



Alarums and excursions.....and plenty of ballyhoo

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Books reviewed:

Alarums and Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage

Luuk van Middelaar (translated by Liz Waters) (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2019), xviii + 320 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78821-172-7

European Civil Service in (Times of) Crisis. A Political Sociology of the Changing Power of Eurocrats

Didier Georgakakis (translated by Marina Urquidi) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), xiii + 329 pp., ISBN: 978-3-319-51791-9

Opposing Europe in the European Parliament: Rebels and Radicals in the Chamber

Nathalie Brack (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), xv + 213 pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-60199-5

Between 1987 and 2009, the European Union (EU) underwent five major treaty changes (Single European Act, 1987; Maastricht Treaty, 1993; Amsterdam Treaty, 1999; Nice Treaty, 2003; and Lisbon Treaty, 2009) and three waves of enlargement (1995, 2004, and 2007) that took it from being a Community of twelve Member States to a Union of twenty-seven (and then twenty-eight when Croatia joined in 2013). It was a huge amount of rapid change. Understandably, the EU is currently suffering from a bad case of indigestion, one that has been exacerbated by the 2008 economic and financial crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis. One Member State is set to leave and new Member States will not be joining in the immediate future, though half a dozen are queuing up at the door. In other words, the sort of rapid evolution that the EU experienced in the 1987–2009 period will not be occurring again for at least a decade. No Member State dares accept the prospect of further treaty change, though the eurozone badly needs treaty amendments if it is to be properly consolidated and, although the Union knows that the Western Balkans reform process badly needs the continued prospect of membership, it balks at the idea of absorbing further

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Member States just yet. Does that mean, then, that change has stopped and that the EU has ceased to evolve? The answer, as these three titles convincingly prove, is “no”; the Union is continuing to evolve significantly, albeit in a less formal way.

Didier Georgakakis, a French sociologist, has been studying the Union’s civil service—*la fonction publique européenne*—over many years, and particularly its elites. His latest publication “gives an account of field work and features papers, lectures and more generally, reflections spread over nearly 20 years” (p. vii). Being a compilation, its seven chapters (plus introductory and concluding chapters) work also as excellent stand-alone reflective analyses, and so this volume complements perfectly the seminal collection of texts Georgakakis co-edited in 2013 (*The Field of Eurocracy: Mapping EU Actors and Professionals*, Palgrave). It will be obligatory reading for anybody interested in understanding how the EU civil service is changing.

His basic theory is that, “the European institutions, well beyond their establishment and their organisation, had succeeded, sometimes against the wishes of certain large member states, in forming a kind of collective human resource, a group that was built by building Europe...” (p. 12). However, this extraordinary creation is, “threatened today in its foundations, not (or not only), ... by external processes, but by policies and an internal power process that, for reasons of misreading or deliberate ignorance of collective phenomena, took the opposite course to that of the historical trend that had taken shape” (p. 13). In other words, the *fonction publique européenne* is not only menaced by its traditional external enemies (for which read the net contributors and the more intergovernmentally minded Member States) but is also, he argues, being eroded from within. It is those twin threats that serve as the backdrop to this set of intriguing studies. The (implicitly normative) question left hanging is whether what some liked to see as a vanguard of an ever-closer Union is becoming more akin, at least in some of its aspects, to the secretariat of an international organisation, with such Anglo-Saxon concepts as “professionalisation” and “reform” as the bogey words.

Chapter Two considers the genesis and construction of the myth of the “Eurocrat” (which Georgakakis concludes is a Durkheimian “well-founded illusion”). Chapter Three looks at the socialisation of EU civil servants, and Chapter Four reports on a collective biography of directors-general and deputy-directors-general in the European Commission between 1958 and 2000 (Georgakakis terms it a “prosopographical study”). Chapter Five considers the debate about “key competences”—an important aspect of the professionalisation process as it was implemented after the 2004 Kinnock reform package, though not the only one. Chapter Six is a more openly partisan analysis of the personnel selection process, “inspired by a culture of undifferentiated management, from which knowledge about the EU, and more generally-speaking, everything that was previously used as indicators of expertise and multicultural skills are absent” (p. 20). (Having sat three of the old-style open competitions about which Georgakakis waxes nostalgic, I can confidently declare that a previous emphasis on “multicultural skills” is a well-founded illusion.) Chapter Seven looks at the cultural effects of enlargement and the arrival of a new generation of civil servants from Central and Eastern Europe in particular. Chapter Eight looks at the most recent staff reform processes against the backdrop of the economic



crisis, where the European Commission's administration in particular became both "the pilot and the victim" of austerity policies (p. 255).

In his concluding chapter, Georgakakis writes about a "crisis of reproduction" (p. 285), by which he means that old-style passionate integrationists in the Monnet–Hallstein–Delors tradition (Chapter 4 includes a one page obituary of the European Commission's first, and longest-serving (1958–1987), Secretary-General, Emile Noël) are dying out—or, rather, failing to perpetuate their breed, and he somewhat polemically concludes that "the future of Europe and its citizens is ... directly linked to it" (p. 301). Georgakakis is absolutely correct to identify the still-evolving transition of the EU administration from its charismatic heyday to its current more technocratic managerialism as a major change whose consequences are still being played out—although this applies mainly to the European Commission. New functions and institutions (e.g. the European Central Bank, the European External Action Service), new categories of civil servant (e.g. contractual agents, parliamentary assistants), ever-increasing delegation to executive agencies and ever-increasing devolution to decentralised agencies are all changing the nature of the *fonction publique européenne* and, as Georgakakis argues, not necessarily always for the better.

Belgian political scientist Nathalie Brack's study examines a paradox at work; namely, how do anti-system representatives behave when they get elected to the representative institution *par excellence* of the system which they oppose? The core of *Opposing Europe in the European Parliament*, which won the Xavier Mabilille Prize for Best Thesis in Political Science in an earlier incarnation, is an empirical study of the behaviour of Eurosceptical MEPs in the European Parliament (EP). Two early chapters examine the concept of political representation beyond the nation state (what role should Eurosceptical MEPs aspire to or model their behaviour on, but also what sort of representativeness does the EP aspire to?) and the phenomenon of Euroscepticism in the European Parliament, with numbers greatly increasing after the 2014 European elections. The core chapter's empirical investigation results in a fascinating set of findings. Brack develops a typology of four roles that Eurosceptics grew into: the Absentee, the Public Orator, the Pragmatist, and the Participant. It will be understood immediately that two, if not three, of these ideal types result in degrees of socialisation; that is, many Eurosceptical MEPs became players in the system they theoretically opposed.

That consideration leads Brack's study on to a fascinating fifth chapter about the strategies of the Parliament itself (and its main actors) towards members who, although theoretically beyond the pale, potentially at least bring legitimacy, representativeness and the citizen's voice (in the form of political debate) to an institution which has traditionally suffered from low levels of electoral participation and who are (many of them), notwithstanding their views, prepared to "play the game" according to the system's rules. The institution's basic response, though, is to try to freeze them and their voices out. It does this through its formal rules: non-attached MEPs are almost completely marginalised; individual MEPs—even those who belong to political groups—enjoy steadily decreasing scope for action; and the political groups—particularly the largest—wield ever-growing power. The rules are brought to bear in other restrictive ways; limited speaking time; controlled



allocation of strategically important rapporteurships; and strict regulation of, for example, opportunistic attempts to achieve some sort of voice through impromptu demonstrations in the chamber. The Parliament's informal rules also make the lives of Eurosceptic MEPs difficult—the pervading culture of compromise and the greatest possible consensus sits ill with their—by definition—oppositional stance.

In a concluding chapter, Brack considers the strategic choices for Eurosceptic MEPs on the one hand and the EP on the other. Perversely, almost, the Parliament's behaviour encourages Eurosceptic MEPs to opt for the Absentee ideal type, for the only alternatives are some sort of “going native” whilst enjoying, at best, a marginalised role and limited rights. At the same time, the presence of these voices within the EP could be seen as an asset, in terms of the institution's representativeness and as a way of giving the EU the politics it currently lacks. Eurosceptical MEPs, she argues, “provide a channel for the expression of opposition of segments of public opinion. It attests to the democratic nature of the EU, which cannot be presented like a bureaucratic Leviathan exclusively composed of federalists” (p. 188). Indeed, Brack concludes that a better engagement with dissenting voices “could lead to a more democratic and mature polity, which could, paradoxically, deprive Eurosceptics of their main arguments” (p. 189). This is an important contribution to the growing literature about how the European Union has to find a way to become more political. This may not be easy but, as Brack cogently argues, the populist crisis will not be overcome by trying not to listen to it.

Luuk van Middelaar, a Dutch political philosopher and sometime member of Herman van Rompuy's private office, 2010–2015, when the latter was President of the European Council, has penned an elegant and magisterial follow-up to his 2013 study, *The Passage of Europe*. van Middelaar has, in part, made good use of his ring-side seat to examine another form of adaptation without formal treaty-based change. The beginning of van Rompuy's mandate (1 December 2009) coincided with the Greek debt crisis, with its existential threat to the eurozone. van Rompuy has written and spoken evocatively about his stark realisation that he and his institution had not a single tool in the toolbox to deal with the crisis. The European Council had no choice but to improvise. That it could do so—and do so quite so effectively—is what fascinates van Middelaar and drives his entertaining narrative and convincing analysis forward.

Opting for a theatrical metaphor, van Middelaar's “Prologue” first describes the “performance space”, the “script” and the “open stage”, thereby inviting us to consider what sorts of roles the various actors might be expected to play, and in which context. In the four following chapters, he describes the crises with which the European Council had to deal and recounts the ways in which the various actors improvised and negotiated their way to satisfactory, if far from ideal, solutions—those actors being, of course, the heads of state or government of the twenty-eight Member States, ranging from the mercurial Nicolas Sarkozy to the quietly determined Angela Merkel, but also including other institutional actors such as the Presidents of the European Commission and of the European Central Bank and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *Alarums and excursions* was an Elizabethan stage direction initially meaning martial sounds and the movement of soldiers across the stage, but it later came



to mean general ballyhoo. There is plenty of general ballyhoo in the four crises van Middelaar recounts. These were/are: the euro crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the refugee crisis, and what he describes as “the Atlantic crisis”, conflating the Brexit and Trump election psychodramas (both still unfolding) as some sort of Atlantic malady or, at least, challenge.

van Middelaar was not present in the European Council for all of these events, but when he was, the reader gets a fascinating fly-on-the-wall point of view and when he wasn't, he brings a practised and well-informed former insider's eye to what was going on. As a result, these accounts will in themselves be standard reference works. But van Middelaar (no doubt aided by his excellent translator, Liz Waters) writes in a literary style which is immensely pleasurable to read and lards the text with insights from classical philosophers and strategists which further enhance the pleasure. At the so-called entr'acte, van Middelaar cites Machiavelli's observation that, “to be both a good person and political, one has to step into time, accept the contingency of events and take responsibility for the open future. This demands foresight, preparation, action—and an awareness that you will always be surprised” (p. 147). Machiavelli got there some 500 years before Harold MacMillan's “events, dear boy”!

In two final chapters, van Middelaar first takes a more general, reflective look at the “Directors and actors”: the European Council, the Council of Ministers and the so-called troika of rotating presidencies, the Eurogroup and Euro-summitry, the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the Agencies. Each has its space, its stage and its role to play. The result is a complex, interacting spectacle that somehow, miraculously, keeps working. van Middelaar's implied point is that this is because they somehow realise that they are all in the same play, the same drama. In his final chapter, van Middelaar echoes Brack's argument that the Union needs more politics. “Opposition, protest and dissent”, he argues, “can give Europe once again the dynamism without which events-politics cannot continue to unfold” (p. 266). This change, he acknowledges, “will result in a Union with more commotion and noise, more drama and conflict—a development not without risk”. But, he concludes, “the cherished rules-politics of the past, which fewer and fewer voters feel to be credible, is inadequate for a Union that needs to act” (p. 267).

These three excellent works each describe various crises and the way in which the institutions concerned—the European administration, the European Parliament, the European Council—have adapted to them. As such, they are both tests and proofs of two of Jean Monnet's more famous dictums. The first declared that, “People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognise necessity when a crisis is upon them”. The second foresaw that, “Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum total of the solutions adopted for those crises”. Based on the evidence in these books, there is still room for optimism; Europe must and does adapt, and the show (or, for van Middelaar, the play) goes on.



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