

Politics and Science in Disguise

Not Quite the History of European Integration

STEVEN VAN HECKE

In his *De passage naar Europa. Geschiedenis van een begin* [The Passage to Europe: History of a Beginning], Luuk van Middelaar makes European integration intelligible by applying a distinction between three spheres – the states, the community and the intermediate sphere of the Member States – to various events that have proven crucial in ‘the making of’. These events form passages that have made Europe what it is today; as well as what it is not. Van Middelaar’s writing is sensitive and inspired; his perspective is open-minded; the cases are well-documented (but not always adequate); and his book is innovative, as he introduces political/theoretical terminology into history, combined with insights from political science. He could even have gone further in narrowing the disciplines gap, however, and he has not always avoided the traps of history writing. In any case, he succeeds brilliantly in his ambition ‘to tell *another* story about the birth of political Europe’ (9; author’s own italics).

De passage naar Europa. Geschiedenis van een begin [The Passage to Europe. History of a Beginning]¹ is more than the latest in a series of books about the history of the European integration process. Not only does the author, Luuk van Middelaar, seek to recount the birth of political Europe in a different way; his primary objective is to ‘tell *another* story about the birth of political Europe’ (9; author’s own italics). He succeeds brilliantly in this ambition. Van Middelaar accomplishes this largely in two ways. Firstly, he extends an original conceptual framework within which the classic events of the past sixty years can be understood. Secondly, he applies this framework to offer the reader a new, clarifying perspective on a number of these events, which Van Middelaar considers to have proven crucial. These events form the ‘passages’ – passages that have made Europe what it presently is, as well as what it is not.

1 Luuk van Middelaar, *De passage naar Europa. Geschiedenis van een begin* (Dissertatie Universiteit van Amsterdam 2009; Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2009, 531 blz., ISBN 978 90 6554 236 6).



On 25 March 1957, in the Hall of the Horatii and Curii in the Capitol in Rome, the representatives of the six Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) sign the Treaties establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom). From left to right: Paul-Henri Spaak and Baron Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers (Belgium), Christian Pineau and Maurice Faure (France), Konrad Adenauer and Walter Hallstein (Federal Republic of Germany), Antonio Segni and Gaetano Martino (Italy), Joseph Bech and Lambert Schaus (Luxembourg), Joseph Luns and Johannes Linthorst-Homan (Netherlands).

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In order to understand Europe, we must first consider the manner in which we speak about Europe. According to Van Middelaar, this takes place through *three discourses*. According to the *Europe of the States*, European politics emerge through cooperation between national governments. In the *Europe of the Citizens*, the European institutions (as a component of the instruments of a European federation) play the primary role. Finally, the language of the *Europe of the Bureaus* emphasises the realisation of the European bureaucracy, as manifest in the form of directives, funds, programmes and other facilities. These three discourses are in constant conflict with one another. Given that politics is driven by discourse (even in Europe), the outcome of such conflict is anything but neutral. According to Van Middelaar, however, these discourses do not tell the whole story. They have no concept of ‘the actual historicity of politics’ (29). Unexpected events transverse and interrupt them. Although the three discourses are ‘historical’ (in the sense that they are oriented towards the past, future and present, respectively), they are not resistant to time nor, more accurately, to the facts that accompany time. Van Middelaar proposes that the past, present and future must therefore be connected to one another, as ‘only then can one do justice to both discontinuities and continuities’ (30).

Mapping Europe’s intermediate sphere of Member States

By this route (which was actually a detour, as it was not entirely necessary for the rest of Van Middelaar’s own discourse, which thereafter makes only sporadic reference to the three discourses), the author arrives at the true heart of his story: the *three spheres*. These are the three spheres within which European states have organised. ‘Each sphere has its own rules of movement and order’ (32) and its own public. These three spheres are not separate, however; they enclose one another. The outermost sphere is that of the *States* (plural). States are sovereign, *bounded*, act in their own interest and organise themselves in relation to one another in a permanent quest for a balance of power. This is the classic domain of international relations or, from the point of view of the states involved, foreign affairs. The innermost sphere is that of the *Community* (singular). This is the sphere of voluntary cooperation and integration based on treaties. Here, relations between states are driven by an orientation towards ‘the European project’. The third (intermediate) sphere is that of the *Member States*. This is the sphere within which states attempt to reconcile their sovereignty with membership of an integration project that undermines this sovereignty. This is the space of ‘give and take’, of common interest. Sometimes, the overlap with the outermost sphere is greater; at other times, with the innermost sphere. Member states, however, always operate in the intermediate sphere. According to Van Middelaar, the specificity of this intermediate sphere is manifested in the abovementioned ‘passages’.

The insight that European integration consists not only of states and common institutions is nothing new. In my opinion, the earlier political-theoretic terminology Van Middelaar adopts in this respect is indeed new, however. Describing European politics as a process that takes place primarily in this intermediate sphere meshes seamlessly with recent insights from the field of political science and, more specifically, EU studies. Van Middelaar is familiar with this discipline, making explicit reference to it (albeit not always in glowing terms) when discussing the combined forms of the three discourses. In supranationalism, the discourses of offices and citizens are brought together; intergovernmentalism refers to the discourses of offices and states; while constitutionalism combines the discourses of states and citizens. Van Middelaar does not systematically apply this or other theories (as is normally the case in political science); conceptualisations, hypotheses and case selections included. In this way, the book is not political science *stricto sensu*. Neither does he relate these theories to the three spheres – although he would have been perfectly capable of completing such an exercise. For example, *governance* (which appears on page 25) and *multi-level* theories offer frameworks within which the intermediate sphere can be analysed, both in proximity to and distinct from the innermost and outermost spheres. The three-way division emphasising the intermediate sphere is thus not new. What is new is that Van Middelaar does not restrict his exegesis on the intermediate sphere to political Europe as it currently exists (as political scientists do). Instead, he engages in an active search (after the fact, as he is applying recent insights) for the intermediate sphere in the history of the emergence of this political Europe. In this quest, in this literature, in his emphasis on the importance of the intermediate sphere, Van Middelaar clearly distinguishes himself from average historians and their classic books about the history of the European integration process.

The intermediate sphere, ‘the most prominent source and carrier of European politics’ (39), therefore also demands the leading role in the book. In which of the passages can this intermediate sphere be observed? These are certainly not many (but nonetheless, more than one, as the title of the book erroneously implies): according to Van Middelaar, there are seven, ranging from the Schuman Plan to the Dutch and the French, who rejected the constitutional treaty by referendum (discussed throughout, 499-500). The presence of the Schuman Plan on the list reveals very little. History has yet to show whether those who voted ‘no’ in 2005 also left a lasting impression on political Europe. To brand this as a new, definitive passage at this early stage seems somewhat premature (even more so, given that all the other passages revealed their true value only many years after the events concerned – a detail Van Middelaar convincingly negates). The passages that are not as old as the Schuman Plan, but predate the 2005 referenda, are of much more interest to the reader. After all, these events are less well-known, but nonetheless have set out the markers for the future. Van Middelaar demonstrates his artisanship in

the multi-faceted and in-depth analysis of each of these passages. He provides the reader with an alternative perspective on history; a perspective that is hard to resist.

Let us, for instance, consider the Luxembourg Compromise of 1966 (86-108). This famous compromise, which (in the classic reading) offers no solution (*'agreement to disagree'*), is not only a conflict between two archetypes (De Gaulle and Hallstein) or a collision between two visions of the future of Europe. By creating the intermediate sphere between institutions and the state – a space within which a political Europe can be realised – it is also (and, according to Van Middelaar, primarily) an agreement in which Member States are protected against the will of the majority and the veto of a single Member State. Van Middelaar further argues that political Europe can continue to exist, not despite but because of the renunciation of both majority decisions and unanimity. The development of the Council of the European Union as a fully-fledged institution of the *Community of Member States* (which was not provided in the Schuman Plan) has provided an abundance of evidence to support this claim. In addition to becoming the mouthpiece of Europe (99), this body gave rise to the European Council, which subsequently became the motor of Europe. Each of these developments came at the cost of the European Commission. Along the way, the innermost sphere (*Community*) was overtaken by the outermost sphere (*states*), with the creation of a separate intermediate sphere (*Member States*) as the result.

Explaining Europe with(out) theory

In sketching this and other passages, Van Middelaar spans the gap between political theory, law and history. The book therefore offers more than merely a summary of names, dates and facts. The *other* story is primarily the story of the author and the disciplines in which he is at ease. Political science is not one of them. Although the author is aware of and uses political science, he does not always integrate this, either explicitly or systematically. This is astonishing, as the intention of the book – to explain Europe as it is, as it works and as it does not work, with major roles for a variety of actors (and thus not only the Community institutions and/or the states), albeit through the detour of the past – is absolutely relevant to political science. This is also unfortunate, as the inclusion of political science could have made the book even richer and more multi-faceted. For example, consider the work of Simon Hix (*The Political System of the European Union* (Basingstoke etc. 2005)), who analyses the EU as a *political system*. This work pays considerable attention to such matters as strategic, anticipatory behaviour – behaviour that can explain why the formal transition from unanimity to majority actually resulted in consensus decisions. At the same time, the lack of an explicit and systematic political science framework makes Van Middelaar's work provocative for political scientists:

their challenge then consists of discovering the points of cross-reference with their own discipline.

More generally, the author takes a critical stance against plain and simple theory development. This also seems neither completely justified, nor consistent. In his work, Van Middelaar makes copious use of abstract concepts and ideas to order, distinguish and explain the historicity of political Europe. At the same time, his words are unilaterally positive with regard to experience, events, perception and personal involvement (as well as the value thereof), while remaining extremely critical with regard to theory development. Although both obviously have shortcomings, it may be wrong to set up a pure opposition in this context. (As early as page 20, Van Middelaar speaks of ‘The demand of the discipline’. A more appropriate phrase may have been ‘The temptation of the discipline’.) The book itself is the best proof of the combination of theory and ‘the role of events’ (29). Excessive receptiveness to events (428) brings a number of risks. In most cases, Van Middelaar avoids the trap of the anecdotal and the particular. Moreover, he refers the reader to the major potential of minor details (as with the general mood regarding the initiation of an IGC at the European Council of Milan (148 ff.)). Nevertheless, the attempt to explain the political Europe of today according to passages from the past *with the benefit of hindsight* indeed sets this trap. For example, the reader learns essentially nothing about the European Defence Community (EDC), even though it is also a passage that does not deserve to be relegated to the category of failures in the classic history of European unification.

Struggling with today’s Europe

The book’s conceptual framework (i.e. the three spheres, particularly the intermediate sphere of the Member States) is applied and elaborated consistently. This is evident from the very beginning of the book, for example in the exposition of the transition between the spheres (47 ff.). Such attention enhances the book’s clarity and logic. The choice to focus on the Member States is obviously not only clarifying; this approach also encloses the role of other, non-state actors and institutions *within* the various Member States. Although Van Middelaar appears to be aware of this (see the comment above with regard to *governance*), the reader learns nothing about partisan politics (and thus about the role or absence of political parties). As the founder of neo-functionalism, Ernst Haas can count on little sympathy from the author with regard to his plea for increased attention to the study of *transnational* (and thus not *supranational*) partisan politics as an important perspective from which to analyse the development of Europe as a political system. The author also does not consider the *freedom* of the actor – states included – to make political choices. This freedom is nonetheless an important resource, and the author

uses it to conclude his book. The rulings by the European Court of Justice cited by Van Middelaar could obviously have been different. Or De Gaulle could have chosen not to initiate or continue his empty-chair politics. The historicity of political Europe is not determined by *events* alone (whether coincidental or non-coincidental); by choosing whether to act upon opportunities that may arise, actors also generate ‘coincidental’ behaviour, behaviour that might have far-reaching consequences. Those responsible for shaping the details of the birth of political Europe were (or are) neither passivists nor fatalists. On the contrary, they chose the *kairos* – the right moment to grasp and re-route in a direction advantageous to them. Emphasising the role of actors is important because organisations and institutions, states and Member States do not have the capacity to meet (or miss) dates with history (and therefore compose and colour it); in contrast, *à la limite*, people in these organisations and institutions, states and Member States do.

Van Middelaar does more than simply combine political theory, law and history. His writing is also sensitive and inspired, giving the impression that the disciplines flow into one another like streams into a wide river. The logbook (history) is presented to the reader through an open-minded perspective – the perspective of wonder (philosophy), in constant consideration of the way in which reality exists on paper (law) – as well as its negation. (Here, political science should find its place.) Unlike a multitude of historians, he does not lose sight of the big picture. He achieves this by emphasising the factor of time and the perception of or experience of time (8). His toolkit contains an abundance of metaphors and rich, illustrious language that sheds new light on such classic concepts as representation, unanimity and the right to veto. He knows both the classics and the *petites histoires* of European history. He refrains from answering the recurring and often sterile question of ‘*Quo vadis, Europa?*’ (‘Where are you going, Europe?’). Instead, he chooses to ask, ‘*Unde venis?*’ (‘From where have you come?’; 30). His work, however, only gives the appearance of charting the past. Van Middelaar’s book is primarily about the Europe of today. This volume of more than 500 pages (including a 70-page reading guide, which is quite useful to the reader) is highly recommended for any reader who wishes to know more about the history of the European integration process. The author achieves his ambition: to do more than simply tell the story of the birth of political Europe in another way, but to ‘tell *another* story about the birth of political Europe’. This book is therefore worthy of broad distribution, including translation into English. ◀

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Time, Fortuna and Policy – or How to Understand European Integration?

ANDRÉ GERRITS

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De passage naar Europa [The Passage to Europe] is an interesting book – creative, original and readable, but for a doctoral dissertation it is also remarkably devoid of theory. Van Middelaar introduces various interesting notions and ideas (European ‘discourses’, ‘policy spheres’ and ‘zones of interactions’), but these remain ambiguous, and therefore rather noncommittal. The book stands out for its interpretative richness, its analytical sensitivity and its imaginative prose. It lacks an overall theoretical framework, however. It fails to link up with the wider academic debate on European integration.

‘The EU’s greatest tactical advantage is that it is, in a word, so *boring*’, writes Andrew Moravcsik regarding the apparent ease with which the Member States of the European Union agreed on an alternative to the Constitutional Treaty following its rejection by the French and Dutch electorates, just a few years previously.¹ What goes for the European Union, also goes for much of the literature on European integration: as empirically rich and theoretically innovative as it might occasionally be, it is rarely exciting or particularly entertaining. Generally, the combination of social science terminology and EU jargon does not make for very enjoyable reading. *De passage naar Europa. Geschiedenis van een begin* [The Passage to Europe. History of a Beginning]² written by Dutch historian and philosopher Luuk van Middelaar (currently adviser to Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Council), could be mistaken as another general history of European integration, from its earliest days to the Lisbon Treaty. However, this is one thing it is not. *De Passage naar Europa* is an extraordinary book; not so much because of its empirical or theoretical content, but because of its creative structure and individual style. This is a sparkingly written book: creative, original and highly readable.