisis, he sets the creation of a coronavirus recovery fund. He notes that ‘within three months, the EU had embraced the principle of sizeable support for struggling

economies’. He adds that this development saw the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, ‘cross ... monetary red lines that were still sacred during the euro crisis’. This is because she was ready to engage in a ‘joint debt issue’ (something that had been anathema to many of her compatriots during the euro crisis). This development prompts van Middelaar to argue that the pandemic—a ‘great revealer’—has made apparent a readiness on the part of Europeans to see in the EU a ‘community of destiny’ (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*).

Van Middelaar develops his analysis of the EU’s response to the Covid-19 crisis by drawing a distinction between ‘rules-politics’ and ‘events-politics’. A commitment to rules-politics has featured prominently in the process of European integration since it began in the early 1950s. This form of governance places emphasis on readily applicable rules as a basis on which to depoliticise practical life. Rules-politics has, as van Middelaar notes, many attractions (most obviously, the order, predictability and impartiality that reflect strong commitment to the ideal of the rule of law or *Rechtsstaat*). However, he argues that it encouraged the EU to adopt an inflexible approach to the provision of a vaccine (that focused narrowly on ‘price’ and not ‘speed of delivery’).

When he turns to the EU’s coronavirus recovery fund, he finds an emphasis not on rules but, rather, on the need for an effective response to a pressing practical problem. Moreover, he argues that this response (which paid close attention to the concerns of EU citizens) was the work of the European Council (composed of the Union’s heads of state and government). In these features of the scene he surveys, he finds the stuff of events-politics and a European *res publica*. This is because the European Council exhibited a capacity to

‘improvise’ effectively. Moreover, it did so in a way that was attuned to one of the ‘root melodies’ of the integration process. This is the aim of establishing (in conformity with an egalitarian philosophy of government) a ‘space’ where all citizens can express their views on matters of public concern.

As these points make clear, van Middelaar forges a link between events-politics and democracy. However, some strands of argument in *Pandemonium* sound a technocratic note. This is apparent when he argues that successful practitioners of events-politics are able to fashion a ‘toolkit’ that equips them to respond effectively to the contingencies that confront them. The creation of the coronavirus recovery fund explains why van Middelaar talks in these terms. However, the ability to engage in events-politics depends ultimately on the disposition of those who fashion any such toolkit. People who possess this disposition exhibit vigilance. They are alive to what van Middelaar (following J. G. A. Pocock) calls ‘a stream of irrational events’ that may disrupt their environment. Moreover, in democratic contexts they must act in ways that are sensitive to the concerns of those in whose name they exercise power. This is a disposition that has affinities with the ‘sense of reality’ that Isaiah Berlin found in Franklin D. Roosevelt (I. Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*). Berlin identifies Roosevelt as having possessed the ability (in, for example, the Great Depression) to deploy the resources (political, legal, economic) at his disposal in ways attuned to prevailing circumstances. Van Middelaar traverses the same ground when he talks of an ability to ‘intuit the situation’ in which the exercise of power is necessary.

In van Middelaar and in Berlin’s reflections on Roosevelt we find a concern with what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*: the ability to take fitting action at an appropriate moment. In the context we are considering, this clearly

means an ability—on the part of the European Council’s members—to relate means to ends that will serve the interests of EU citizens. But it also encompasses attentiveness to views that find expression in the ‘European public space’ that van Middelaar describes. This point brings us back to the disposition implicit in van Middelaar’s account of events-politics. Those who possess this disposition might be said to be alive to a data-stream on which not just they, but also those they seek to serve, reflect in ways that may yield practically useful results. Van Middelaar seems to have something of this sort in mind when he identifies the pandemic as having encouraged the formation of ‘a public space in the true sense’. In this context, those who wield power are attentive to and ready to act on the concerns and insights of a public whose vigilance van Middelaar likens to that of the all-seeing Argus.

This analysis supports the conclusion that van Middelaar has thrown light on a developing democratic context. It is a context in which both those who participate in high politics and citizens engage in processes of reflection that concern the deployment of power in response to socially disruptive contingencies. The Covid-19 crisis provides a clear instance of such a contingency. Rules-politics as van Middelaar describes it provides an unpromising (because inflexible) basis on which to make an effective response to such a source of disruption. Events-politics, leavened with commitment to an egalitarian philosophy of government, provides a more fitting mode of response. While an ideal (*res publica*) inflects democracy on this model, it is, procedurally, a rather rough and ready affair. Whatever its shortcomings, it lends some plausibility to the view that we can find in the EU the outlines of a community of destiny.

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