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Can Europe tame pandemonium?

Covid-19 brought the EU together — the crisis in Ukraine may now tear it apart.

By Adam Tooze

As 2022 begins, Europe presents a Janus face. In the east, Russia's military is massing on the border of Ukraine. The EU's attempts at diplomacy have been swept aside. Moscow wants to deal with Washington. While the east European member states strike a hawkish pose, the German government is divided and Mario Draghi, Italy's prime minister, says out loud what ought to be obvious. With limited military means and heavy dependence on Russia's gas, Europe has no capacity for credible deterrence. Whatever position you take on the Ukraine crisis, the EU does not come off well.

On the other hand, Brussels is releasing volumes of NextGenerationEU funding to its member states. France and Italy have opened the debate about enabling greater public investment. Tens of billions in revenue are flowing into the EU's Emissions Trading System. Nor is Brussels flinching from its confrontation with Britain over Brexit, and with Warsaw over the Polish government's flouting of the supremacy of European law. While Russia's aggression exposes Europe's divisions, it appears that Covid has driven the EU more tightly together than ever.

There was little reason to think that the pandemic would be good for the EU. It was unprepared and a common healthcare policy was not part of the union's remit. In March and April 2020 things were going disastrously. The European public was outraged. It was an urgent and fast-moving crisis – not the kind of situation you would expect the EU to cope with well.

But as the Dutch historian and political theorist Luuk van Middelaar has been arguing for some time, the EU is no longer the mechanical rule-making apparatus that it was. It is an increasingly capable political actor, forged by crises over more than a decade. That was already clear before 2020; Covid confirmed it.

Pandemonium (2021) is the third in a trilogy of books in which Van Middelaar has sought to anatomise the EU. The previous two, *The Passage to Europe* (2013) and *Alarums and Excursions* (2019) are widely touted as definitive guides to modern European politics.

We need a guide because the EU is such a strange beast. Commentators in London and New York regularly predict its demise. Insiders are so preoccupied with what they think the EU should have been that they struggle to acknowledge what it has actually become. That somewhat deluded self-image – centred on the absolute equality of member states, the rule of law and the promise of federalism – remains a guiding ideal for many in Brussels and some European capitals. As Van Middelaar explains, you cannot understand the EU unless you understand its sedimented history.

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The first layer, and the one still regarded most fondly by many modern Europeans, is the foundational phase of the 1950s and 1960s, in which the patron saints, led by Jean Monnet, rescued Europe from its nightmarish past. By Van Middelaar's reading, they did so by a canny politics of depoliticisation, translating Europe's violent history into interminable negotiations over trade, raw materials and farm subsidies. The core institutions of Brussels, notably the Commission and the parliament, date from this period and they honour its legacy with the idea of the so-called community method.

It was a great success story, but one that was coddled by US commitment to the Cold War. If questions of hard power and security arose, they could be handed off to America and Nato. In 1989-91 the Community was shaken to its foundations by the collapse of Soviet power in eastern Europe and the reunification of Germany. This required a frantic burst of nation-on-nation bargaining from which emerged a twin-track EU. On the one hand the process of monetary union led to the creation of Europe's most powerful federal institution, the European Central Bank. On the other, national governments led by France and Germany entrenched their power in the European Council, which in 2009 acquired a permanent, full-time presidency. Power at the European level now lay with a conclave of nation-states, rather than the Commission – not what the patron saints of Europe had in mind. This has created a fundamental cognitive dissonance.

When Angela Merkel was tactless enough to expound the new realities in her Bruges speech in 2010 by calling for leadership by the Commission (the community method) to be supplanted by coordinated action by national governments and parliaments, she caused a scandal in *bien pensant* Europe. Against the backdrop of the failed European constitution in 2005, for Van Middelaar, a Dutch liberal, the effort to stifle Merkel and Brussels' refusal to accept what Europe is becoming are the death agony of an old order. The future belongs to her vision of a Europe of states.

Merkel was vindicated by the shocks that rocked Europe from 2008: Europe's third age, the age of crises, the age of what Jean-Claude Juncker called polycrisis. Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, followed by the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the eurozone debacle, the first Ukraine crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, Trump's abandonment of Europe – these were the turbulent prologues to the pandemic and increasing tension with China, which are the focus of Van Middelaar's latest book.

For Van Middelaar – who served in the cabinet of Herman van Rompuy, the first full-time president of the European Council, between 2010 and 2014 – the age of crises has permanently buried the founding mythology of Europe. The idea that politics is the drafting of a system of rules to govern historical change has been exposed as a dangerous snare. What is needed is a Europe that is capable of responding to existential challenges, rallying a public and governing in the face of uncertainty. Driven by crisis and facing unpredictable hazards, the EU has, Van Middelaar argues, emerged as a community of fate. It is a community that can no longer pretend to be the local realisation of the universal values of the UN. It has come into its own as an entity with its own distinct and selfish interests, and as such it has finally become a vehicle for *raison d'état* in the classic sense.

For Van Middelaar this maturation of the EU is overdue. He admits that depoliticisation in the aftermath of the Second World War fulfilled a historic role. But it was the result of particular circumstances: a reaction to the trauma of two world wars, and a creature of US hegemony after 1945. Under those conditions Europe was able to reduce politics to administration. The heyday of neoliberalism in the 1990s gave the politics of rules a new lease on life. But by the 21st century, clinging to that model was a sign of immaturity. It is well past time for Europe to affirm its identity and assert its interest with concerted strategy.

Van Middelaar's argument, as in his earlier works, flows elegantly and forcefully. But as an account of European politics today, it has telling blind spots. One is tempted to say that it falls victim to the logic it diagnoses. It has been caught and overtaken by history.

Van Middelaar's retelling of Europe's financial problems in the spring of 2020 is depoliticised and sugar-coated. The situation was more dangerous than he allows. The resistance, led by the fiscal conservatives in the Dutch government, to the coronabonds that had been proposed by France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland threatened to hurl Europe back into the darkest days of the eurozone crisis. The escape was narrow and heavily dependent on backroom manoeuvring between Berlin and Paris. Flanking support was provided, as it was between 2008 and 2012, by the US Federal Reserve. Though Europe has avoided an unemployment crisis, its recovery has been much slower than that of US.

The current crisis in Ukraine cruelly exposes the very limited degree to which Europe has actually developed as an independent geopolitical actor. This is both a matter of resources and of internal resolve. With the Biden team having restored normality in Washington, the Scandinavian and eastern European EU members are only too happy to pursue containment of Russia in alliance with more hawkish forces in Nato. France and Germany, though reluctant to pursue a hard line against Putin, lack a credible alternative. And neither hawks nor doves have a near-term alternative to reliance on Russian gas.

Van Middelaar's failure to anticipate the Ukraine crisis is less surprising, however, than his omission altogether of what the EU would no doubt regard as its distinctive achievement in handling the Covid crisis: how it responded to the shock while maintaining its strategic focus on the climate crisis. *Pandemonium* is a short book but it is remarkable that Van Middelaar can write about Europe in 2020-21 without underscoring the central importance of climate policy.

This isn't a minor omission. The Green Deal is essential to every aspect of the EU's self-understanding. Its economic policy, its social policy, its revenues and expenditures – even its foreign policy – all refer back to the climate issue. The EU took ownership of the environmental in the 1990s, the period that Van Middelaar rightly identifies as the formative moment of the modern European project. In the face of US withdrawal, the Europeans upheld the Kyoto Protocol. There would be no Cop process as we know it without Europe. Europe has been a test bed for the renewable energy technologies and carbon pricing. Faced with the threat of a populist right, environmentalism has become the mantra of centrist Europeans both in Brussels and in national capitals. The hallmark of the European crisis response in 2020 was not improvisation but the opposite. Unlike

the response in the US, where cash was doled out to maintain basic social cohesion, the foundation for common European action was a focus on digital modernisation and climate. This is not incidental. In the eyes of sceptical north Europeans, it is crucial to legitimising the common funding of the NextGenerationEU programme.

Of this central organising theme of Europe's politics, there is no mention in *Pandemonium* – or, for that matter, in Van Middelaar's earlier works. How is this to be explained? What does it mean that books reputed to hold the key to grasping European situation should omit the centrepiece of politics in Europe today?

A degree of historical distance is part of Van Middelaar's method. As his Latinate titles suggest, to grasp the return of history he wants us to stand far back. Van Middelaar's books are studded with references to the 17th and 18th centuries, the classical age of European political theory; Defoe has more entries in the index than Frans Timmermans. It is from this high vantage point that Van Middelaar can declare that the EU is finally meeting the challenge of modern politics. The price you pay is that the past, rather than the immediate exigencies of the 21st century, provides the template. The question of how to create a continent-wide public has a deep genealogy. Defining Europe's interests in relation to China fits a conventional template of *Realpolitik*. But environmental politics isn't part of the classical repertoire.

Indeed, Van Middelaar's analysis of two types of politics – rule-bound and event-driven – seems designed to exclude the challenge of climate change. Between the belief that history follows a regular pattern that can be governed by rules and regulations, and the view that history is a series of unpredictable events to which politics must respond with timely improvisation, where does climate fit?

Climate politics is based on the advice of scientific models based on law-like regularities. The relationship between GDP, energy intensity, carbon intensity and emissions is the foundation of policy. But climate forecasting is a continuous demonstration of our ignorance rather than a confident assertion of knowledge. No one imagines that we can simply set policy and follow a safe path to climate stabilisation. But nor can we rely simply on improvisation. We need to make a gigantic series of investments and institutional changes, sustained over decades. Climate policy fits neither of Van Middelaar's ideal types of European policy.

But, once one examines the climate case more closely, one can't help wondering whether Van Middelaar's dichotomies of rule-bound and event-driven politics can grasp the history of the pandemic either. After all, coronavirus wasn't really an exogenous shock that came out of nowhere; it was a predictable upshot of economic development and globalisation. It should have been anticipated. Once the crisis struck, scrambling responses that were based on improvisation and could not be supported by reliable and robust advice proved impossible to sustain.

The pandemic was for many observers an accelerated and terrifying harbinger of other environmental crises to come. That, indeed, was part of the shock for the EU. Unlike the Trump administration, Brussels, Berlin and Paris began 2020 thinking they were meeting the challenge of the Anthropocene that would be addressed at Cop26 in Glasgow later that year. Instead, they were blindsided by a disease that came out of

China and spread in a matter of weeks. It was not by accident that the pandemic led Brussels to double down on climate; as soon as the first wave had passed in the summer of 2020 the focus shifted back to net zero and climate diplomacy. At the level of Europe's political narrative, acting on climate was part of the response to the pandemic. It was a way of demonstrating the EU's commitment to forestall and manage future shocks.

But if both climate change and pandemics are not simply random shocks but events with complex causation that require not improvisation but an organised and systematic response, the same is true for the 2008 financial crisis and the eurozone debt crisis. It is also either naïve or self-serving to suggest that the recurring bouts of tension with Russia are a historic surprise. And the same is true for Europe's uncomfortable position between the United States and China. This tension may generate "events" like the current clash with Beijing over Lithuania's recognition of Taiwan, but that conflict is itself the predictable result of structural change. Going back to the period between 1945 and 1989, European integration was never as geopolitically innocent as Van Middelaar suggests. In the confrontation with the Soviet bloc the Europeans were no mere free-riders on the US's deterrent. West European integration was part of the Cold War front. One should not confuse the demilitarisation of the 1990s with the earlier history of Europe. Until 1995 even the Dutch maintained a Nato armoured corps.

Viewed through the prism of climate, all the historical shocks that explode into Van Middelaar's narrative as drivers of event-filled politics are not exogenous disruptions but the result of obvious causal chains. The crisis that engulfed Dutch real estate and destroyed its banking sector in 2008, to give one example, was not an earthquake. To treat such a crisis as an unpredictable "event" – rather than the result of the lopsided aftermath of social democracy in the Netherlands – is to indulge in euphemism.

Between the polar extremes of history as law-like automatism and history as unpredictable event that structure Van Middelaar's account, what is missing is a notion of history as process: qualitative, one-off, irreversible change, governed by a complex and at times opaque but nevertheless undeniable causality.

Van Middelaar doesn't deny the existence of this kind of historical logic, but in *Pandemonium* it is never part of the analysis. And if, as Van Middelaar observes, notions of politics are tied to notions of historicity, then this is the missing piece in his image of European politics. The counterpart to a conception of history as process is a conception of politics not as rulemaking or ad hoc improvisation, but as project – concerted action organised around a long-term goal, a historical vision, and a set of social interests. Once upon a time it was the idea of a project that defined social democratic, Christian democratic or Eurocommunist politics. Different visions of climate politics fill that space today.

What the EU is trying to concentrate its resources and political capital on is climate and digital modernization. That is what both Brussels and many national governments hope will give them their *raison d'être* and strategic mission. The project is backed by hundreds of billions of euros in investment in the energy transition.

Van Middelaar has his reasons for avoiding the notion of a European project. As he archly points out, the idea of Europe as a project – ever closer union – is an essential part of its foundational ideology. It is the ideology of the Monnet generation repeated like a mantra down into the 2010s. Refusing this ideological snare and demanding that Europe face itself in the mirror of the here-and-now is the first taboo Van Middelaar set out to break. That is, he insists, what the pace of events demands. It is also a move forced on a generation of Europeans scarred by the rejection of the European constitution in 2005. Ever-closer union is the old lie. It is time to talk about interests and national differences, and European identity. Perhaps that is how you win the Dutch, among the most Eurosceptic of the lot, back to the cause.

Talk of the “European project” may be tired. It no doubt feeds off complacency and self-deception, but refusing to take it seriously generates its own blind-spots. Realism may counsel scepticism, but it also demands that one acknowledge when Europe’s show is on the road again and, with climate as its central idea, it currently is.

The consequence of Van Middelaar’s climate blind-spot is that, judged by his own standard of historical actuality, *Pandemonium* falls short. European politics does, indeed, lay down sediments. And, as Van Middelaar rightly insists, history in the 21st century is moving rapidly. Organisations such as the EU constantly add new layers of identity and self-definition. Reading both of Van Middelaar’s recent books one has the sensation of being trapped in the last-but-one layer, seeing Europe as if it were still organised around the trauma of the eurozone crisis and Greece’s horrible fate. In *Pandemonium*, a book about Europe in 2020-21, Greece has nine mentions in the index, and Alexis Tsipras and Yanis Varoufakis have two each. There is no entry for climate, Cop26 or the Green Deal.

Of course, NextGenerationEU may fizzle out. Europe’s fiscal hawks may manage to turn the conversation back to debt and financial sustainability. The crisis over Ukraine may fatally derail European unity. Managing these risks will certainly require political improvisation. But throughout the Covid crisis, Europe’s collective project has been green modernisation. This is a determined effort not just to react to events, but to make history and thus to tame the pandemonium.