

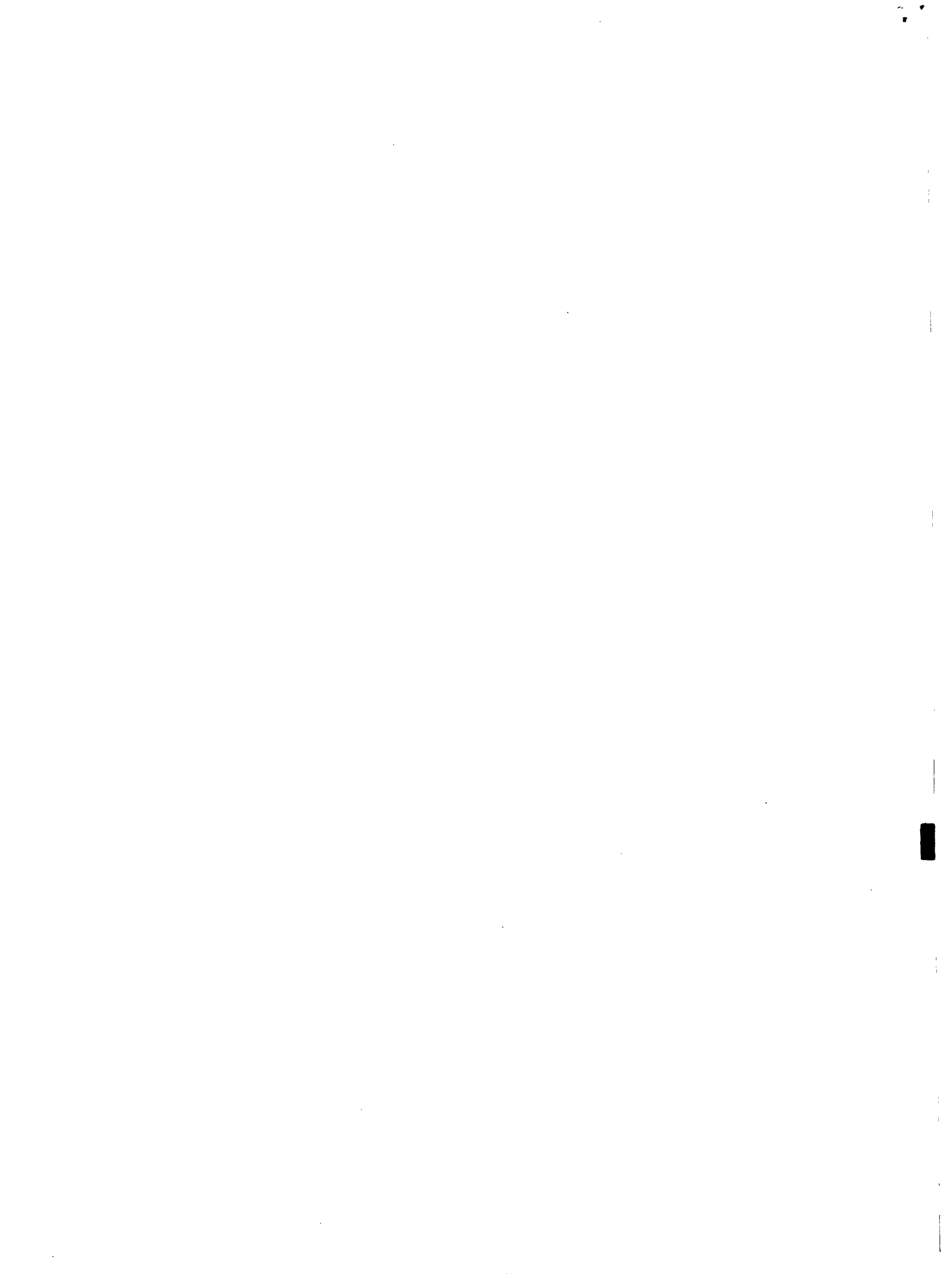
**AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE EUROPEAN  
COMMISSION**

**REPORT**

**Marc Abélès** (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique)  
**Irène Bellier** (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique)  
**Maryon McDonald** (Brunel, The University of West London)

**December 1993**

This report has been prepared under contract for the European Commission. The evaluations, judgements and ideas expressed in the report are the sole responsibility of the researchers concerned and do not commit the Commission in any way.



# AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER I: IS THERE A COMMISSION CULTURE? .....	8
A society of houses .....	8
<i>In-house</i> .....	8
<i>House Staff</i> .....	16
Enclaves of sociability .....	22
An ordered universe.....	24
Time and memory.....	27
A Commission culture ?.....	30
CHAPTER II: FRONTIERS CAST A SHADOW .....	32
Daily Speech .....	32
Language and culture.....	34
Incongruence and stereotypes .....	39
<i>Unity and difference</i> .....	39
<i>A meeting of incongruent systems</i> .....	40
<i>Of the difficulty of being German and the relative ease of being Irish</i> .....	47
Pressure, <i>Idées-valeurs</i> and denunciation .....	49
CHAPTER III: THE HOLY GRAIL .....	54
Formal relations and hierarchies.....	54
Information .....	58
Negotiation and coordination .....	61
A question of management? .....	66
CONCLUSION.....	69



# AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Marc Abélès, Irène Bellier and Maryon McDonald

## Introduction

This report presents some of the results of an anthropological study of the European Commission, a multicultural organization which has been allotted a key role in the process of European integration. The observations made in this report give a glimpse of investigations carried out in 1993 in a number of Directorates-General - DGs I, III, V, VI, VIII, XV and XVI - plus a few forays into the Secretariat-General, the Interpreting Service and DGs II, IV, IX, X, XI, XII, XVII and XIX. In the course of this inquiry, we have tried to gain a better understanding of the world of Community civil servants through their day-to-day behaviour and their own perceptions about what they are doing.

What we were originally asked to investigate concerned the existence or not of a specific Commission culture, plus the weight of the different languages and national cultural traditions and their impact on working relationships, and how a European identity might emerge in such a context. Given these concerns, the study was entrusted to anthropologists, specialists *par excellence* in analysing intercultural relationships. Anthropology took the place here of the sociology of organizations and the audits and psychologies of various kinds which had otherwise been called on, and to which appeal is more commonly made.

What new light can an anthropological approach shed on the Commission? And what is an anthropological approach?

A still common image of anthropology is one that owes far more to its nineteenth-century origins than to its present-day activities. In the nineteenth century, anthropology was both tied in with, and helped to produce, an interest in so-called primitive societies. Anthropological efforts helped to ensure firstly that the adjective 'primitive' was no longer used in simple denigration, and then that it was put in question and rejected as a description of other modes of life. In order to understand, and render comprehensible, other cultures or ways of life, anthropology was the first social science discipline to query and reject the naiveties of questionnaires and surveys, which tend to impose the researcher's preoccupations on the world of those studied. Instead anthropology developed its own methodology which generally goes by the name of 'participant observation', a methodology since copied by or incorporated into

other areas of social science. This approach meant living and working in the milieu of those studied in order better to grasp 'the native point of view' (Malinowski, 1922).<sup>1</sup> In a continuous spirit of scholarly self-criticism, aspects of this approach have been constantly problematized and reformulated within the discipline, but in some form it generally remains the ambition of anthropological research. In keeping with this, our study did not involve questionnaires or rounds of questioning but attendance at meetings day in and day out, at all departmental levels, and an active involvement in social life.

Given the origins of the discipline, those countries with the strongest colonial traditions have tended also to have the strongest anthropology. In a post-imperial, self-castigating era, anthropology has developed a keen tradition of critical self-awareness and has shown itself fully able to examine the institutions of the cultural worlds in which it was itself born. A study of the European Commission was, in this respect, very much in keeping with the current trends of the discipline.

Perhaps one of the best-known anthropologists, one who was mentioned to us originally as a model to follow in this study, is Claude Lévi-Strauss. For many anthropologists, his ideas helped to reinforce a concern with conceptual structures. At the same time, his ideas or interpretations of them have presented many problems. One of these has been that his work has tended to concentrate on an exotic set of activities roughly described as myth, ritual, kinship and symbolism, and it appeared to leave the domains of politics and economics to others. This was part of his appeal in the 1960s, an apparent escape from materialism, and it has tended to encourage older views of what anthropology's 'culture' is all about. We shall return to this point, in connection with management studies, at the end of this report.

For many people still, there is something called 'culture' which is both separate from, and sits ephemerally alongside, the apparently 'real' domains of politics and economics. It somehow does not include them. For anthropologists now, however, culture embraces all areas. The assumptions of politics and economics, for example, are no less available to anthropological scrutiny than anything else. In this study and report, however, it has not been possible to include as much of those areas as we might have wished. On the one hand, in keeping with widespread notions of what 'culture' is all about, it was something that did not seem to be required or expected of us in the Commission. On the other hand, the unusual constraints of time placed upon us, constraints appropriate to Commission daily life but difficult for the scholarly requirements of an anthropological study, have in themselves been prohibitive.

This study has been carried out by three anthropologists, two French and one British. In some

---

<sup>1</sup> B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge).

respects, very different traditions of anthropology have been brought together. The results of these traditions have, in a sense, been stitched together here and we hope that it is only occasionally that the seams will show. The overall aim and result, we feel, is one that will allow both those inside the Commission and those outside it to understand, and reflect differently upon, certain aspects of the daily life of this organization, and to inspect certain ways of thinking and behaving which they might otherwise have found banal.

Any study of human beings can present ethical problems and anthropology has developed its own guidelines.<sup>2</sup> We have tried to present our material here in such a way that no-one can be identified who might not wish to be so. It is worth bearing in mind that this is only a brief account of the material available to us. We hope to have feedback, and then publications will follow. For several reasons, therefore, not every area of the Commission departments studied appears explicitly in this report.

Our approach, we should stress, is very different from that of a sociology of organizations. We do not impute a rationality to any organization as such an approach tends to do, but are more interested in people's own construction and distribution of rationality. It is people's own perceptions of the world that determine their behaviour, and not those imposed by the theorist. A sociology of organizations has, for the most part, followed a tradition of sociological positivism in which there are ideas, values and norms on the one hand and then action or behaviour on the other. Several points can be made about this. Firstly, anthropology has shown that there is no such distinction in everyday life: ideas and action, the conceptual and the behavioural, are not divorced but implicated in the same apperceptions and events. Secondly, the sociology of organizations tends to see the specific characteristics of an organization as systems of constraints in which those involved develop strategies: the systems produce blockages, and the main problem is to devise means of overcoming those blockages and giving those involved room for initiative. The sociology of organizations accentuates these processes and the operating procedures they result in. For these sociologists, the values current within the organizations are often left outside the field of investigation. The anthropologist, however, sets very great store by modes of thinking, representation or values. For anthropology, they are at once the essential driving force of social behaviour and the only means through which behaviour is interpreted.

In reply to the question how to define anthropology, we can follow Claude Lévi-Strauss in distinguishing three steps : ethnography, which corresponds to observation and field work,

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example the booklet *Ethical guidelines for good practice*, published by The Association of Social Anthropologists in 1987.

ethnology, which is a first step towards synthesis, in three directions (geographical, historical and systematic); and anthropology, which through comparison, generalization and theoretical formulation makes the results of anthropological investigation available to increase our general knowledge of humankind. The research we have carried out in the Commission fits in with this anthropological orientation: it is supported by ethnographic investigation, but the approach is not purely monographic. The objective is to underscore general processes and to produce a conceptual analysis of a complex intercultural situation. On this basis the study of the Commission can throw light on two anthropological questions *par excellence* - one relating to the nature of human institutions, the other to relationships between different cultures.

For any anthropologists still accustomed to working solely in small, exotic societies, or for those who imagine that this is still what anthropology does, then a study of the Commission might seem to represent a challenge. However, a good deal of work on contemporary institutions and institutional processes has already been done. Our starting hypothesis is to consider the institution as a micro-society with its own codes, rites and customs. We studied officials' perceptions and behaviour by immersing ourselves in the Commission's departments and taking seriously all aspects of civil servants' activities, their ways of reacting, their observations, and their daily discourse. At the same time, we were well aware that the Commission does not exist in isolation.

In an institution such as the Commission representation plays a fundamental role. It is on this point that a sociological approach can only founder, short of measuring all the difference that exists between the Commission and classic bureaucracies. Unlike national civil services, which are there to serve an existing State with clearly defined frontiers and a long history, the Community public service can seem to be operating in a vast building site. It could be said to be a project of which completion is always being postponed. In the absence of a centralized political authority at Community level, the executive that the Commission represents is fragile, a prey to the skirmishes characterising relations between the Member States. It is the 'European idea' (*l'idée européenne*) that guides Commission officials, and it is to this that they refer when Member States challenge the lawfulness of their actions. The Commission has no territorial roots, which in itself distinguishes it from any national civil service. The material constraints, the discipline, and the weight of everyday tasks have to combine with an investment arising out of an idea that is both disembodied and demanding: these people cannot wait until Europe exists, they are making it daily. In this sense, the institution could be said to work largely by reference to what Maurice Godelier calls '*l'idéal*'<sup>3</sup> in reference to an intellectual process.

---

3

M. Godelier, *L'Idéal et le matériel. Pensée, économies, sociétés* (Paris: Fayard, 1984)



Merely describing the standards by which the organization operates, analysing the constraints, and bringing out the strategies - characteristic processes in the sociology of organizations - would not suffice, therefore, to render the complex of relationships which informs this institution and the identities that are constructed there. There are several senses in which there could be said to be a culture proper to the European Commission. A sense of conforming to shared concepts and values is one of these. There exist intellectual systems at the centre of which '*l'idée européenne*' (or the 'European idea') has its place and participation in these systems could be said to be ingrained in the world of the Commission. Some would feel, therefore, that there is a common complex of ideas in the Commission which nurtures reflection and action. If we are to understand the Commission culture, how this is structured needs to be demonstrated.

There exists a whole complex of concepts and values which determine the discourse and conduct of officials, and the relationships between them. There is a feeling that to share in this culture is also to share a common identity. This apparently all-embracing identity nevertheless carries within it all kinds of compartmentalization. The intellectual systems prevalent in daily Commission life make use of a stock of representations : certain recurrent, common concepts (the 'Community interest', for example, or 'subsidiarity'), and of stereotypes and '*idées valeurs*'<sup>4</sup>, which assert a hierarchy between activities or between groups. It is this intellectual system which interests the anthropologist. We need to emphasize the recurrent representations which are carried into the modes of behaviour and perceptions of officials. An individual official can see himself or herself both as participating in the all-embracing organization represented by the Commission and, at the same time, as being part of a smaller group (a DG).

The official has at least two contexts of belonging available -the Commission as a whole and one or other of its departments. The perceived layering of identities<sup>5</sup> here might seem to guarantee the Commission's own 'cultural cohesion'. However, it also generates strong centrifugal tendencies. Such tendencies are inevitably reinforced by the very special circumstances in which the institution has developed. After all, the Commission employs officials originating in all twelve Community countries. It employs nationals of different countries and it is both at the service of the Member States but always trying to act on behalf of a Community venture which is not necessarily identified with national interests: the Commission cannot be seen in the same way as the executives and administrative structures to which we are more generally accustomed.

---

4 L. Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme, une perspective anthropologique sur l'individualisme moderne* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1983), Chapter 6.

5 *Feuillette d'identités* - expression used by F. Héritier-Augé, in 'L'identité', séminaire de C. Lévi-Strauss (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1977).

Officials find themselves in situations in which they represent the Commission in opposition to their own country of origin: by virtue of their status and function, they embody a different entity from the one to which they might be deemed to be 'naturally' attached. This puts them in an ambiguous position, and it is their lot in relation to the outside world, in the state of permanent negotiation in which the Commission and the Member States are locked. Inside the Commission, the situation changes. Where different nationalities cohabit, a discourse of national differences resurfaces : north versus south, French- versus English-speakers, and so on. What are generally termed 'stereotypes' take on new life and appear to have empirical reality. Alongside the unity of the Community, there is also a plurality of cultures and relationships.

The diversity of languages and cultures obviously has its consequences: it introduces massive doses of 'otherness' into an organization which has as its purpose some form of integration, unification and harmonization, to use the most current expressions used by those in charge. The tensions caused by this coincidence of identity and otherness at the very heart of the Commission inevitably form part of this study. An approach of purely 'structuralist' ethnology of the Commission would be an inadequate basis on which to think through this situation. While this type of analysis highlights the stock of representations that the officials have at their disposal, we must also take account of the way in which they are manipulated in complex situations. This is why we have also applied a pragmatic approach throughout this study.

These tensions are very much a part of the complex and enriching universe of the Commission. In this universe, the "flow of information" is deemed to be very important. Here we touch not only on an organizational problem but also on power relationships. Informal aspects of power relationships are important, taking us beyond the organization charts and official hierarchies. We were able to observe networks and the construction of *hommes clés*, and many strategies hinging on access to information.

Anthropologists attach much importance to the length of their study. In our case, we stress, the time we were allowed seemed to us to be very limited in relation to the complexity of the object of study. This was probably the major handicap under which we had to labour, and it prevented us from developing certain aspects of the inquiry as thoroughly as we would have wished. We followed the methodological procedures of anthropology relying both on participant observation and the '*regard éloigné*' (Lévi-Strauss) a dialectic between immersion and distancing that enables us to construct the object of research scientifically.

It remains to be seen whether we have answered the questions put to us by those who commissioned this research. The progress of the inquiry and the reflections it threw up led us

to rework the questions, to test their pertinence, to extend them in the light of the material gathered. Take, for instance, the relative rarity of ritual and symbolic elaborations, which forcibly strikes anthropologists, who are commonly interested in this aspect of social activity. In all we hope we have encouraged some reflection and raised interesting questions. There may be a few new keys here to understanding the world of the Commission; and some aspects of the conventional wisdom about its staff may be put in question. The study also has the objective of redirecting the Commission's own thinking about its operation and the realities lived daily by its staff, whether positive or problematic.

## CHAPTER I: Is there a Commission culture?

While we are interested in the overall environment peopled by the Community's civil servants, the first part of our study focuses on the "house" (or *la maison*), an important category delineating and defining officials' group loyalties. We then go on to some perceptions of history and time.

### A society of houses

Different meanings are attached contextually to the notion of 'house' (or *la maison*), and it can have geographical significance or serve as moral identification. The 'house' can mean the Commission as a whole, or it can more commonly mean the 'DG', or Directorate General, or categories within this again.

### *In-house*

Once upon a time there was the Berlaymont ... This building once symbolized the Commission and was such a powerful image that some felt it imposed its identity on them: the "*Berlaycage*". The vertical stacking of departments leading up to the Secretariat-General and the Commissioners themselves gave a semblance of coherence to the whole. Officials felt they knew each other and their bosses better. It was a place where people could meet up. Waiting for the lifts to whisk them off to their offices, staff from all departments would chat in the hall. So many memories are associated with the Berlaymont - from the battle of the windows to the garage which was the trysting place for fantasy lovers.

Today the Berlaymont stands abandoned, a sad symbol of monstrous urban development, and the Commission and its officials are scattered to the four corners of Brussels. The "big house" which was the Commission is splintered into a multitude of "houses", some of them known by the name of the boss; and the fact of being located on a site for its own exclusive use can reinforce the department's sense of internal cohesion or of its difference from others. We outline here some of the perceptions and imagery involved to what constitutes the style of a Directorate-General.

In a garden city in the Evere neighbourhood, DG VIII (Cooperation and Development) officials feel somewhat remote from the centre of power. Ordinary communication difficulties hamper participation in interdepartmental group meetings and the circulation of information. This negative aspect is offset by the provision of new well-equipped premises; faxing is swifter than the internal mail service. The fax revolution has changed this department's perception of the world by placing headquarters/delegation links, and DG/Commission links, on the same time scale. This has reinforced this outward-facing DG's involvement with the world at large.

Working in DG VIII means having one's thoughts elsewhere. A glance at the decor in the corridors and into the open offices tells visitors where they are and what to expect from the specialists they meet. Headquarters works with its delegations on the one hand and with the ACP partners on the other.

The style of this department is that of a large family marked by history and generation gaps, recalling the model figures of the past. "*F's empire was dismantled; ... he was the senior French official in DG VIII, a typical product of overseas France ...*," said one German, while a Frenchman thought of him as "*a warm-hearted tyrant*". Different groups form around different personalities, thus giving substance to a pattern of paternalist relationships not without its own appeal. Individuals build up their own networks of relationships providing the basis of their activities, and this applies at all levels - from top to bottom. There is a warm and friendly atmosphere, staff know each other well and take the time to talk, and references to experiences in the ACP countries crop up in every conversation. The average age is lower, the relaxed environment is appreciated and chatting in the hallways is permitted. Considerable socializing takes place at work and outside: units lay on breakfast or drinks; arrivals, departures, job changes are always celebrated; all grades of staff contribute to a newsletter in which verses appear and humour is prized; staff invite each other to dinner and the children play together. This is combined with a rigid hierarchical structure which until recently depended on a bottom-up rather than a top-down flow of information. Bosses of whatever rank take a personal interest in dossiers; their competence and capacity for work is well-known. They are more accessible now than they used to be, and their mode of operation has changed: a hierarchical laying down of the law has given way to resolving conflicts at the most suitable level, possibly with the intervention of the assistants or of key figures who act as mediators. In the current upheaval associated with the change in relations between the Commissioner and the Director-General, the main thing is to see that the team spirit survives.

The vocabulary of family relationships expresses the strength of these bonds. Staff refer to the grandfather figure, or patriarch, around whom an inner circle is formed. Or staff at headquarters and in the delegations are referred to as members of an extended family. It is worth noting that since responsibility for the delegations was transferred to DG IA the language has changed: "*People in the delegations should realize that their friends are in DG VIII*". The shift from the category of *relation* to that of *friend* expresses the relative distancing involved.

For the outside world (the other Commission DGs) DG VIII is an "*ivory tower*", and this is because of the way this DG conceives the mission performed by its staff, economists or engineers: the development of the countries associated with the European Community under

the Lomé Convention. This is the realm of the European Development Fund (EDF): *"In the ACP countries the Commission is unheard of: the EDF is what counts"*. Staff in DG VIII perceive themselves as men and women working at the grass roots, the only ones in the Commission who know the true state of affairs (contradictory and pessimistic though it may be) of the areas in which they operate. After some thirty years, DG VIII has acquired all the tools needed for the task of managing autonomously the European Development Fund - a 12 billion-ECU operation which is outside the general budget. The DGs with which DG VIII does not have professional contacts are not regarded either as family or as friends. In the eyes of DG VIII, the antipodes is DG III.

Mansholt, the Commissioner of Agriculture, who conceived of DG VI as a self-contained entity with its own mini legal and financial services, special management structures (market organizations) and policy-making units, also wanted it to be independent. DG VI occupies a vast complex of buildings which to the layman seems to be a labyrinth of corridors where busy officials commonly refer to *"la grande maison"*, thus emphasizing the size of the sector for which they are responsible: *"We swallow up 52% of the Community budget ... worth 36 billion ECUs..."* Gigantic, powerful, the *"grande maison"* on the rue de la Loi is *"a huge fortress, a sort of empire"* where representatives of lobby groups and trade associations meet. *"Professionals come here to meet officials, to participate in expert committees or management committee meetings."* The machinery is well oiled: those concerned praise the effectiveness and precision of the arrangements which require perfect coordination between market specialists and lawyers and smooth cooperation with representatives of national government departments: *"It takes years to integrate the various parameters and work efficiently"*. DG VI staff see themselves as a key department, unlike *"bureaucrats who spend their days drafting regulations but are not responsible for managing anything"*. They differ from DG I, *"which has quantities of officials who travel the world and practise diplomacy while we work our hearts out and push up productivity to the limit"*.

In DG VI, there is a great emphasis on experience and a proven capacity to get things done. There is no desire to show a face of modernity to the world but instead to know and master specialist areas through claims to long experience and in-depth knowledge. Those in DG VI who are where the action is are there, they feel, because of a proven competence. Personalities have had time to develop, and some to dominate, but it is generally said that they balance each other out in the end. Conviviality is the desired image, and often the reality, with the idiom of family important. Paternalism is said to persist but there is also a sense of things having changed, with a hierarchy less marked than it once was.

Regional Policy in the form of DG XVI has a different look, *"on the other side of the*

*Cinquantenaire park*" - another reference to the rond-point Schuman, the Breydel and Charlemagne buildings as the centre of things. DG XVI's building seems to be lighter, more modern, cleaner; the difference in size hits one in the eye and the areas of activity are quickly identified. Although the budget does not equal Agriculture's, structural policies - of which regional policy is in the first line - have forged ahead. Now that the ERDF accounts for half the Structural Funds' resources, DG XVI is the lead department in the revision of regulations and takes an active part in redefining structural policy objectives and establishing criteria for determining what areas are eligible for Community aid. Officials in this DG feel the wind is in their sails and are aware that their task is to promote the redistribution of wealth and solidarity in a world dominated by liberal views about competition and the free market, while in the meantime social policy in Europe founders. They operate inside the Community in the same way as DG VII operates outside. The "similarity" of their tasks tends to bring officials together, at least as far as ideals go, and distinguish them from staff in DGs with other concerns: DG XVI considers DG IV *"something of a bête noire: they are always trying to make trouble for us"*.

In DG XVI the manager-type predominates, modelled on the person of its Director-General: dynamic and efficient, reluctant to spend time on anything other than the task in hand. Then there are the academic types, the economists and geographers. All have backgrounds in higher education and apply their capital of knowledge to the planning and management of specific policies. They are not obsessed with getting results; they regard Europe almost as an experiment and may even express some doubts regarding future achievements. Neither type has an axe to grind, they both value a logical approach, reject extremes and have a rather austere attitude to everyday life. In DG XVI there are no excessive formalities, nor is it nonconformist; it is, in self-perception, a small trouble-free world. Officials are young, interpersonal relations are more direct and informal, though a little distant. Staff keep their private lives to themselves and work more separately than elsewhere.

DG I (External Relations) is divided between three Members of the Commission and three Directors-General: the "houses" are still intact, but the intellectual and geographical boundaries are poorly drawn according to the "inhabitants". Given the relative confusion of the designations (DG I, DG IA and DG North/South Relations), officials prefer to use their boss's name to identify their department - *"maison Krenzler"*, *"maison Burghardt"*, *"maison Prat"*; or *"maison Brittan"*, or *"maison Van den Broek"*, *"maison Marin"*.

DG I has been expanding for several years as a result of the redirection of its activities towards the former Communist countries. Although it has not internalized the break between its economic and its political activities, it has easily absorbed the schism between the part

involved in the North/South Dialogue, which maintains established and competitive contacts with DG VIII, and the part concerned with the rest of the world. The two Directors-General and their staff, who occupy neighbouring buildings near the Commission centre, have defined their fields of interaction and areas of jurisdiction. This is the area of diplomacy and technical assistance. At the same time DG I harbours a very specific and, according to some, not very diplomatic sector, which is concerned with the Community's trade policy. It is located in a building far from the others and close to the DG involved with the internal market, and its areas of interest differ from those of the rest of DG I. And as for DG IA, which was established after a radical break-up, it invites a wide variety of comments regarding the calibre of its staff and its mode of operation.

Whether concerned with anti-dumping, the Israeli-Palestinian talks or the Latin America joint commission, staff feel they belong to an aristocratic and powerful DG, operating at the most exalted levels of international diplomacy and responsible for a variety of tasks which are attractive to the rest of the Commission. However, the fact that not one of the three Directorates-General has all its various departments on a single patch is universally seen as a problem which goes back a long way.

A degree of formality is to be observed in DG I. A northerner has always headed one part and the other has been headed by a Spanish diplomat for several years, and both have a well-established sense of hierarchy: use of correct forms of address and of the "vous" form in French predominate, and first names and the "tu" form are reserved for close friends. Officials cultivate secrecy, they feel they are working on matters of State, on political affairs, and there is an air of urgency. There is little time for relaxing in the office, and individuals identify with their own sector of activity and indicate it by the decor inside the office, never outside.

DG I is divided into three "houses" and harbours a variety of "cultures", even if the various DGs concerned with external relations share common patterns of behaviour, also found in DG VIII. The lack of sharp conceptual distinctions reinforces identification at the practical level by reference to department: *"I work in Tacis ... It's a Phare meeting ... We should go along to anti-dumping"*. These remarks illustrate modes of identification which can be found elsewhere in the Commission. When such in-house expressions are used outside, the layman is mystified: *"Who is Mr PECO? ... Where can I find Madame Droits de l'Homme? ... Go to the Sénégal desk"*.

A nostalgic expression of *"la grande maison"* draws on a perception of the Commission as something whole and strong. The contextual, conceptual breakdown of this into many "houses" (or, more commonly, *maisons*) gathered around their bosses highlights some of the



forces at work in the Commission. The separation between the centre and the "houses" underlines structural and functional differences between the Commission (or College) and its administrative units, or between *cabinets* and departments, and this brings to the fore the question of the relative autonomy of the "houses" as opposed to the notions of cohesion, consistency and coordination dear to the Commission and its staff. It is not so much the organization of work that counts here as the perceptions and images making up the cultural universe of those involved.

Some of the DGs are aware of their relative novelty - DG XVI, for instance; others feel themselves to be in some sense the 'real' Europe, both there from the beginning and part of the 'nuts and bolts'. Historiographical and perceived epistemological priorities join forces here to offer a powerful space of self-definition. This would be the case for DG VI, for example, and for DG III (Internal Market and Industrial Affairs). It is DG III which has, in the perception of many of its own officials, produced the Internal Market on which so much else depends. *"What is Europe if not a market?"* Moreover: *"This is new wine in old bottles. We are the Common Market. That's what Europe is: the Common Market"*.

The market can find symbolic coherence in relation to other DGs, not only in historical relation to those deemed to be newcomers to the scene, but also in contradistinction to those deemed to be less close to the coalface. For example, from DG III, DG I (External Relations) is perceived *"...to be noble, bronzed and sophisticated but flighty..."*. DG V (Social Affairs) is talked of as *"idealistic and disorganized"*. Through relational images of this kind, DG III becomes its own model of self-conscious and down-to-earth rationality, and a model of realism and order.

There is much in this imagery which is congruent with the relative epistemological statuses of economics and culture, or economics and the arena of the social; and political priorities have tended to leave this epistemology relatively unquestioned and intact. DG V has had, in relative terms, little claim to priority in the European arena, and this lack of attention has encouraged internal demoralization and a relatively high turnover of staff in several sectors at the lower levels. For those who have stayed, a special commitment to the social arena has been required.

In DG V, political priorities and aspects of national and language difference referred to elsewhere in this report have also encouraged an unusually quick turnover of Directors-General in a short space of time. For those who wish to claim order, realism and rationality for themselves in the Commission, DG V is always an easy target against which to define oneself, and it is a frequent point of reference. Gender imagery also plays a part, for DG V

contains the Equal Opportunities Unit, a unit unique in the Commission in that it is staffed almost entirely by women. A male definition of the world in which women are perceived to be the point of entry of social disorder is something to which anthropologists are, in their various studies, well accustomed. In other words, women are often seen to be a source of trouble. DG V has a relatively large number of women in posts of responsibility. Indeed, many of its successes are deemed to be those of the women who work there. DG V, therefore, is bound to be seen as a symbolic source of trouble, a metaphor of disorder.

The DG has more recently been taken over by a new acting Director-General. This has encouraged a sense of change, a sense of newness. A new Commissioner, a new post-Maastricht impetus, the prospect of enlargement to include socially conscious countries, plus internal restructuration and self-consciously hard work: these aspects are evident in the self-image that DG V officials are now constructing. Unlike DG VI, DG V has, it is felt, its future before it. But it also has its past. Officials know that there is a whole metaphorical complex, a whole external image, to disentangle: "*Like women, we have to work harder!*"

DG III, on the other hand, has long enjoyed a high reputation and is often said to attract a high calibre of staff. Women are scarcely present above the lowest grades in the A category. In the A grades, the DG is composed largely of economists, lawyers and officials with a natural science background. The scientists complain that it is generally in that order that officials are tacitly ranked. Dark suits are common, sometimes with an accompanying air of self-conscious gravity. The status of the discourses from which the 'market' is constructed, notably economic theory with its assumptions or aspirations of rationality, perfect knowledge and perfect competition, sometimes imposes a mood of seriousness which would be out of place in other DGs. At the same time, there has been high morale, a sense of being at the centre, base and forefront of the creation of Europe, and plenty of joking and fun. This fun cannot easily, however, find a space in the external imagery of a DG reputed to deal solely with products, reason, technicalities and figures.

Through the positive imagery that the 'market' can evoke, DG III finds its own unity and coherence. Internally, however, the market is inevitably not quite so unitary. Some form of 'perfect competition', that formal emptiness of theoretical economics, remains the elusive but not uncontroversial goal for many (while DG V and DG XI are left, in their own view, to pick up the pieces). At the same time, trade barriers, 'distortion' of the market, and the level playing field all take their meaning in different systems of ideas, different ideas about an impersonal, rational market or one helped by the hand of intervention, and different approaches, old and new, to regulation or legislation. Any questions, doubts and differences can dissolve into unity again when it is noted that debate is healthy, that discussion is a

necessary condition of progress. There is always DG VI, too, into which the madder aspects of the 'managed market' can be poured, and DG III's rationality thereby reasserted. However, DG III has undergone in 1993 two major upheavals at once practical and symbolic. Firstly, the deadline of '1992' passed. This moved the DG from a largely regulatory or legislative role to a largely managerial one - overseeing the market it had helped to construct. Secondly, however, *"we lost the Internal Market"*. A new DG was created, appropriating this title. DG III was left with 'Industry'. *"We are still the Internal Market really"*, it was said, but a sense of historical, political, practical and symbolic loss was marked.

The new DG that had appropriated the title 'Internal Market' was DG XV, and was in effect composed of the old DG XV (Financial Institutions and Company Law) plus the 'horizontal' sectors of DG III. The new DG XV became known as 'Internal Market and Financial Services'. From being a small DG of about 120 people, the size of DG XV suddenly trebled with the new DG III arrivals. Neither the new title nor this large new influx pleased every one at first, however, and the new Director-General eventually organized a special seminar to try to bring people together and to allow them to get to know each other. The arrival of another DG had effectively allowed an old DG XV identity to take shape. DG XV had been cosy, it was said, and a part of the Commission where everyone knew each other. It had been like a 'home' or a 'family'. Women, it was claimed, had been relatively visible, and the DG had a woman Commissioner, too. Suddenly, in walked the self-confident "strangers" from DG III, their self-confidence intruding here as arrogance. *"They don't even say 'hello' in the corridors!"* The largely male influx appeared 'macho' even to some of the men of the old DG XV, but the old DG XV could fight back: *"We have built the Internal Market, too, you know!"*

In the meantime, with the 'Internal Market' title gone and the rush of the 1985 White Paper legislation over, a broad spectrum of industrial sectors remained as the new DG III, bolstered only by the 'sexy' novelty of Information Technology (newly arrived from DG XIII). Wherein now was the coherence? Some did not mind the loss of the 'horizontal' sectors dealing with the Market since horizontal/vertical often seemed to elide in some respects with upper/lower echelons of the hierarchy. Others, however, felt keenly a loss of overall impetus and vision. Industrial policy? *"Is there one?"* more than one official asked. *"Industrial policy. Yes. And what is it?"* And then there was subsidiarity, which seemed to inject further muddles into the formerly clear, legislative functions of the DG. Initiatives from the Director-General and the organization of a DG seminar for open debate helped to create the space for a new coherence. However, in the context of these changes, other DGs began to seem enviable: *"It must be so easy in DG VIII - a clear policy to gather around, the Lomé Convention and so on"*. And now DG V could appeal: *"At least there is something there to get passionate about"*.

## House Staff

Some officials are born "Europeans": their parents may be of different nationalities or they may be the children of a Community official. Others may have been exposed to "European" environments when attending university or through living in frontier areas. They may have been "European" since childhood and have no strong national roots any longer. These, however, are relatively rare.

Every Directorate-General includes a good many officials who were attracted to the idea of a European public service and studied at the College of Europe in Bruges before finding a job to their liking in the Commission thanks to their own old boy network. Others, from a variety of backgrounds, find a post after a "stage" (or training period) - a useful preliminary to being selected from the reserve list of successful competition candidates. Officials then spend varying amounts of time before settling down and finding job satisfaction.

Apart from the really old hands, most Commission staff have been taken on after a competition (*concours*), and the competitive nature of the exams is increasing. Appointments are made to established posts, or to temporary posts for three years which can be extended in various ways. The 14,000 Commission officials include 700 or 800 'national experts' seconded from their home government departments - and who have a different perception of the Commission. They often view Europe from the perspective of their national public service career.

There once was a time when people came to the Commission with positivist ideals, especially French and German officials of a certain age: "*We were motivated by the idea of building a Europe that would be solid and would guarantee peace after the horrors of war.*" This generation has left its mark on the Commission, especially in DG VI, which embodied the Community's first positive achievements. We sensed a certain nostalgia in the officials interviewed when they thought back to the early days - since when so much seems to have changed: DG VI has become ponderous, and the recent CAP reforms, disgruntled farmers and criticism of Eurocrats contrast with the euphoria of times gone by. In DG VI, the development of new policies, the importance given to the environment - all go to reinforce the impression that "*The DG's future is behind it*". Symptomatic of this is the fact that young officials are now less attracted to this DG and some leave it for others with more appeal.

Different criteria apply for entry to the European public service from those for entry to the national public service. Officials are motivated as much by the international aspect as by entry into a career with good prospects and interesting opportunities. But some twenty years after the initial, pioneering era, values had changed. The almost militant, idealistic approach of the

early days gave way to a need to get through the competition as a means of escaping from the poor prospects of the national labour market. Material attractions became important: the high salary and stable employment drew young graduates to Brussels. Not until the Delors era did "building Europe" again become an attractive and valued prospect and working for the Community was again held in high esteem.

Although these motives can seem to humanize the Eurocrats' image, inside this small world old hands criticize the new arrivals for their lack of enthusiasm, lack of imagination, excessive bureaucracy and pushiness. Besides the successful competition candidates who have been lucky enough to find a post, some officials land up at the Commission on account of their "expertise". This always requires other factors, however, such as a chance meeting (getting themselves known) or political support (being recommended), which has given them a different perspective from those with an idealistic approach to European integration.

In Directorates-General responsible for development or for external relations, entry into the Commission is often a result of having specialized in one of the specific areas (sectoral or geographical) they handle. The overseas experience of French and also German, Italian or Belgian civil servants has counted for so much in a DG such as DG VIII, for example, that it has gained a neocolonialist image which has proved difficult to shake off despite changes of direction and efforts to modernize its policy. In this DG, experience in the development field, whether academic or practical, is valued at all levels of the hierarchy in the case of experts (recruited under contract by consultants accredited to the Commission) or even non-Community civil servants in training at the Commission. This high level of specialization, combined with the special nature of development policies, means that both operational staff and policy-makers who perceive themselves as "developers" are somewhat ignorant of the rest of the Commission.

Other factors come into play also in explaining how officials came to be at the Commission in the departments responsible for external relations, which are regarded as the most interesting on several counts. Luck would seem to have little to do with entering a universe as difficult of access as the Commission, yet several officials claim it played a part: the chance reading of a competition notice, an initially temporary post becoming permanent, the result of an unwanted transfer ... Whatever the mode of entry, officials become identified with their work, for the best where there is upward mobility, for the worst where there is enforced stagnation. Although people's studies encourage a degree of specialization (e.g. legal or economic), opportunities for transfers do enable officials to switch fields. They may be able to move into a job that they could not have occupied straight away for lack of specialized competitions in that field in the past. There are so many examples of changes in direction, from generalist to

specialist, in Commission departments that the original degree only plays a part in the initial selection process which precedes the more important, on-the-job training from the old hands.

Apart from departments such as those devoted to Research, which recruit specialists from specific competitions, the fact that generalist competitions can open the door to specialized occupations supports the perception of the Directorate-General as a training ground which reproduces a particular culture. This is one aspect of "house" identity and an interesting feature of the Commission. For example, it is said of DG VIII that *"it was the school for middle managers in the field of cooperation"* for the entire Commission.

A shared culture in a DG may be seen by some to depend on the convergence of vocations, staff training and adaptation of working methods to the matter in hand. Identities are created in this way. The various departments, each with its own speciality, constitute different facets of the Commission, which is then itself part of another constellation - the European institutions - whose staff are also members of the European public service, amongst whom Commission staff are seen as distinct.

Bound by the Staff Regulations or victims of an illusion, officials are taken on for life - the Commission awards a medal and extra days' holiday after twenty and after thirty years service - unless they are retired under Article 50 or they resign. Some leave in midstream, like the Spaniards suffering from 'culture shock' and stress at work. Others become almost invisible, being so few.

Some turn out to be high-flyers; others are described as "rejects" by some senior officials, and in some cases the term is applied to the failures of national recruitment procedures. Some are "burnt out" for various reasons. The "house" is replaced by a "machine" when the individual ceases to feel part of the group project.

Men are at the controls of this machine. Women account for no more than about 10% of the senior staff at the Commission, one out of 17 Members of the Commission, two out of over 20 Directors-General and equally few directors. Few women are in the middle management positions that can seem to open the way to independence. 1993 was the first year in which two women held the job of head of division in DG VIII. On the other hand, in several departments, women hold the A3-grade job of assistant to the DG, a key position in the internal operation of departments but which is subordinate to the directors and Directors-General they are assisting.

The scarcity of women in key posts, including in the *cabinets* - where there are only two women heads and one deputy head - leads to an exclusively masculine use of names of titles and functions. In the middle and lower grades, however, where women are well represented, one does hear the feminine equivalents. The general imbalance in the number of men and women in the various grades is very obvious, but the Commission is not alone in being affected by a phenomenon which appears in all national government departments and power structures.

While women's levels of skills and presence on the labour market vary from one Member State to another, their apparent preference for the civil service leads them to take up jobs in the lower categories in great numbers. There are various stated reasons in the Commission, or elsewhere, for why women are in a tiny minority in senior posts and in political positions: these include male reluctance to recruit women to the higher echelons, and women's fears that the pace of work, imagined levels of responsibility and male competitiveness will blight their domestic existence.

It is felt by some that the male organization of work should be reconsidered, as should the selective recruitment, establishment and promotion procedures. In the interests of equal opportunities for men and women, the Commission recognizes that it should introduce in-house the policies it proposes to the Member States. It has accordingly adopted a succession of three positive action programmes for female staff at the Commission. Consciousness-raising activities in the Member States to encourage women to apply for the open competitions have not boosted the number of successful candidates recruited. The number of male and female applicants has tended to even out, but there is still a great imbalance in the number of successful candidates, 80% of whom are men. The type of tests and the composition of selection boards, massively male, are felt to play a part. Likewise, in the career prospects women can hope for, male domination on the appointment and promotion bodies and the lack of consensus on the inclusion of criteria specific to women make it unlikely if not impossible that these differences will be corrected. Few senior officials and male trade unionists are capable of introducing or defending positive discrimination for women at work, and it is women who continue to bear the burden of child rearing and housework. Some of the differences in the attitudes of both men and women at the Commission also evokes aspects of the North/South divide discussed in the next chapter.

The organization of staff into the various categories corresponding to basic posts (set out in the Staff Regulations) - director-general, director, head of division, administrator (A); administrative assistant (B); secretary, typist and clerical officer (C) chef de groupe, ouvrier (D) - does not have the effect of creating in people's minds the sharp distinctions which are

drawn between, for example, *encadrement*, *conception* and *exécution* in the French civil service. There is more solidarity between grades, witness the social relations that are built up around the administrative unit both at work and outside. These good-neighbourly relations do not alter the difference in treatment of men and women - for example, in forms of address and the unequal esteem in which "competence", "authority" and "availability" are held. People - in the Commission and elsewhere - accustomed to the association of a boss and his secretary will treat a woman in a managerial post basically as a woman. Women, on the other hand, tend to separate the job they do from any feminine connotation: "*People should be judged in the light of their abilities and the performance of their duties*", said one official who acknowledged that men would treat her with a degree of gallantry not exhibited towards each other. "*I am a woman doing a job*", said a woman of a different national background, endorsing the first speaker's view that for promotion purposes "*it is a person's ability not his or her sex that counts*".

With respect to relations between the sexes, the situation in the Commission does not differ in any significant respect from that obtaining in the Member States. But there is some sign of change. Women in assistant jobs are no longer automatically put in charge of staff management (for which they are supposed to have a special gift) but may be given political matters to look after. At more senior levels, they have not yet been given responsibility for important areas, and this easily suggests to some a coherence in "men's attitudes", whatever their background.

Seemingly flexible relations between upper and lower echelons of the Commission's staff structure may be a product of cultural mix: authoritarian or contemptuous behaviour is generally not tolerated. While some nationalities are deemed to work better in teams and others to require a hierarchical structure, styles of command may change in practice. The British and Spanish are discovering "hierarchy", and the French are learning the management skills and teamwork which are felt to be almost second nature to the Dutch.

Marital links within the Commission and within Directorates-General affect the mutual perception of employment categories. Men in category A often have wives in category B or C; category A women are married to men in the same category or men working outside the Commission, while women in *cabinet* posts often have no family responsibilities. Sometimes marriage takes place as a result of contacts at work, but the more common situation is that the wife joins the Commission after the husband has already been working there. The provision of crèches and the European Schools for their children, combined with the relatively tedious life of an expatriate in Brussels, are factors cited to explain why women take up employment but maintain a traditional marriage structure.



The spouse's position in the Community environment gives cause for such real concern that associations have been set up to help officials' spouses (men and women) to find a job, to help to keep male officials' wives busy, and even to help resolve problems arising as a result of expatriation, or travel in the case of delegation staff. It is not so much the need for a second wage packet as the wish to have the benefit of a status which is engendered by the break with national social and professional ties.

The general calibre of staff is high, starting with the skills - linguistic and other - of category C staff, which gives the Commission an image that is more intellectual than executive. This is especially true of the political Directorates-General rather than of the management or regulatory departments. It also reinforces the feeling of women staff - in a majority in this category - that they are not given adequate consideration.

Secretaries sometimes attend meetings their heads of unit organize with their A and B staff. Their duties do not always come up to expectations, but their competence and willingness to take on responsibility are well known. A distinction is made between outside staff and officials: the former are said to be more motivated than the latter, who, being protected by the Staff Regulations, cannot be mercilessly exploited. Some women in category C struggle to pass competitions to obtain more interesting posts, but some may be put off, it is felt, by the thought that their family life will suffer.

The division of labour within a unit and relations between staff vary widely. This is sometimes seen to depend on the boss's "personality". The days are long gone when secretaries would have to type the same document ten times over: the advent of photocopiers and word processors has changed all that. But not all secretaries find they are entrusted with interesting duties, nor are they all willing to take on duties that do not correspond to their grade. On the other hand, administrators are not always keen on doing their own photocopying. The style of work organization of managerial staff can depend more on an individual's age than on his or her national background.

Established for better or worse, and enjoying good living conditions in Brussels, Commission officials are aware that they are outsiders and that they are criticized by the Belgians, with whom many feel that they have no more than superficial relations. This reinforces their feelings of belonging to a special world.

## **ENCLAVES OF SOCIABILITY**

The relative exteriority of officials in relation to Brussels is a constant source of anxiety. Anxiety becomes even more perceptible when officials contemplate the future, look ahead to retirement, or wonder what will become of their children - children who were not educated in the country of origin, who do not speak their "*native tongue*" but a language which is a "*hotchpotch*" of European influences.

Officials note that they may experience the principle of a cultural melting pot and geographical balance at work on a daily basis - "*culturally enriching*", they say - but they display a tendency to congregate with those who speak the same language and/or felt to share the same culture. This tendency is particularly strong in certain departments - DG XVI for instance, where the "rapporteurs" get together in Greek, Spanish, Portuguese or Italian groups, or DG I, where southerners or Spanish-speakers look after relations with Latin America and English-speakers take care of the rest of the world. Outside the office, acquaintances are seen and known to form around language, and political or religious persuasion. There may also be perceived differences between dominant and dominated languages, Latin and Nordic cultures, wine-drinkers and beer-drinkers, socialism and liberalism, Catholic and Protestant ideology, and so on.

Each nationality tends to have a club, a network, an association of European civil servants, even a church, frequented by those who find a multinational environment most destabilizing - more commonly the Irish and the Danes, rather than the Germans or the Italians. Not all officials experience the need to be among their own in this sense.

Membership of the Irish Club gives access to news, helps people to keep up with developments back in Ireland, to remain in touch with perceived "roots". Similarly, the Dutch and the Danes tend to seek out cafés in Brussels where they can meet casually. The Benelux Portuguese Club brings together diplomats from the embassies and the representations to NATO and the European Community. It organizes dinners with talks by prominent speakers and has intellectual and social ambitions. The French tend to join political associations or, if they are ENA graduates, their own "old boys' network". The Spanish are said to have formed a small colony but their traditional, nocturnal socializing does not easily survive the climate in Brussels or the pace of work at the Commission. The British often see no point in joining clubs in Brussels because they are members of clubs in London.

Not all officials seek to join a club, the sole exception being sports clubs, which attract a high proportion of Commission staff: the Dutch Hockey Club, said to be "very typical", the German Aikido Club, the Irish Golf Club ("The Wild Geese") to relax in international company, the

local tennis club and swimming pool, the Château Sainte Anne, and so on. One way or another, officials manage to take advantage of the sports facilities on offer in Brussels and are ardent theatre-, opera- and cinema-goers. This approach to city living is said to make contact with Belgian neighbours difficult, partly because of the segregation of residential areas favoured by Commission staff, partly because of the local "caste" system which is said to exclude foreigners who are neither Walloons nor Flemings, freethinkers nor Catholics, nor aristocrats ... The Belgians and the Eurocrats have separate social circuits; they both use the term *communautaire*, but it means different things for each. This is important because, we were told, *"officials' perceptions of the value of what they do is heavily influenced by the image that Belgians in general, and the people of Brussels in particular, have of the Community"*.

The Community's accommodation policy is seen as being at the root of the problem: *"What can the city of Brussels do faced with such powerful institutions?"* Relative earnings, the purchasing power of 15,000 to 20,000 officials on the one hand and that of the local population on the other, is another source of malaise according to some. European civil servants are regarded as privileged: exemption from Belgian income tax (which is replaced by a Community tax deducted at source and transferred to the Community budget), the special EUR car-plates, the level of salaries and allowances, and other advantages - all of these were cited as possible explanations for local resentment. The official line, supported by many, is that good conditions are necessary *"to attract the best people and have a public service that is beyond reproach"*, as a Belgian trade unionist said. *"Even with our salaries it is difficult to attract Danes, who do very nicely at home"*. Others try to restate the problem by relating Community salaries to the salaries that individual Member States pay to their expatriate staff rather than salaries in the home civil service.

The 'special' nature of the European civil service and the Commission is an important self-perception. The trade unions invoke this special nature, for example, to defend acquired rights, notably "the method" for calculating pay. The question of integration in Brussels life is perceived in various but related ways. A Greek woman, for example, who never gets home before 8 p.m. said that it was impossible for her to meet her neighbours. Linked by the telephone to her family in Greece, she lives by and for the Commission. A Portuguese official claimed that Belgians do nothing to help Eurocrats to integrate: *"They could at least have bilingual water and electricity bills"*.

## AN ORDERED UNIVERSE

The Commission is not merely the juxtaposition of segments of territory built around the professional and private lives of its staff. It is unique unto itself. Its address is the address for all staff, with all incoming and outgoing correspondence transiting through the central mail department which is responsible for distribution. The *Guide des Services*, the Commission's Directory, and the in-house telephone book, provide a picture of the Commission's activities, helping staff to find their way through the conceptual framework and to pinpoint the individuals they want to speak to. The most informative of these sources is the Directory, which sets out the hierarchical structure, highlights the relative importance, in terms of numbers of units, of each Directorate-General and Directorate, and reveals the lines of demarcation which serve to identify staff. One of the ambitions of A staff is to have their names listed in the Directory. It is a status symbol.

The Directory picture of the institution can be interpreted at a number of levels. Although informative in many respects, two elements are conspicuous by their absence. As far as the Directory is concerned, Eurocrats are asexual and stateless. This ideological choice highlights the perceived need to soft-pedal nationality, but it also reflects male dominance of professional structures. Titles (Mr, Mrs, Miss or Ms) are dropped and all that remain are initials, intelligible in all languages. The aim was neutrality of a kind. But failure to indicate gender sits ill, some feel, with the Commission's positive action programme for its female staff.

The most obvious structures of identity are the different DGs, themselves divided into directorates, units (divisions) and sections. To these must be added ad hoc structures to deal with priorities: task forces, agencies, study units etc. Within these, yet further structures, such as interdepartmental working parties, are created as work demands.

Rational work organization might seem to be imposed on staff by these structures, but they are not without problems: *"One has the impression of living in a cell of a big organism. The only escape is to kill the DG or jump out of the window. The individual has no sense of continuity in his work. Everything changes, and it is only later that you discover that the course of action you recommended was rejected in favour of another. This creates a sense of insecurity and toughens the less sensitive."*

In a DG there are sometimes two Deputy Director-Generals with responsibilities divided between them. In DG VIII, for instance, there is one concentrating on policy, the management of instruments and financing, and another who presides over the FED and relations with ACP countries. Those working under each of these two Deputy Director-Generals take on their own distinct identity: *"policy-makers and thinkers"* on the one hand,

and "geographers and technicians" on the other. There are two directorates for Africa, one for the Caribbean and the Pacific. Everything would be neat and clear-cut were it not for the asides placing one activity or another under the direct responsibility of one of the Deputy Directors-General - and the special advisers. These speak volumes about the difficulty of making structures less rigid while preserving internal consistency over a number of years. "There is an organization chart on paper and an organization chart on the ground. You need to know how to work them" was a frequent comment here and indeed in other DGs.

In DG I ("*maison*" Krenzler") three Deputy Directors-General and one Director-General *ad personam* share 11 directorates and 42 units. The "sectoral" and "geographical" distinction is similar to that found in DG VIII. The directorates responsible for Mediterranean, Latin American and Asian countries and those for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS rub shoulders with the rest of the developed world and live under the same roof as those responsible for policy and sectoral issues. Close by it seems, but reporting direct to the Director-General, is the directorate responsible for external economic policy. Until the common foreign and security policy is up and running, this is the only directorate of this vast DG with responsibility for managing a Community policy. Its responsibilities are handled by separate ministries in the Member States and its *modus operandi* is quite different from that of the DG as a whole. Like so many aspects of Commission structure, this apparent anomaly is one for which officials can supply historical explanation.

The organization of DG I has special interest. The letter of the alphabet carried by each directorate is deemed to illustrate the historical development of the DG. First comes GATT (Directorate A), then relations with the United States (Directorate B), then external trade (Directorate C) ... with Directorate K (North-South dialogue) bringing up the rear. Also, each organization chart is no more than a snapshot. Discussions with senior staff suggested that structures and instruments were constantly evolving from an ideological point of view, and form the axes around which the department changes and develops.

DG XVI has been reorganized following the reform of the Structural Funds. Until 1988 there were three directorates: Directorate A (Guidelines and Priorities) responsible for periodic reports on the socio-economic situation of the regions, analysis of the regional impact of Community policies and the coordination of regional policies; Directorate B (Programmes and Integrated Operations); and Directorate C (Project-based Assistance, Conversion and Endogenous Development). The main purpose of the reorganization was to highlight the various regional policy Objectives: each unit in the three directorates concerned deals with one or more countries depending on the scale of assistance. For Objective 1, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece and Ireland each account for a unit in either Directorate B or Directorate C.

Within Directorate D, by contrast, the units responsible for Objectives 2 and 5b each manage several countries simultaneously, since the programmes are not so extensive.

The reorganization had the effect of accentuating the divide between planning and programming on the one hand and management on the other. It is true that there had already been a distinction between guidelines and priorities (Directorate A) on the one hand and operations (Directorates B and C) on the other. But the growth of the funds administered by DG XVI has added considerably to the monitoring workload. *"When I started working here I was a bit disappointed because I thought that I would be involved in programming too. But administration takes most of my time and there is little if any policy-making"*. This comment by a Directorate C official reflects the situation on the ground. Staff saw a clear divide between the "operational" staff of Directorates B, C and D, and the "policy-makers" of Directorate A. This divide has consequences for everyone working in the DG.

Sometimes the "hierarchy" can feel like a factor making for cohesion here. Each individual, it was explained, is assigned a place in the structure, the key positions being occupied by A staff. Roles are clearly identified within these DGs. Some staff have a geographic function, others a planning function, for example. Some manage Community objectives and work with regional and national authorities in the Member States, others manage aid programmes and work with the outside world at government or other levels. Some produce analyses and assessments for their Commissioners, others draft documents, manage budget headings, human resources etc.

These little worlds are part of the same working organization, with a discipline that formally applies to everybody: working hours, division of labour, obedience to hierarchical superiors, duty of discretion, trade union representation, staff representation on various committees etc. In this respect, the Commission could seem to have much in common with national bureaucracies. As Max Weber wrote: *"The 'spirit' of rational bureaucracy has normally the following general characteristics: (a) Formalism ... (2) There ... is the tendency of officials to treat their official function from what is substantively a utilitarian point of view ..."*<sup>6</sup> But such a description of the organization's operating rules takes no account of the web of relationships that give the institution and the identities that develop within it their daily reality and significance. The Commission has its own culture. It is the endorsement of the same ideals and values that cements relationships or is it quite simply the sharing of a political space?

---

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Willich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 226.

## TIME AND MEMORY

*"Things move much more quickly at the Commission than in a national government department. We keep pushing ahead; we never look back. It's like driving without a rear-view mirror."* Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman launched this venture just after the Second World War. History has weighed heavily on the development of the DGs. Everyone involved seems able to recall an heroic period in the 1960s, the invention of Community policies, working through the night, bosses and secretaries sharing sandwiches. In those days it was more exciting to be in the office than at home. Brussels was making its mark. The experience of the 'pioneers' is reconstructed in this way by the longest-serving staff in the oldest DGs. In some DGs, in DG VI and DG VIII, for example, it is admitted that things are not what they were with their areas no longer at the centre of things, or their DGs no longer seen as attractive. The DGs riding high now include DG XVI and DG I, where the political dimension and openings to the East are seen to mark a fresh step towards European integration. There has been a general move to reorganize the Commission along sectoral and political lines, and some staff feel *"betrayed"*, as in the case of DG XXII which was abolished in December 1992; others working in the external relations area fear for their future.

Staff may be conscious of *"building world history"*, but the process of translating a messianic venture into concrete action gives the permanent impression of a task unfinished. Enlargement has encouraged this feeling. One question which haunts staff who have been with the Commission since the early days, since Europe was "the Six", is whether all the lessons have been learnt from previous enlargements. They are well aware of the policy changes that followed the accession of the United Kingdom and Denmark and wonder how far European integration should go.

Faced with a sovereign Commission decision affecting the future, staff are discreet. Situations of this kind are indicative of a more general attitude to time and history at the Commission. Developments must be digested without too much comment, but decisions nevertheless have to be acted upon.

For some, all this is a way of hiding reality, of withdrawing, as if the pursuit of action and efficiency left no room for reflection. *"We must press ahead; the pace of work is dictated by the short term"*, said a DG XVI official. For some, it is as if the Commission were incapable of working out its own relationship with history, as if it were torn between two extremes: to vindicate itself by emphasizing the past, by harking back to the pioneering days; or alternatively, to erase the memory of periods of conflict, however, recent, once and for all.

*"Driving without a rear-view mirror"* could be said, in this sense, to suppress reflexivity in an institution that is constantly being challenged by the other institutions, by the Member States and by the general public. The need for reflexivity is nevertheless openly claimed, and can be seen in a tendency to longwindedness, in concentration on the detail of past events, and in complaints and reflections about why the need for urgency leaves so little time for analysis.

It is exciting when things move quickly. But the chain of events is not always under the players' control. Individuals can feel themselves to be working frenetically with no opportunity to assess the rationality of what they are doing. A Portuguese official, for instance, claimed that he was forced to work *"against the clock. Nobody appreciates a job well done; all that counts is meeting deadlines set by the Commission's partners - the Council and the Member States"*.

Throughout the Commission the rationality of action comes up against the pace of commitments. The time constraints imposed by the financial year, and the changeover from one Commission to another are two poles defining the short and the long term respectively. Four years has been an important symbolic span in officials' perceptions of time, a long term with little space for reflection other than on its passing.

Any article, speech or piece about the Commission generally begins with a reference to its role as guardian of the Treaties. Similarly, when they speak about the work of departments, officials themselves begin with a reference to this history. Certain key markers crop up regularly: the Single Act, the Single Market, the Lomé Convention, the tenth EDF, the *n*th generation of international agreements. At a certain point, everything telescopes and secretaries stop dealing with emergencies and turn to their boss's priorities instead - inside the Commission, that is. Outside, however, the other institutions constantly question the Commission's goodwill, accusing it of being dilatory in transmitting dossiers. The "pressure of time" is attributed to a number of factors which include: insufficient human resources to deal with a growing workload; inbuilt difficulties at the preparatory stage attributable to national differences (lengthy external consultations, misunderstandings, professional rivalry); and the need to translate everything before documents can be presented to the Commission and Member States' representatives.

Some dossiers take years to come to fruition. Presidency initiatives, however, can complete the course in two months. The Commission's negotiators prepare the background papers and, as we saw with GATT, end up by working non-stop under a stream of deadlines. This strange process of the Commission stems not only from internal work organization but from the nature of its relations with the other institutions and, more important, with the Member States which



issue instructions to it through the Council.

In different ways, staff may question the European venture which generally gives a sense of purpose to the daily round. There is a sense that the trend towards Euro-pessimism - or Afro-pessimism - is more marked today than at any time in the last decade. There is also a feeling, in what can be a stop-go situation, of failure to be in control of anything durable. The Commission always seems up against it. The geopolitical changes of recent years are making it necessary to invent new international relationships and, at the same time, the conflicts that were supposed to be a thing of the past are seen to be raging in what was Yugoslavia. There has been some humanitarian response, in the form of ECHO, for example, but a political solution is proving elusive. Many uncomfortable questions are raised here, including - for some officials - the nature of the relations the Community and its Member States have, via the Commission, with UN agencies.

The need for reflexivity referred to above corresponds to a serious search for benchmarks, but records are given no special treatment in the Commission. Indeed, it is difficult to say just what has come out of any one DG in a single year. For some, this points to the eternal youth of the European institutions, the ebullience of an organization still only in its thirties. For others, this is part of a more general problem of looking back, and a fear of reconstructing all the changes that time has brought. There are cultural differences, too, in evaluation of *"les archives"*.

The apparent fragmentation of organizational memory is also attributed more generally to the way the Commission operates, subcontracting a large number of studies, evaluation and monitoring exercises to outside consultants, of widely varying status and origin, while relying on national government departments to implement its decisions. The Commission is engaged in a constant process of communication, a process never completely under its control, with a polymorphous world which sends back strange, unrecognizable images through the media: one such image is the perception of the Eurocrat as a cross between a technocrat and a penpusher. Internally, one favoured profile of the Eurocrat is, rather, that of an intellectual. He is kept on his toes by the very material he or she is working on, the debate being kept very much alive by cultural diversity and the issues it generates.

The Commission has no territorial roots and its staff, in their own perception, are cut off from theirs. Some think of themselves as *"incorporeal beings in a rootless world"*. However, they invest heavily in their professional environment. There is a sense of involvement here which cannot be explained by conditions of employment alone. These people are integrating Europe, an ambitious venture which, many feel, enables them to overcome any difficulties resulting

from the multinational nature of the administration. Concepts and ideas condition the behaviour and strategies of staff.

### A COMMISSION CULTURE?

The behaviour and the strategies of staff are contextually tied to a sense of belonging to a particular DG. The fact of belonging to a DG, the relative image of, and the relations between, that DG and the others, plus the management of time and memory, a sense of sharing key concepts and an awareness of the lines of demarcation which construct the individual: all of these aspects define a person and his or her "competence" within the institution.

This sense of "competence" is not too distant from that defined long ago by Noam Chomsky.<sup>7</sup> This notion of competence suggests for some a Commission culture, a competence which makes it possible for individuals to position themselves to act and to be understood in this world.

The fact of sharing a culture is often deemed to create a sense of a common identity. Any such identity, however, is one of many and is contextual. We have already mentioned the various "houses" (or *maisons*), the DGs, and other activity-related identifications. None of these is without its moral dress. This would include "geographers" and "policy-makers" in DG XVI, for instance, or between the divisions that are responsible for markets and those that look after rural development in DG VI, or between the sectoral and geographic units in DG VIII. "*We have the supremely confident high-flyers, who look after markets, and then we have structures and development, the Cinderella of the DG*", said a British official in DG VI. The Cinderella analogy came up again in discussion with an Italian woman about DG X, and specifically about the information service for women, which was, she claimed, a poor relation, "*the Cinderella unit of a Cinderella DG*".

The intellectual apparatus which creates the world of the Commission could be said to be not only of ideas but also of "*idées-valeurs*", an expression favoured by the French anthropologist Louis Dumont<sup>8</sup>. He emphasised that relationships are the universal components of any culture, with these relationships made up of discriminating hierarchical oppositions. If, for example, we compare the right hand and the left hand, we can stress the different nature of the two; but the comparison does not end there. If we introduce a reference to the body as an

---

7 'Chomsky drew a fundamental distinction (similar to Saussure's *langue* and *parole*) between a person's knowledge of the rules of a language and the actual use of that language in real situations. The first he referred to as *competence*; the second as *performance*'. David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 409.

8 Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme, une perspective anthropologique sur l'individualisme moderne* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1983), Chapter 6).

entity to which right and left belong, we see that there is a difference in value and a hierarchical relationship between the two hands. *"As different parts of a whole, left and right differ in nature and value because the relationship between the part and the whole is hierarchical, and a different relationship implies a different place in the hierarchy. Hence the two hands and their tasks or functions are not only different but also superior and inferior respectively."*<sup>9</sup> Similarly, if we distinguish between "geographers" and "policy-makers" in purely functional terms, we have a discriminating opposition. If we replace this discrimination in its Commission context, we get a hierarchical opposition with a different value being placed on the two terms. The intellectual universe of the Commission is structured around discriminating oppositions of this kind, with hierarchical oppositions constructed at each level. These oppositions are never stable or permanent but are always linked to a specific context. They also feed a propensity to compartmentalize.

Any official has at least two categories to which he or she belongs - the Commission and a given department. Thus, the individual sees himself as (a) an integral part of the all-embracing organization and (b) a member of a smaller group delineated by the benchmarks provided by a conceptual fabric made up of shared concepts, discriminating oppositions and hierarchical oppositions. When contextually placing himself in the department, he finds it easy to criticize the Commission, understood as those at the top: *"When you see the problems we have here, you really wonder what the Commissioners are doing"*. In other cases, individuals will take on the broader category to state a local problem: *"If we were less compartmentalized, we would implement Commission policy better"*.

Inevitably these centrifugal trends have been reinforced by the very special circumstances in which the Commission developed. The diversity of languages and cultures in the Commission creates an 'otherness' within an organism which, at the same time, sets out to integrate, unite or harmonize - to use the terminology of the powers that be.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 239.

## CHAPTER II: FRONTIERS CAST A SHADOW

The Commission, for some, is a "Tower of Babel". All accents, grammatical constructions and neologisms seem acceptable in Community "jargon". Officials can usually speak several languages, although they may not use them daily. Those from under-represented nationalities - the Greeks, for example - have got into the habit of translating what they want to say to their compatriots back into their own language.

A command of "Community jargon" sets the Eurocrat apart from his or her compatriots, situates him or her in the Commission, and seems to suggest that national language frameworks can, in some respects, be set aside.

### Daily Speech

French and English are the two working languages at the Commission. Other nationalities (with some exceptions among Germans) have come to accept a limited use of their language at political and departmental level: in meetings with government delegations or MPs, when interpretation is provided, or in situations involving staff of the same nationality - boss/secretary, for example - or in work situations where the use of a third language is essential (Spanish in relations with Latin America, for instance).

Given the use of French and English, some describe their language as either "franglais" or "Frenglish". Certain words or expressions are rarely translated, and syntax can appear to combine elements culled from both languages - or from others. A Spaniard, for example, might say "*nous passons au suivant point*". The same is true of semantics, because words do have different meanings in different cultures. New concepts emerge from the encounter of difference. The interest shown by the Commission and its representatives in "*transparency*" and in the sending of "*signals*" is significant here.

Daily spoken language in the Commission can make play of a literal transposition of certain expressions and the accretion of tailor-made terms. DG VIII *stagiaires*, for instance, supply "*pistonews*" for a small magazine, with "pisto-news" being willingly interpreted in the sense of "piston-use".

*Faux-amis* can be a further source of amusement and machine translation yet another: officials smiled when *auto-suffisance* was rendered as *car sufficiency*, for instance. At the same time, there are regular complaints about the time taken by human translation and the changes of meaning introduced by the lawyer-linguists. Similar problems crop up in the interpretation service which the Commission shares with other European institutions, except the Parliament.

When officials express themselves in a different language than their mother tongue, misunderstandings can also occur: "*des comptes vous seront rendus*", for example, instead of "*des comptes-rendus vous seront transmis*". Changes of meaning innocently linked to pronunciation can similarly provoke amusement - "*notre colère*" instead of "*notre collègue*" - but irritation too - "*peut-on fermer les plants nucléaires de l'ex-URSS?*"

The apparently relaxed approach in Commission language is not necessarily a matter of spontaneous, internal comment. In response to questioning, it is sometimes said to derive from the fact that this is the only way that staff speaking different languages can work together on a daily basis. In small departments, the fact of working together can create a self-conscious micro-identity which is seen to go beyond national differences: "*We share the same references, we speak the same language*". Or, as one official said, "*I have known cases of disputes arising from linguistic and cultural misunderstandings, not so much within a department but between departments and with outsiders*".

The resonances can be strange to the untutored ear, and similarly Commission texts for internal consumption are almost unintelligible to the average, outside reader. Officials acknowledge that what they write is often verbose, that an indirect style and compacted writing do not make for clarity. Unit heads are not always capable of passing judgement on highly technical drafts produced by their subordinates or of correcting the form as well as the substance. When they try, the reaction is often "*What right has he to revise my work?*"

What is the role of revision in a document which has been translated again and again? Should the "hierarchy" really intervene at this stage of a document?

There are questions of both language and register difference involved here. Administrative style may be impenetrable in any one language, and it becomes impossible to follow when it is affected by the agglutinative forms commonly used by staff when they speak. Daily administrative speech in the Commission, as elsewhere, has its peculiarities that are unacceptable when put on paper.

The use of abbreviations and acronyms also sets the initiated apart, and effects lines of difference within the Commission. Only external relations specialists know what "Quad" or "PECO" means. Only assistants to Directors-General and the staff of DG IX know what TCE stands for (*transformation des crédits en emploi* = conversion of appropriations into posts). Your average French person would assume that CCP (*congé de convenance personnelle* = leave on personal grounds) was a post office account (*compte chèque postal*). Injecting further confusion, abbreviations change from one Member state language to another and the

same abbreviation can be used for different purposes in the same language: in French, for instance, PAC stands for "*procédure d'affectation de crédit*" and for "*politique agricole commune*". The context is all.

There would be little point in listing all the expressions used in Commission speech. Staff live with this multilingualism and adapt their behaviour accordingly. "*At certain meetings there is a total lack of comprehension, where everyone speaks in one neutral language because not everybody can speak several.*" 'Neutrality' results either from relative exteriority, officials speaking a language other than their own so that any handicap is felt to be shared, or from the use of the language that everyone speaks best, the Chair asking participants at the outset to agree to the use of either French or English.

A problem is perceived and seen to be serious when a Commissioner and a Director-General or a head of unit do not speak the same language or share any other common language. They then have to communicate through an interpreter or a translator, a situation seen to impede the establishment of relations of mutual trust.

There is also an historical aspect to language-use. This can be seen in DG VI with German, the language of the initiated, the language of the earliest staff of the DG. Because the DG was based on a Franco-German axis, however, French remains the main language. As an old hand explained: "*If we have to fight to keep the French the language of procedures, we will*". We shall see further aspects of this in the section which follows.

### Language and culture

We have seen that the way in which officials speak to each other in the Commission involves a speech which outsiders might find mixed or wrong. There are many more examples of this way of speaking, this language. An important point to add here now is that a perception of a language as 'mixed' derives its force from linguistic models of national languages.

The development of a discipline of linguistics and the invention of national units were coincident and congruent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. National units and the boundaries of language were often created together. Languages and nations found their 'origins' in philology, and grammars provided models of bounded correctness.

Within the Commission, a German speaking French to a Dutchman about a text in English does not cause surprise. Movement across linguistically defined boundaries is an everyday affair. An outsider's surprise or admiration can bring a chuckle and a response to the effect that "*we don't think about it*". However, the context changes if that text, the English text for

example, is one that has to go outside the DG or outside the Commission: a consciousness of national languages then emerges. Formally or informally, a *visa linguistique* is required for the text. Formal translation, through the Translation Service, takes too long; someone whose mother tongue is English is called on within the relevant unit to take a look at the text. This is not always a simple matter. The multilingual and mobile childhood of so many officials in the Commission makes the 'mother tongue' neither easy to define nor necessarily of any close relationship to the language spoken daily in the respective national context. Time presses, in any case, and anyone with a reasonably good knowledge of English may feel confident to give the go-ahead. The resultant text is not always 'English' as someone born, brought up and still living in England might understand it.

Even if the resultant text is not easily coincident with the boundaries of the national language as understood in the home national context, it is important to note that a consciousness of linguistic boundaries does occur. This is especially so where written texts are concerned. Written texts destined to move beyond the DG obviously bring evocations of the world outside the DG and outside the Commission. National models of correctness then reassert themselves over the daily sociolanguage of internal communication. Written texts have in any case been the prime emphasis of many national education systems and national-language grammars. It is not surprising that it should be there that the frontiers re-emerge most readily.

The spoken language in the Commission is relatively free of such constraints much of the time, as many of our examples in the last section might suggest. Nevertheless, there are moments when the boundaries do re-emerge in the domain of spoken language also. This happens in a variety of contexts. It is most noticeable externally when a Commission official, in front of Member State representatives, experts or MEPs, is expected to speak his or her mother tongue. The mismatch between what this should be (judged by nationality) and the language or sociolanguage which the official finds easiest to use can be a source of difficulty or surprise, annoyance or admiration.

Internally in the Commission, interdepartmental meetings sometimes begin with the offer of a choice of languages. This can also happen in the special circumstances of inter-unit level meetings, across Directorates. Usually, the choice is between English and French - and responses calling for another language are both meant and taken as a joke. In general, it will effectively be up to the Chair of the meeting to decide, and no one objects. In any case, both English and French are understood to be "*the working languages*", and if the Chair speaks English and people reply in French, this is taken as normal. It is overwhelmingly the case that French dominates, or is seen to dominate. There are pockets where English dominates in the Commission, in specific units or sectors (usually where the 'client' group prefers English), and

where French may not be heard at all. These, however, are sufficiently exceptional to be noticeable.

*"The language of the Commission is French"* is a common self-commentary in the Commission. Some feel that this is in part due to living in a city where French is in daily use. It is noticed, however, that the dominant form of French used in the Commission is *"dictated by the French Academy not by Brussels"*. This can be explicitly underlined for officials occasionally: for instance, at one inter-unit meeting, where several units were getting together for the first time, the German Chair initiated discussion in English and then stopped to ask if that was OK for everyone. Amidst the ritual shrugging of shoulders that generally greets self-consciously diplomatic, interdepartmental charring of this kind, a single voice proclaimed: *"Vous pouvez parler anglais si vous voulez. Je le comprends, mais je refuse de le parler ... Il faut bien défendre la langue française"*. This was said with a smile, and the meeting then continued in the usual way.

Such open linguistic statements may be relatively rare but there is a pervasive awareness that *"the French stick up for their language"*. It is important to bear in mind here that the French language has been historically required to bear a moral and political load unique in the everyday languages of European nation-states. The French language and French national identity have been quite explicitly implicated the one in the other through two hundred years of self-conscious, national fragility. What to a French person can seem perfectly normal, and perhaps necessary, can to others seem pathological. Histories of the Commission are told in which French officials, at the moment of the 1973 enlargement, became very worried about the future of their language. *"The Germans had spoken more German previously, but they did not seem to mind. Only the French were worried. They became neurotic about what was going to happen to French"*. English-speakers, it is said, will apologise for using English sometimes - but *"the French just stick to their guns"*.

To different notions of what constitutes language, we need to add the different moral, political and historical evocations that any single language can produce. In this sense, French easily appears to be *"the most ideologically sound"*, as one official put it, of the daily working languages. It is also the language of President Delors and his *cabinet*, and was the language of the previous, long-serving Secretary General, Emile Noël. All this helps to create a situation in which some anglophones on detachment from national administrations claim that they soon realize that, when working alongside permanent officials, *"if you don't speak French, they make you feel even more that you are not one of them"*. There are stories of officials of the same nationality speaking French to each other in the corridors, even if they are sometimes struggling, and prominent British officials have been known to prefer to speak French - in



order, in their own view, to convince others of their truly European credentials.

An impending change in the Presidency and future enlargement of the Community mean that some officials talk of a possible shift in the language used in the Commission. There has also been increased external pressure to try to introduce more German (a point which some German officials have found both embarrassing and "*unrealistic*"). It has been noted, too, that younger generations from parts of southern Europe now sometimes know English better than they know French. For some French officials, the future of French in the Commission is a serious cause for concern. This concern easily appears to others to be simple "*hysteria*". It is nevertheless a concern which sometimes has the capacity to recruit other officials contextually, through the implication of French in the definition not of France but of Europe. Some occasionally see in the French language a bulwark of Europe against the cultural might of an English-speaking United States.

For the moment, practical considerations plus both national and European moral and historical weight encourage a use of French in the Commission. This use of French, and the morality and politics invested in it, can on occasion involve an understanding of *langue* which 'language' - or dictionary equivalents in other languages - do not translate; in the mismatch can lie tension, irritation and misunderstanding.

As earlier paragraphs would suggest, however, it is the case much of the time in the Commission that linguistic self-consciousness does not intrude in everyday, oral communication. Mismatches of structures and concepts can arise, sometimes with misunderstandings resulting, and without any commentary or action suggesting awareness of a problem. A further instance of this which links up with the points made in this section concerns one high-ranking British official who has self-consciously spoken only French daily in order to be properly European; however, he sometimes uses expressions that have no such clarity of linguistic definition for others. For instance, in response to proposals, he might say "*je ne sais pas si c'est une bonne idée*". In his adamant and well-intentioned French, he unwittingly requires others to know English so that he can be properly understood. Only accomplished anglophones around him grasped that here he was saying 'no', and some confusion inevitably resulted.

There are occasions, however, when the evident mismatch of concepts across national languages will bring self-commentary explicitly noting a problem and discussing it in terms of one-to-one relationships between language and culture. "*Cultural diversity*" is said to be part of Europe (as we saw earlier), and it is assumed that any given language either determines or reflects a culture. Such notions were once common in social anthropology or ethnology, and

were important throughout the construction of nations and national languages. Every nation, it was thought, had its soul or culture and its language in which to give it expression; later theories added to this the notion that the language used might determine the culture. Within social anthropology, such ideas can now seem arcane, although they have become common currency elsewhere. In the context of the Commission, the question might be phrased differently now from an anthropological point of view: we might say, for instance, that some misunderstandings arise because the concepts with which people work do not always find backing in the language they hear or use. For example, an official might say "*l'agriculture*" but be talking about "agriculture"; or officials might say "*les archives*" but be working with a notion of "archives"; and so on. This is an issue difficult to express since it has to rely on language, and on language difference, for its expression. In an important sense, however, the linguistic and the conceptual could be said, from the point of view of an older model of language-and-culture equivalence, to have parted company.

It would be falling back again into an older model of language-and-culture to ask if the peculiar sociolanguage of the Commission meant that the Commission had its own culture. Whether or not the Commission has a 'culture' is a current preoccupation of some officials, and it is a preoccupation and idea which draws in large measure on assumptions about national cultures as they have embedded themselves in management studies, to some aspects of which we shall turn in the next chapter. The conviction and worry of many officials that the Commission does *not* have a single, coherent and clear culture of its own is tied in with many of the points made elsewhere in this chapter, and it is further encouraged by a consciousness of the existence of different languages. Culture for the anthropologist, however, is contextual and relational. The Commission regularly constructs itself in relation to the outside worlds of clients and experts, Member States and Members of the European Parliament. Also, officials do not always like to speak openly about national differences, as we shall see later in the next section, and this is itself one further example of activity that defines the boundaries and proprieties of the Commission, defining what is Commission behaviour and what is not. It does not require the analytical models of some positivistic social science to construct a 'Commission culture'; Commission officials are daily involved in drawing their own boundaries.

## **Incongruence and stereotypes**

### *Unity and difference*

The following paragraphs look at the question of stereotypes. The idea of 'stereotypes' as currently understood was invented in the 1920s, after the First World War. In the circumstances after the First World War, discussion of 'stereotypes' began and thrived as a discussion about 'prejudice', and how to go beyond this. Stereotypes meant, above all, *national* stereotypes.

But what, it might be asked, do national stereotypes have to do with the European Commission?

Given the circumstances, both historical and historiographical, of the creation of 'Europe' in the period after the Second World War, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a strong feeling amongst many officials in the Commission that stereotypes are something that European civil servants have gone beyond. "*We don't think in terms of national differences*". There is an "*esprit européen*" and a European identity. If there are differences, they are "*personality differences*". If there are cultural differences, then that is part of Europe's "*richness*". And so on.

There is an immensely positive discourse to be heard along these lines. It can generally be heard in contexts of obvious displays of commitment, in some contexts of negotiation, and especially from those newly arrived. It is also likely to be the response to any unknown outsider naive enough to pose a direct question on the issue, and it thereby constructs the boundaries of the Commission and its cultural proprieties. 'Personality differences' and 'cultural richness' have become statements of political and moral correctness, and seem to leave the idea of a European unity intact. Such statements are matched by an evident tolerance in the language sphere of linguistic usages which elsewhere would be considered 'mixed' or simply wrong.

However, national identifications and stereotypes *do* occur in the Commission. Why should this be so?

The way in which 'Europe' itself is defined means effectively that it can conceptually require the existence of the nation. Amongst lower-level officials, giving positive content to 'Europe' can be difficult. This is partly due to perceived problems of information flow (a point discussed in the last chapter of this report). More commonly, Europe is contextually defined by what it is not: temporally, it is not the past, it is not war; spatially, it is not the US or Japan, and it is not roots, national attachments or prejudices. "*I only have to go home to feel*

*European*", one official explained. 'Europe' and the national, home identification can conceptually require each other. At the same time, national identification continually threatens to intrude and divide the Europe so created.

There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, there is the obvious reason that, for 200 years, the nation and national identification have posed as inalienable objects, and have been important means of identification for the self and other, a means of asserting or describing difference. Secondly, the Commission is both fed by and reproduces this traditional mode of identification and difference. For better or worse, national identity is seen to be encouraged in the Commission by some features of the modes of recruitment and promotion, by the *cabinets* system, the ENDS (the *experts nationaux detachés*) and *parachutage*. These aspects structure important contradictions into the heart of the organization.

There is much bitterness about the aspects just mentioned. The conceptual opposition of Europe and national identification can contextually become contradiction, and a moral and political opposition. People who came in through the *concours* system, who have been in the Commission for years, who feel they have struggled to build something called Europe, can suddenly find themselves passed over for promotion - ostensibly on national lines. Moments of anger and disillusionment are rife on these points - to the extent that one senior person explained: "*One certain way to failure here is to be European*".

#### *A meeting of incongruent systems*

We come back then to the question of national identity, and the question now of stereotypes.

To appreciate this question properly, it is important to bear in mind the following general points. When different conceptual and behavioural systems meet, then there is often an apprehension of incongruence. The systems do not match, do not 'fit', giving a sense of disorder; there is commonly both a perception of, and empirical confirmation of, disorder in the other. These apprehensions are often made sense of in national terms - it is there that difference is most commonly noticed and in those terms that it is readily understood. Definition and self-definition are always relational and contextual; cultures are not homogenous wholes but relationally constructed; and nations do not consist of essences or given national characters. Rather, nations provide the boundaries by which difference is most easily constructed and recognized. At the same time, difference is also widely understood in terms of the ideas which came with 19th-century nationalisms and which we generally know, for short, as the ideas of positivism and romanticism. These points are not meant to imply any stage-by-stage process of thought but a simultaneity of definition and experience, a unity of theory and observation.

Put more simply, we often make sense of difference unthinkingly in terms of a dichotomy such as rationality/irrationality ('we' are rational, 'they' are irrational), or reason/emotions, realism/idealism, practicality/impracticality, work/leisure, work/family - and many other similar dualities which can easily and contextually evoke each other. It is in terms of such dualities that differences between the sexes have also been understood, and even the two sides of the human brain (there is said by some to be a part for 'reason', another for 'emotions') and much else besides. In various and ever changing forms, such dualities and their recensions are pervasive.

These are dualities in terms of which differences between northern and southern Europe have often been asserted or described, and in other contexts they can describe differences between different countries - Britain and France, for instance. Sometimes in the Commission, the differences between DGs can be heard expressed in these terms. Some DGs are perceived to be all work, and others fun; DG III may be the rational market, but DG V (Social Affairs) takes the 'morality' which the 'market' can appear to exclude. And so on.

These differences operate at the level of everyday life in the Commission. For instance, differences of gender, nationality, and language (including pitch and use of the body) between an English boss and a French woman working for him resulted - for both - in apparent empirical confirmation of French emotionality on the one hand and British coldness and rationality on the other. When the French woman had problems at home, her problems brought no sympathy: "*She seems to get so emotional about everything anyway*". Irritation and mutual misunderstanding were then further encouraged when the English boss asked the French woman to stop calling him *Monsieur* ... and to call him *Jim*. This seemed at once contradictory and singularly inappropriate to the woman: "*I don't understand*".

There are several examples of this kind, some flagrant, some trivial, and some of which can go right into the heart of marital attraction and marriage breakup. As one Spanish woman commented of her Belgian ex-husband: "*He was crazy about everything Spanish - but seemed to expect me to be so passionate and sexy all the time*".

On the point of first names amongst the British: this derives from a self-consciously British tradition in the civil service wherein everyone is ideally part of a team, sharing information, collegial, all on the same side. Sometimes, when the British come to the Commission, and especially those with a British civil service background, it can feel like "*anarchy*". The systems do not match - to the point that there can appear to be "*no rules at all*". But then the British always knew the Continent was like that. All emotion and no rationality. "*All ideas*

*and no practicality".*

The British, Danes and others know, of course, about the 'hierarchy' in the Commission. They spend some time trying to change or subvert it. For them, the hierarchy is not structure. At the same time, their behaviour can encourage the view that they are 'difficult' and themselves 'anarchical'. There is a mutual perception of anarchy involved then when different systems meet, and each perception can feel empirically true.

In very general terms, there is often a north/south divide in the Commission. This division allows brevity of presentation here, but it is also an attribution alive for Commission officials. The attribution of 'north/south' changes contextually, but the countries generally in the north would be Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg and sometimes Belgium; and those in the south would include France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal. On certain points, Belgium becomes definitionally the 'south'. France's metaphorical inclusion in the 'south' is owed, in part, to the unusually long tenure of President Delors. However, France is itself divided in some contexts into north/south differences, as are many other countries, and countries of the north or those of the south can become metaphorically opposed among themselves through the same imagery. The Spanish are sometimes said to be the rationality of the south, and distinguished from Italians and Greeks, just as the Irish sometimes become, as we shall see, the festive soul of the north. All such divisions can be used not as simple national or geographical divisions but as metaphorical statements in which moral or political perceptions and preoccupations both take up and are distributed in various ways across geographical and ethnological space. Some do not talk of north or south, but of "*nordiques*" and "*latins*", for example, or of "*nordiques*" and "*méridionaux*". And there are contexts in which any north/south distinction is cast aside and replaced by a British/French division; this division, often said to dominate in everyday life, nevertheless partakes of the same imagery and is one to which all other differences are then reduced. At the same time, the prospect of new northern countries becoming part of the Community, together with an impending change of President and presidential style, are among the factors that have injected a special north/south salience into any perception of national difference.

Among those from the north, there seems at present to be a far greater sense of unease. This is partly because the idiom of a rational, ideal-type bureaucracy is theirs and it is this discourse which can most easily define 'problems' with public credence or legitimacy. In the meeting of different systems in the Commission, there is an incongruence, at once conceptual and practical, of the frontiers between: administration/politics, public/private, public/personal. Seemingly political, private or personal matters appear where, for those from the north (and especially for the British and Danes), they should not. This intrusion or mismatch is inherent

to perceptions of disorder, a sense of unease. There is a feeling of "*contradictory forces*", of "*unpredictability*", a lack of trust. There can seem to be no coherence in time (including no obvious, shared filing system or erratic minutes) and no coherence in space (no coordination, no collegiality, no readily shared information). There can seem to be only idealism ("*look at their notes*"!) and competition, sabotage and power. Everything seems linked to the person (networks, *hommes clés*, or the President).

For other officials, whatever their background, there *are* some modes of coordination, which are also essential systems of control. There is structure, there are ways of getting information. Make friends. Be sole master of your *dossiers*. There is lots of autonomy. There is plenty of space in which to do creative and exciting things. It is "*democratic*". If there's a problem, send it up the hierarchy. It's not difficult.

For many from the north, however, it *is* difficult and there is a problem. There are no job descriptions. The hierarchy is there only to control, and to be used to get rid of problems. There are no clear rules. "*You are treated like a child*". A hierarchy has to check even your simplest letters. "*You cannot take responsibility*". It is "*like trying to re-create your job every day*". It is continual "*self-starting*". And where are the frontiers? How far can you go? Then there is Article 50. "*It's a cruel place. You could lose your job any day. Nothing is clear*".

Here we can see the ideals of the relative impartiality of an administrative system, a system ideally independent of politics and the personal, encountering systems in which the political and the personal play an important role. There is pressure from both or all sides.

In southern Europe, patronage systems of various kinds operate openly as an important, if not the only, moral system. There is not space to give details here, or to distinguish as one should between the different proprieties involved. (There are many anthropological studies of the various systems in operation<sup>10</sup>.) In the Commission as outside it, such overt patronage

<sup>10</sup> Blok, A., 1981, 'Rams and Billy Goats: a key to the Mediterranean code of honour', *Man* 16 (3). Boulay, J. du 1974 *Portrait of a Greek mountain village*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. Campbell, J. 1964 *Honour, family and patronage*. Oxford: Clarendon. Davis, J. 1977 *People of the Mediterranean*. London: Routledge. Gellner, E. 1977 'Patron and Clients', in Gellner E. and Waterbury, J. (eds.) 1977. Gellner, E. and Waterbury, J. 1977 (eds.) *Patrons and Clients*. London: Duckworth. Gilmore, D. 1987 (ed.) *Honour and shame on the unity of the Mediterranean*. American Anthropological Association, special publication no. 22. Giovanni, M. 1981 'Woman: a dominant symbol within the cultural system of a Sicilian town', *Man* 16 (3). Herzfeld, N. 1980 'Honour and shame: problems in the comparative analysis of moral systems', *Man* 15 (2). 1985, *The poetics of Manhood*. Oxford: Clarendon. Loizos, P. 1975 *The Greek gift: politics in a Cypriot village*. Oxford: Blackwell. Peristiany, J. 1965 *Honour and Shame: the values of Mediterranean society*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. Pitt-Rivers, J. 1954 *People of the Sierra*. New York: Criterion Books. Pitt-Rivers, J. 1977 *The Fate of Schechem, or the politics of*

systems have a self-evident importance for those who operate them. Indebtedness can be created as a matter of pride and honour, and similarly debts repaid with loyalty and support. It would, from within such systems, be naive to imagine that life works differently. Honour and manliness are among the rewards of knowing how to work this system, and shame, naivety and stupidity among the sanctions on ignorance. Where those from the south see loyalty and pride here, however, those from the north can see laziness, immorality and corruption. Where those from the south can see honour and propriety, those from the north can suspect fraud and the mafia.

There are internal criticisms of the patronage systems, criticisms coming from those who actively participate in them, but these tend to be criticisms which sustain them. For example: "*He's our Commissioner and he's done nothing for my husband!*" It is a common feature of many patronage systems and of the way they are sustained that each party seeks more honour or favours. At the same time, there is awareness amongst all parties that this is not the only available moral system, both in their own terms and in the context of living and working alongside people from other backgrounds. Moving between the moralities available is quite common. When someone else gets the job or promotion and you don't, then you can openly condemn the *piston*, *magouille*, *imbroglio* or *enchufe* at work; as to your own success, however, well this happens "*par hasard*" or "*par accident*". How did you enter the Commission in the first place? "*Eh bien, c'est un peu par hasard que je me trouve là ...*"

At the same time, perceptions from the north can place moral stress on those from the south, with the latter feeling that their every move can bring accusations of corruption and fraud. And then empirical confirmation of 'corruption' can seem to present itself through the same processes of misunderstanding. For example, a Greek official returned from the Christmas break to find a birthday celebration prepared for her, with flowers and cards and other officials ready to wish her 'Happy Birthday'. "*But it's not my birthday*", she explained. Her colleagues had noted 1 January on her official forms as her date of birth. However, this was not, she explained, her 'real' date of birth. It was, she claimed, one which many people in Greece had put on administrative forms. A Danish woman who had helped in the birthday preparations was aghast at this, and openly expressed moral outrage. The Greek woman found the Danish reaction at once uncalled for and 'typical'. Each could find here empirical evidence of the 'typical' nature imputed to the other. In this single incident a whole series of cultural differences came together, and imploded into open outrage on the one hand and a quiet, embarrassed resentment on the other. Different notions of state administration and differences of both religious background and administrative priorities can bring very different

---

sex. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Wikan, U. 1981 'Shame and honour: a contestable pair', *Man* 16 (3).



understandings of the relevance of one's birth date. In Orthodox Greece, it is a person's Saint's Day that has traditionally been celebrated, and not the anniversary of his or her birth date. Birth certificates (rather than baptism certificates) are relatively new in parts of Greece, and the rationality for birth date identification still novel and fragile. Modes of counting for age have not necessarily hinged on exact birth dates either, but on the year of birth. What does it matter what exact birth date one puts on a form? In such explanations, whether valid for modern Greece or not, a Greek self-identity and pride could be constructed. A rule-governed administration, moreover, can have its rules used and turned back on itself. When pressed, one male Greek official was willing to read a whole world of manly cunning and advantage into a 1 January birth date.

Some stories of self-confessed deviousness come close to a self-conscious appropriation of northern European stereotypes by those from the south. There are, however, many well-established modes of asserting social precedence (and manliness) which cannot find easy expression in the moral languages of northern Europe, and which can involve familial priorities and personal alliances of a kind that intrude in a way already described. Some of the actions of those from southern Europe do not always, they know, have the formal sanction of official rules and official approval, whether at home or in the Commission; they do, however, have an informal sanction, their own pride and virtue - a pride and morality which cannot easily be given expression in the idiom of the ideal model of an impartial and rational administration favoured by those from the north.

Wherever one set of proprieties does not match another, there is ample space for misunderstanding to work both ways. There is space for southern Europeans to accuse northerners of a naive idealism and to claim an honourable realism for themselves. Moreover, where southern discourses have fully a space for honourable loyalties and alliances, for their own precedence, reciprocities and proprieties, northern discourses can appear to southerners to have nothing. There appears to be a gap, a silence. Into this silence is read a whole world of suspect behaviour, a world of corruption all the more insidious because it is not talked about or practised openly. Two Danes were seen lunching together: "*Mais les voilà!*" One was left to assume the rest. Or two northern officials talked to a lobbyist, whose caused turned out to be successful: "*They're taking money, believe me*", an Italian official insisted.

When the finger of accusation points northwards, it generally points at Britain. One important axis of difference that then comes into play is that of pre-1973/post-1973, an axis which can contextually eclipse all others whilst taking on similar moral colouring. From the point of view of some officials whose own background predates the first enlargement, it is those who came after 1973 - and especially the British - who introduced a world of deviousness hitherto

unknown. British civil servants came and went, it is said, working without any obvious militantism and returning to their national administration where their loyalties seemed to lie. These national networks of patronage, seen to work without the expected proprieties of honour and commitment, have had the capacity to generate empirical confirmation of suspected slyness and untrustworthiness (*"la perfide Albion"*), and a mutual sense of resentment.

Such comments and suspicions, it should be stressed, do not occur in the ether. Mention has already been made of some of the factors which can make national difference contextually salient. Also, an interested researcher can appear to offer a willing ear for grievances which, in the Commission, cannot easily find another forum for expression. External events have also placed extra pressure on Italian officials. It took only one sensationalized case of suspected fraud by an Italian official in 1993 for many to fear the worst. *"My country has a bad reputation"*, one self-defining Italian 'compatriot' was moved to comment, *"but you should take a look at what others are up to."*

Many examples can be given highlighting north/south and other differences as outlined here. Some examples can seem trivial but they are part of the general misunderstandings involved in the encounter of different conceptual systems, which cannot be lightly dismissed for those who live them daily. This encounter of different systems poses some problems for the Commission. For example, definitions of 'corruption' can be a source of controversy, and reporting procedures are themselves inevitably a part of the cultural differences already described. Another problem is that, from the meeting of different, incongruent systems (plus the difficulties of thinking through and talking about such issues without seeming un-European, or 'prejudiced' or simply derogatory), and from related sources of tension outlined elsewhere in this report, come discussion and the realities of stress, of 'burn-out', exhaustion, anxiety, depression, marriage breakdown and alcoholism. Many of these conditions are self-perceived or defined by colleagues. They do not always reach the doctor. Nevertheless, they account for almost 40% of officially recognized invalidity claims.

On the question of alcoholism here, more could be said. Sometimes, reputations for alcoholism derive from the meeting of different drinking cultures and the misunderstandings that can result. Social dysfunction and 'drinking too much' are defined very differently in different parts of Europe. It should not be imagined, therefore, that heavy drinking and the Commission go together; rather, it is a meeting place of different definitions of social pathology and there is always a risk that such perceptions are totalled rather than disentangled. Sometimes, however, heavy drinking itself results from the encounter of different systems, with fermented grain drinking cultures encountering fermented grape drinking cultures and

taking on grape drinking in grain quantities. A festive, episodic drinking culture meets a daily drinking culture and becomes a daily, festive drinking culture. This seems to happen most easily when people first arrive at the Commission, a time when being away from home can encourage a sense of holiday and 'time out'. The problems encountered in daily working life can then perpetuate the requirement for all the metaphorical relief, fun or sophistication which a drink can seem to offer. Men from northern Europe seem to be more vulnerable to drinking problems in the Commission than those from the south, and the encounter of drinking cultures has much to do with this. We cannot talk loosely of 'alcoholism' in relation to the problems previously described without also taking the meeting of drinking cultures themselves into account.

*On the difficulty of being German and the relative ease of being Irish*

Finally in this section, we turn to rather different and more specific aspects of national stereotypes. The rationality/irrationality duality plays itself out in different ways between the twelve nationalities. Here, we look briefly at what might be one of the most difficult national categories to inhabit - German - and what would seem, on the contrary, to be one of the easiest - Irish.

On the German example, it is not the case that it is difficult to be German or difficult all the time; it is just that it can be a difficult category to inhabit.

There is German social life in Brussels, with Germans meeting Germans, although it is relatively diffused (in the *Länder*, in political parties, or through activities in Tervuren around the German school, for example). People of German origin in the Commission, however, tend to boast of their integration, both in the Commission and in Brussels, and they boast of Belgian friends, of knowing 'normal' people, of having "*friends outside the Commission*", and there seem to be many mixed marriages.

Stereotypes of the cold, super-rational, super-ordered, tyrannical Germans are well known. Many people believe that it was two world wars that created these stereotypes. It is important to note, however, that they pre-date the two world wars. In an important sense, the two world wars gave empirical confirmation to the imagery. The uniqueness of Germany's own construction of itself is also important to note. Germany realized itself romantically before it realized itself in statehood and power (under Bismarck). It became a powerful industrial nation which had a romantic interpretation at the centre of its being. This made Germany unique. Elsewhere, romanticism had served to celebrate the conceptual frontiers of nations either in the periphery or in other nations (as was the case for Britain and France, for instance). Germany was a self-consciously rational, industrial nation which could also find -

not a romantic other - but a romantic self in its very foundations. With both a romantic identity *and* a solid politico-economic sense of self, it could be said that, in an important sense, the Germany that entered the European Communities had already exhausted all the traditional national rhetoric of identity.

There has been a self-conscious attempt in the Commission to create the space for a new identity, in a Europe of peace. There is no commemoration of the two world wars, with no holidays on the relevant dates. Nevertheless, there is no new German identity that can easily be found. "*What would it mean to be German?*" What could a new identity look like? Unification has seemed to make it even more difficult for some: "*We don't want to offend anyone*".

Old stereotypes of the Germans re-emerge within the Commission, both from others and from Germans themselves, effectively constraining their actions and sometimes causing problems. Such examples would include a German official known to take a firm line on the organization and input of his Directorate; he was on several occasions cited discreetly by others as "*typical*". In another DG, an unwanted instruction from a German *cabinet* moved an Italian official to make private comments about "*le grand Deutschland über alles*". One young German expert on detachment at the Commission left after only a short time. She found the 'anarchy' too much but felt that she, as a German, could say nothing and do nothing about it. Another German official used the term 'de-Germanized' to describe himself in the Commission (some other officials of German background used this term also). He held no meetings of his Directorate. He did not wish to impose. Other officials working for him, however, were all the more convinced of his links with the German hierarchy. Whatever he did, it seemed, he could not win.

There are other examples that could be offered her. Perhaps one poignant instance was that of a young, dark-haired German woman. She liked, she confided one day, to try to pass as Spanish: "*It makes life easier*". A point worth bearing in mind here is that the very same structures of misunderstanding that can make those from southern Europe seem variously lazy and corrupt are also those by which they can seem very friendly and warm, and an attractive source of identification. Any distribution of moral pluses and minuses is, therefore, complicated.

This point is further exemplified in the case of Irish identity. Irish identity was constructed, from the nineteenth century onwards, in conceptual opposition to England and Britain. Where Britain was rational, Ireland was emotional. Where Britain came to represent imperial, industrial rationality, Ireland became a primitive, backward and, by the same token, mystical,

rural and festive authenticity. This imagery has, through tourism, become an important part of Ireland's economy.

Within the Commission, the impact of all this takes various forms. Many find being Irish very useful. They can argue points very strongly and win: *"And still everyone just assumes I'm nice"*. And if they get angry then this just seems to be a 'natural volatility'. The Irish meet regularly in an Irish Club in Brussels and have their own festivities. This would include St Patrick's Day in March. In each of two different committees in the Commission on that day, an Irish official from the Commission served Gaelic coffee, and Irish music was played, and green sashes or bows worn. In the middle of one Scientific Committee, Irish whiskey was served and a video played of festive, rural Ireland. People were surprised but found it pleasant. Except one Commission official: *"It's the same every year - can you imagine what would happen if the Germans did that?"*.

### **Pressure, *idées-valeurs* and denunciation**

*"Generally speaking, there are no nationality problems as such but there can be misunderstandings. We tend to judge each other by outdated criteria. If a German takes a conservative line, an Italian will react by labelling him a Nazi. The French are more burdened by their history than others"*, said a Frenchman. *"We know all about perfidious Albion, but I have every confidence in my British staff ..."* Naturally, some might add, because they are trapped by the hierarchical system. On a lighter note: *"We play with stereotypes"* said a secretary. *"I am Belgian and I call her a "sale française"*". This sort of thing is taken good-humouredly, though in certain situations it can pose problems. The stereotypes are felt to be latent. *"We don't think of our colleagues as German or French but as colleagues ..."*, it is said - as long as there is no friction.

Some nationalities attract more comment than others, but to the analysis of stereotypes we could add that everyone has *idées-valeurs* which situates themselves and others within the universe of the Commission. There are many examples. From this point of view, stereotypes become evidence of a propensity to introduce hierarchical benchmarks in a world dedicated to diversity. They often operate through denunciation, with speakers stating their own superiority by belittling others.

*"Some colleagues know nothing about history beyond the Holy Roman Empire ... For them the countries of the south are corrupt ... The Germans despise us since unification"* said a Greek. *"To the Germans, the Spanish are Africans"* ... said a Catalan. *"The French, the Spanish, the Italians and the Portuguese have the same basic values, which are not accepted by the English or the Danes, but the Germans are closer to us because of their legal system"*,

said an Italian. "*Southerners are more imaginative, northerners are more black and white*", explained a Dutchman. "*Teleological oppositions criss-cross the Community. On one side we have the Anglo-Saxon free marketeers, on the other we have the Franco-Italian interventionists*".

Many wanted European culture to be something more than the sum of its parts. However, we have seen that although the richness of the multicultural situation is proclaimed, many blame it for difficulties in their work situation and career development. When it comes to filling a middle or higher management post, one candidate is the right nationality, while the other is a victim of his or her "origins".

The juxtaposition of different nationalities and of different cultures thus appears to some to be a vector for instability and unease within the Commission. Perceptions of what constitutes good manners change from one cultural world to another, and the mere fact of sharing a workplace is not seen to be enough to establish sociable relations between individuals brought up in different cultural registers. In some corners of the Commission, there is endless discussion about how to behave and what form of address to use in this language or that when speaking to this person or that: the familiar *tu* or the more formal *vous*, titles or first names, whether to make a direct approach or to go through the hierarchy. Everything depends on the context, perhaps the nationality of those concerned, their relative ages and their positions on the hierarchical ladder.

Staff admit that they can sometimes have difficulty in striking the right note and finding the correct form. But customs grow up and are passed on. At the Commission as elsewhere the use of the familiar *tu* marks the sharing of a number of points of reference, mutual comprehension born of repeated encounters; assistants to Directors-General use it, as do Directors, people working in the same department, etc. In chance encounters or in hierarchically asymmetric situations, the use of *tu* and *vous* alternate with a frequency determined by the mother tongue and the age of the individuals concerned.

One of the reasons for this instability of forms is that the Commission, according to the model of some officials, tries to combine cultures by laying down successive strata rather than simply bringing together national delegations, as is done at the UN, or imposing a dominant style, as is done at the World Bank, where work is more centralized and more economic with a perceived "Anglo-Saxon" influence. People who have worked in other international organizations speak of pragmatism or empiricism prevailing at the Commission.

In the possible repertoires in which difference is discussed, there are individual "personalities"

as well as "national styles". Different styles of command and individual codes of conduct lend credence to the view that there are no ground rules. Working conditions are judged to be all the more difficult than in a national government department: *"Slanging matches are necessary here, it's become a habit ... the Spanish left the Commission because they could not take the pressure ..."* Others feel that senior staff pay no attention to the work done by their subordinates until they make a mistake. Compliments are unheard of. These statements are consistent with others we have already cited, suggesting a general climate of uncertainty (*"we never know what to expect"*) a perceived *"cruelty of the Commission"*, or power relationships illustrated by expressions such as: *"I had my arm twisted ..."*, *"he was furious"*, *"he banged on the table ..."*, *"you need to develop a thick skin and give in easily"*.

Two main styles of command are often discussed: *"A Frenchman would say 'draft me a note', a Briton would say 'I'll do it myself'"*. Other styles are said to err on one side or the other. Frustration and malaise can feed on these different approaches to administrative expression, but people grow accustomed to it in time. Long-serving staff amuse themselves by writing French-style notes in English (Cartesian logic, with one solution) and British-style notes in French (successive points without linking words or phrases, leading to a final recommendation).

The coexistence of different administrative traditions makes the organization more complex and can create an additional form of division. Conflicts can be sparked off by the slightest incident. The "relaxed" approach of the British, seen to be flexible and capable of switching easily from one dossier to another, is criticized by those who see it as evidence of a lack of professionalism. On the other hand, there is the French reluctance to delegate responsibility and power of signature. *"Southern countries lumber themselves with laws,"* said a Dane, *"but never apply them. Northern countries have a minimum of rules but abide by them."* This statement, heard also in the world outside, is used at the Commission to criticize 'parallel' means of communication (for example, the French habit of telephoning to reinforce the transmission of dossiers).

The diversity of traditions, languages and cultures is sometimes experienced as a relativism - with an escape route into the securities of one's own cultural world. A blaming of others and their national and cultural background for problems encountered at work is then seen as part of this. A use of stereotypes is disconcerting, however, when they can seem, as outlined earlier, to reflect empirical, observable traits. The fact that everybody can use such a weapon in their own way is a further factor for confusion, increasing the range of frames of references. Otherness, that is to say the opportunities for differentiation offered by national background, lies at the heart of the identity promoted by this professional culture created by European

integration.

A sense of generalized relativism is increased and creates problems where staff feel themselves under fire in the name of another frame of reference: a move to another directorate, or the departure of colleagues of the same nationality, can create disequilibrium. People have to come to terms with new colleagues, and be "*well armed*" it is said, to deal with trouble. This refers to a capacity to preserve the benchmarks which allow an individual to act.

Everyone agrees that a balance of nationalities is essential at the Commission. But the political play of nationalities at the highest levels is seen as a frontal attack on this European microcosm. Departments speak of "renationalization" undermining the "European spirit", and some blame this process on the latest arrivals: "*They (the Spanish and the Portuguese) lowered the level of performance at the Commission by placing people with no experience of Europe in senior posts - even though the profile of the European civil servant calls for quite specific qualities. Senior Spanish staff speak to people without allowing for the fact that there is a Community behind them*".

Such blunt statements - and there were many - are always explained by a specific context of friction. Nationalities can seem to be in confrontation without interfering with the operation of the Commission as a whole. Nevertheless, some staff wonder how the Commission will adapt to further enlargement. There are yet more different ideologies, it seems, as well as different languages, different perceptions of what constitutes good manners, different styles of command, and more. Staff talk of the affinities between northern countries, of the consequences for southern countries of an influx of more northerners, of the relative weight of large and small countries, of religious traditions, of the tradition of coalition government, and so on. What ideals will dominate in the panorama of influences - socialist, Christian Democrat or liberal? What kind of Europe is being created? Such ideas and queries were encountered throughout the Commission.

For some, the practice of "flagging" posts, political calculations aside, could be a positive one in the sense that it provides a clear point of reference in each case and helps to avoid even more confusion.

The processes set in train by intercultural contact within the Commission involve what some call "transactional identity". As mentioned earlier, identities - far from being essences cohabiting within the Commission ("the French", "the Germans", "the British"), are the product of a web of relationships woven and re-woven day by day. The cultural identity of one individual is affected, in the Spinozian sense, by that of his or her neighbour and vice versa. When an official "labels" a colleague by reference to his "Germanness" or his



"Frenchness", it is with reference to a given situation. The idea of "transactional identity" restates this process and highlights the way in which identity is felt to be negotiated as part of an offensive strategy or as a means of strengthening one's position faced with the spectre of a generalized relativism.

One recurring comment heard at various levels suggests a tension between what is seen to be the hierarchical, centralizing propensity of the system on the one hand and a cultural relativism with "centrifugal" effects on the other: "*There is no true management at the Commission*", it is said. We come back to this, and to related questions, in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III: THE HOLY GRAIL

### Formal relations and hierarchies

At the top of the formal structure are the Commission and the Commissioners, each of whom, in his or her own field, has an interest in understanding the whole. They are surrounded by advisers and members of their *cabinets*, who forge the links between the departments and the Commission's tasks. The political structure determines the Commission's course of action; the administrative structure which serves it mobilizes the "machinery", the procedures and the individuals. The interaction between political structure and administrative structure has changed over time.

The entire structure had to be created from scratch in 1958, and the first Commissioners spent their first two months on their own, discussing the administrative model to be adopted. The President, Walter Hallstein, opted for a hierarchial ladder rather than a team formula. The French tacked on to the pyramidal job structure the system of *cabinets*, hitherto unknown in the other Member States. The first years of the Commission are said to have been characterized by genuine teamwork, and this remains the ideal model for relations within the Commission itself and the Commission departments as a whole. Over time, however, an expansion in activities and the increase in the number of Member States have altered the structure, and the collegiate model is under threat.

The Staff Regulations, the recruitment system and career structure, which were designed for a staff of a thousand or so, have had to change - or are passed over now in silence. The small-scale, target-oriented administration of the early days is now called upon to administer forms of corporatism, privileges and "*practices which would never have occurred before*". The problems which it faces as a result of its success, and the increase in its numbers and powers, are forcing the Commission to ask itself a number of questions.

In order to justify the current situation, and whenever they draw up a sort of inventory of the Commission's accomplishments, officials cite the work of specific individuals, Commissioners, directors, advisers (the Commission's *éminences grises*) and the trade unions. The aura of the generals, it is said, their contribution to European integration, their respective qualities, affect the morale of the troops. They are the ones who plot the course to be followed, whether by defining major Community objectives or by altering the basic structure (enlargement, "deepening", reorientation) or customs (more openness, more cohesion). They are the ones who give the staff the feeling that they are making progress or, conversely, that they are "reinventing the wheel".

On the one hand there is the Breydel building, home to the Commissioners and their *cabinets*, where decisions are taken, deals are struck, grand manoeuvres planned and compromises negotiated. Its occupants receive callers but rarely venture further afield to the DGs. It is a highly concentrated world where all specializations are represented and to which all doors are open: it is permeated by a heady sense of power. Then there are the Directorates-General, divided between a senior hierarchy, in touch with the political side, and the lower echelons, who are concerned with technical matters. At each level, the bosses play a key role and form the focal point for their staff.

The Commissioners determine the political line, filter the dossiers and present the work of the Directorates-General to the outside world. In their representative function they are assisted by the Directors-General and directors who accompany them on "missions", master the technical aspects of the issues, and sometimes deputize for them. To have access to the *cabinet* and the Commissioner confers a distinction which is universally recognized.

Each in his or her own domain, the Directors-General, who are strictly administrative rather than political leaders, run the affairs of their departments and are responsible for their internal "cohesion". Differences in management style are felt to reflect both nationality and personality. Directors General rely on a management structure - deputy Director-General, director, unit head - each of whose job it is, more than that of the uppermost strata, to encourage their teams to get on with it.

An official's department is seen to be crucial to his or her identity, and the "character" or "personality" of the boss (section, unit or division) to dictate the internal social climate. "Personality" is judged in various ways. Some bosses are said to have the ability to listen to their staff and to take their opinions into account, others to do all the talking themselves and to impose their own ideas, and some to divide and rule while others command respect because of their "talents". The unit head *"can start things moving; he takes the lead in opening a dossier, but the Director can always block any initiative"*.

The bosses are important, not only because they serve as models to equal or overtake in the career system, but also because it is to them that the successes or failures of the Commission are attributed. The middle managers are in the unenviable position of being appraised from above and below, and the risk of losing their job increases with rank. Discussion of the Commission also involves assessment of a person's qualities, often framed in terms of the available division of the political and the technical: *"The most effective Commissioners combine technical ability with political acumen, like Sir Leon Brittan and Jacques Delors"*; or with a demand added: *"We have been waiting from some political guidelines from our*

*Commissioner for the past four years"; or a criticism of moving too far one way: "The cabinet used to be an intermediary; now they just duplicate and recast the work of the departments. Everything is much more politicized now; we used to be more technical".*

Another perceived division is that between the "horizontal" and the "vertical". In "horizontal" areas, each specialized post creates for its occupant the conditions for a career move, because the professional and semi-professional contacts involved open up new opportunities. Technical, sectoral, "vertical" posts, on the other hand, limit the opportunities for such contact, leading to compartmentalization which closes off doors to the incumbents. *"Mobility within the Commission's Directorates-General is insufficiently developed,"* a situation seen to undermine the *"collective dynamic"*.

There is some individual resistance to mobility, with various reasons cited: fear of risk, fear of losing the capital fund of relationships required to obtain promotion to the next grade, the reputations of the different DGs, subtle rules of geographical balance within departments, or the effect of "parachuting" outsiders into jobs. Some officials reach the DG of their choice via a promotion, like those who are given a job in a new DG and a new specialization in return for services rendered in a Commissioners' *cabinet*, or who find that the sectoral skills acquired in another DG prove useful in a "flagged post". Some dare to leave a particular area of the Commission that does not inspire them, or a hierarchical structure which they find constraining, for an environment which more closely matches their aspirations.

In addition to internal mobility - which officials pursue when they believe they have a reasonable chance of progressing in their career without losing any of their acquired advantages or, more rarely, for the sake of a change - structural reorganizations within the Commission can lead to job changes which impact on individuals to a varying degree. The single-track model of a career spent entirely within one Directorate-General is being challenged. A "successful" career now includes a spell in a Commissioner's *cabinet*, but this path is still a source of numerous disputes.

An official who returns to a Commission department after a period in one of the *cabinets* will be readily accepted, but an outsider from a national ministry who is propelled from a *cabinet* job into a departmental post "by diktat" is in for a rough time. The ambiguity of the system is brought home to the observer who is reminded of the number of unit headships in the departments, frozen because the holders are now members of a *cabinet*, to the frustration of the officials deputizing for them.

Although "parachuting" is strongly objected to, its effects are not felt to be wholly negative: experience in the *cabinets* and a thorough "knowledge of the system" can be valuable both in mounting delicate operations and in the day-to-day running of a department. But using the *cabinets* as a shortcut to promotion is rejected on ethical grounds by some who rise through the ranks: "*It goes against the very notion of public service and the requirement of objectivity in such matters*". This leads to a debate about management methods; on grounds of ethics, "objectivity" and equality people are unwilling to accept a promotion system which leaves too much to "caprice" or "personal" relations. The conflict is seen in moral terms, sometimes as a single clash between the good guys and the baddies. The question of careers touches a sensitive chord in a world which suffers from what one commentator referred to as the "*Madame Bovary syndrome*": material wellbeing and social status but disappointed expectations.

At first sight, professional relations within the Commission are structured by a formal hierarchy which some feel to be promoting "cohesion". Unless they belong to a *cabinet*, officials are incorporated in the departments at different levels in the hierarchical pyramid. However, there are significant differences in practices within Directorates-General. Some directors and unit heads leave their staff room for manoeuvre, in the name of "efficiency" and "rational management", without relinquishing their fundamental prerogatives. In some cases relations between unit heads and directors and within the unit itself are informal - use of first names and the familiar *tu* form of address, informal meetings, discussions over the telephone - whereas in others people maintain their distance by using titles, adopting the formal *vous*, insisting on proper appointments and exchanging written notes. Some bosses like to compartmentalize their departments, making them more dependent on themselves (a practice which doesn't simplify matters when the time comes to hand over to a successor). Others delegate power to their subordinates: "*The custom is now to come and get the instructions you want to carry out*", to quote one British official. This newer "management" style based on the ability of subordinates to take responsibility themselves reverses the "normal" Commission practice of a boss directing his staff on the basis of instructions from on high. Since the top of the hierarchy is usually housed at the top of the building, there is a physical correlation between the hierarchical pyramid and the location of departments: the lower the floor, the humbler the outfit. To be "*proche du soleil*" (near the sun) is a common metaphor for having the ear of the boss.

Into this picture of hierarchy, two points dear to officials have to be injected: the questions of information and coordination. "Lack of information" is a recurrent comment. In an organization like the Commission, information is felt to be an essential resource. Access to information can create a form of power parallel to the official hierarchies and sometimes much

more efficient than them.

### **Information**

The Commission, in one common image, is a huge "information factory", constantly in search of the data it needs to prepare the political and administrative dossiers which it passes on to its institutional partners. This information is obtained from outside, from national or Community administrations and private sources (technical experts, lobbyists, consultants, etc.) and forms the basis on which small empires are built. The complexity of European affairs in the broad sense necessitates a compartmentalization of information corresponding to the responsibilities of the various DGs, and then within the DGs to a compartmentalization of the relevant operational and intellectual specializations. A large amount of energy is expended on obtaining information which comes under the aegis of each DG, and on controlling its circulation both inside and outside the organization.

Some directors guard their powers very jealously: all documents must pass through their hands, they alone are authorized to sign papers and they leave very little initiative to their unit heads. They are not in an easy position, caught between the power of their subordinates who have a technical mastery of the dossiers and their superiors who are sensitive to the wider political implications of any action.

*"Whatever I write, I can't circulate it unless it has been approved by my bosses, the unit head and the director"*. This recurrent complaint shows the vertical concentration of information that is widely felt to be the mark of, and to sustain, power. The work of the official at the base of the pyramid may be either lightly amended or completely rewritten by the unit head before going up through the channels available. A sort of guerrilla war sometimes ensues.

The stakes can be considerable, testing both the ability of subordinates and the authority of the bosses. It is a question of legitimacy. Conflicts are settled by a display of authority, whereupon the boss wins recognition of his position. This system can, however, produce the opposite effect, a negation of legitimacy, with accusations of excessive formalism. Two comments are significant here: *"Information does not circulate properly"* and *"It is difficult to coordinate our activities"*.

Power requires information, and the bosses at different levels seek to control information channels in order to assert their authority. But the departments, too, need to be informed - both to define their activities and to know what becomes of their work. Information must therefore circulate, in the spatial model of the Commission, from the top down, from the bottom up, and laterally.

This circulation is ostensibly the purpose of the numerous meetings which bring together the different levels down the hierarchy: in the various DGs (Commissioner/*cabinet*/Director-General and directors meetings, Director-General/directors meetings, director/unit heads meetings and unit head/officials meetings); and there are weekly meetings of the assistants and Directors-General with the Secretary-General, which are an established tradition and regarded as indispensable for the interdepartmental coordination on which the work of the Commission as a whole depends.

Information may be factual, technical, political or indeed fanciful, and it is for those in authority to manage the "flow" and steer it in what they regard as the right direction. In so doing they can use what is felt to be a key skill in an institution which cannot, by definition, fall into an easy routine: the ability to anticipate. If they fail in this they lose credibility and risk losing control. The problem is the same at every level. The person who controls information, has all the dossiers for which he is responsible at his fingertips and knows what is going on elsewhere, will be much more likely to be regarded as a strong leader than someone who simply acts in an authoritarian way.

Control of information can be strategic. Officials covering certain subjects can accumulate a valuable store of expertise. They become important in the eyes of the decision-makers and can use their dossiers as ammunition in a campaign tailored to the verticality of the system, to capitalize on their expertise rather than squandering it among colleagues on the same level.

Mastery of "information-flows" involves all strata of a DG. Similarly, relations between a DG and the Commissioner or Commissioners for whom it works are very much influenced by competition for access to information. The *cabinet* plays a crucial role. Its first concern is to have access to the dossiers and to provide the link between the Commissioner and his or her departments. Its internally specialized structure is designed to meet this need. But the Director-General in turn wants preferential access to the Commissioner and will resent being shortcircuited. The start of each new term of office sees an unsettled period connected with this question of information. Then, as one director puts it, "*After a while, after a period of disruption and intervention by the cabinet, we reach a sort of modus vivendi; territories are then staked out for the rest of the term and relations become more relaxed*". But the appetite for information is never satisfied, which leaves plenty of room for rumour.

So much for the internal situation. To the outside world the Commission is either an open house, where anyone can get hold of all the files, or an opaque structure which holds back the information eagerly awaited by the delegations of the Member States. "*There must be*

*something wrong*", one of these representatives told us, "when we can get a dossier from some agency or the USA before the Commission sends it to us". Is this what you would expect from a bureaucracy, or is it because partners don't trust each other or is it the result of a natural reluctance to share sovereignty on the part of officials defending their own clique?

Criticism at departmental level often focuses on the logic of "verticality" and the centralizing tendencies of the hierarchy. However, our study also revealed that there is also a parallel world of more flexible relations founded on a give and take of information, where affinities based on nationality but also politics or religion come into play. As a result, the Commission seems to be divided between a relatively archaic hierarchical order and other patterns of relations which continually run parallel to the official structure. These information circuits can be accommodated precisely because there are areas of ambiguity within "the system" as formally conceived. Although positions can seem to be formally clear on paper, there are ambiguities and uncertainties, the precariousness of life at the top (Article 50 makes Directors-General and directors vulnerable), the pressure of *cabinets* and Commissioners which limits the autonomy of the DGs, and the power of certain "key figures".

These last individuals, sometimes referred to as "*un homme clé*" or a "key person", play an essential role in their DGs. Their "key" status is due to the information they are seen to possess. Some of them are regularly consulted by the *cabinets*. Others have demonstrated a particular aptitude for negotiation and find themselves entrusted with sensitive assignments and, by completing them, make themselves indispensable. Still others have come into contact with known personalities inside the Commission or in the world of politics as a result of their jobs, and are therefore well placed to act in a particular way. They have "influence" rather than real power, some say, but none of the top people, Commissioners or Directors-General, can do without them.

There are different types of *hommes-clé*, ranging from those who can move effortlessly from one field to another as required, to those who have sole charge of one particular area. There are advantages to belonging to this category, for it means getting your name known and having your talents recognized, but it does not necessarily guarantee a brilliant career. The best way of securing such people's services is to keep them in a suitable position, while at the same time making sure that they do not assert their independence and play their own game. This may mean slowing down their promotion and mobility.

The idea of *homme-clé* came from the pioneers of the Commission. Jean Monnet's method was to identify for each question the key person capable of solving a particular problem. The other side of the coin is that, unless they capitalize on their fund of information by maximizing their



networks, these individuals can suffer from being in a position which is by definition unstable and has no power base in the formal hierarchy.

The role of such key individuals operating in the grey areas in the official set-up is indicative of the complex networks which criss-cross the Commission and link up with the outside world. Whether political, confessional or national in origin, these networks provide individuals with specific reference points to rely on within the Commission, and offer an apparent escape from the relativism referred to earlier. They also influence work in numerous ways: they can affect the substance of projects, by slanting the dossiers (as in the case of the network of "the President's men"), and also their form, by deploying key figures in strategic positions.

### **Negotiation and coordination**

The question of coordination is regularly raised, and is linked to the way in which the Commission operates. It comes up in different guises in comments and in practice inside the Commission and the departments and in the form of questions about leadership: why was the of a particular project entrusted to that particular DG, or department, or person? It is a topic that also raises questions about the structural position of the Commission in the overall institutional layout of the Community. The Commission may derive authority from its technical expertise, but at a political level it is constantly required to negotiate its position in relation to that of each of the Member States, which together control decision-making in the Council. Much of the work of Commission officials takes place in committees of various kinds -expert groups, management and legislation committees, or Council working parties - which means that they are constantly having to arbitrate between opposing positions and lay the basis for the compromise or consensus characteristic of Community decision-making. Even the term "compromise" (or its equivalents) suggests something different in English, French and Spanish. Outside these groups, officials are constantly in contact with different partners, contractors, consultants, lobbyists whom they listen to, advise, recruit or send away empty-handed.

The Commission describes its action under different headings such as "complementarity", "coordination between Member States", "subsidiarity", "Community interest", "comprehensive approach". It claims to act not for itself but as the expression of twelve wills.

What does it mean in practical terms for officials to represent the Community in dealings with their country of origin? Although most officials regard their own country as one of the Member States, no more or no less important than any other, the relationship with the Member States is curious. Espousing the "European ideal" leads the official to adopt a standard formula which suggests a tension: *"I work for the Community, neither against the Member*

*States nor for my home country":*

The first rule of conduct for the European civil servant is to be independent of his or her home country. But it is common knowledge that at various levels Commission officials are subject to pressures to which they must respond because they are in a position of partnership, and which they may be tempted to bow to for career reasons: to obtain the backing they need to get promotion to the highest echelons. Where the professional ethic fervently adhered to by most officials is not enough, the "geographical balance" in the top positions in the Commission administration limits the scope for favouritism, particularly as regards awarding contracts for work, supplies and services. Various monitoring procedures exist to punish the most flagrant violations. But officials still talk of exceptions, such as the case of the official whom some say committed suicide rather than face the music. However, it seems that, in the eyes of officials, any corruption and questions of national loyalties are less of a problem than reconciling the interests of the Member States, which are sometimes perceived as adversaries.

In its dealings with the Member States, the Commission is frequently the target of accusations, to the extent that it becomes the perfect scapegoat in the public's eyes. This view arises in part from difficulties in understanding the nature of Community decision-making, and places officials in a position of insecurity. On one level, the complex way in which the Commission operates and the fact that it is clearly open to all sorts of influences make it particularly difficult to apprehend. On another level, a perceived "national interest" often conflicts with a perceived "European interest", with each governed by different criteria. It is said that just as the general interest is never simply the sum of private interests, the Community interest has a distinctive and paradoxical dimension.

The last concept recurs constantly in Commission vocabulary. In the context of regional policies, for example, an appeal is made to "Community interest" in negotiations with the Member States to revise the rules on the Structural Funds. The funds should be used to satisfy "genuine" needs, but it is impossible to ignore the demands of the Member States. In theory, resources are allocated in accordance with a higher interest, so that the process does not become bogged down in national self-seeking. On their side, the Member States champion the principle of subsidiarity, which implies greater flexibility on the part of the Community in problems which are the concern of national and regional authorities. In the preliminaries to the negotiations and then again in the course of such negotiations, a conflict between Community interest and subsidiarity emerges.

'Community interest' could be described as a "floating signifier", the term used by Lévi-Strauss to denote an idea which is essential but at the same time sufficiently vague that merely

invoking it has a particularly powerful effect. It is the *mana* which holds together endogenous debate<sup>11</sup>. The excess of meaning give eye-value to that concept which can be used in the political context as well as in the universe of magic or mythology. Of course, 'Community interest' is not *mana* in many respects, but the point of this comparison is the way the concept is used as a marker, as something instantly recognizable. It is incorporated into debate on the use of the Structural Funds and, by counteracting the rise of subsidiarity issues and, in the background, a perceived threat of the renationalization of Community policies, it helps to affirm the reality of some genuinely European interest.

This concept of European interest is also advanced when the Member States refer to the economic threat posed by other nations, such as Asian countries or the United States. Here it is an interest defined in relation to others, as a reaction to them: here the concept is presented as something positive, as an incontrovertible assertion of an all-embracing dynamic. When contrasted with subsidiarity, the notion of Community interest takes on a keener political significance.

Championing the cause of Community interest means, in the context of regional policy, pursuing a policy aimed at reducing regional disparities and making the transfers which are felt to be indispensable if the regions are to adapt to the Single Market. This means identifying the real needs of the countries concerned and establishing priorities, at the same time taking into account the different regional and national contexts.

In the case of development cooperation policy, the same type of reasoning justifies coordinating Member States' initiatives and entrusting the Community with responsibility for a number of activities which it is better placed to carry out. Community interest does not mean the same thing here. The complementarity of national policies and European programmes, the coordination of activities by the Community and the Member States is aimed as much at ensuring greater efficiency, given unchanged resources, as at ensuring Community membership of the club of world donors, which enables the Community and its Member States to offer each other mutual support. The EDF is a powerful tool for Community action in the ACP countries, but it does not cover the whole world or all of the sectoral aspects of development. Parliament has voted appropriations for specific activities which enable the Community to take its place on the international stage: humanitarian relief, democracy and human rights, women and development, tropical forests, and sustainable development, for instance. The Community occupies a special position in the debate on structural adjustment led by the Bretton Woods institutions, because of its programmes in support of structural reforms which aim to mitigate

---

<sup>11</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 'Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss', in M. Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1950), xlix.

the social impact.

Discussions between the Member States and the Commission take place on a different level when Community policies are not involved, but the challenge of development, the need to present a united front to other major economic powers, particularly the United States and Japan, and the relatively small weight of individual Member States in international forums all raise the question of the appropriate level of action. Some strategies can only be effective if coordinated on a large scale - for example, the fight against Aids or measures to relieve poverty. Commission officials see themselves as pursuing a general goal of greater coherence, which, at some point, raises the question whether the Commission should represent the Member States and whether a European interest should be articulated alongside national interests. Sovereignty has already been delegated in the area of foreign trade - and problems have arisen - and moves are under way in the diplomatic field. The Member States and the Commission are in open competition over representation, with the Member States winning the first round thanks to the reputation of institutions such as the Quai d'Orsay and the Foreign Office.

Coordination is at the heart of Community action. As one senior British official put it, jokingly, "*We coordinate between ourselves and the Member States coordinate against us*". But the notion can be applied in very different ways. In the case of the Single Market, for example, coordination is essential, both within the Commission and with the Member States, because other Community policies provide the necessary "flanking measures" which enable the internal market to operate without national frontiers. The general nature of the approach and the objective of coherence means that the DG in charge of running the internal market must take into account all the related dimensions dealt with by other DGs. This is not an administrative matter but a political objective which cuts down the number of parties involved, the areas for negotiation and the need for coordination.

If the coherence of the Commission's actions is the result of coordination at departmental level, and if the different departments concede that there must be no conflict between the objectives of different administrative units, the process becomes endless.

On the one hand, coordination is an ideal which can counteract the principle of specialization which tends to close departments off from each other, the subject of so many comments by officials. On the other hand, it is a consequence of the collegial form of government in the Commission. The principle of collective decision-making means that each Commissioner should be informed and able to express an opinion about any matter dealt with by Commission departments. This adds to the procedures and the comings and goings between numerous

departments and stretches people's patience to the limit. Some officials complain of an attenuation of collegiality: *"Nobody bothers to conceal the views of the Permanent Representatives in the cabinets these days. It used to be an insult to talk of the French cabinet or the Spanish or German cabinet, whereas now it's quite common"*.

The *cabinet*, which ought to be a model of coordination with the departments, is seen as a setting for power struggles. *"The specialized meeting of the chefs de cabinet can destroy the work done by the departments, so we have got into the habit of presenting dossiers at the last minute"*. The combination of three elements - *cabinet*, nationality and political party - creates a problem in responding to events (who does what?) and in relation to the DGs (problems of duplication, rivalry, frustrations). Hence the pessimistic comment of one official: *"In the Commission you spend 80% of your time preventing others from working; in your remaining 20% you will have a dossier to handle; but then 80% of the others will be trying to prevent you from working"*. Even in departments where officials know one another personally and interdepartmental coordination works smoothly, there is no guarantee of satisfaction: there will always be one sector that is not covered, one dossier missing, certain individuals who are absent. And where coordination is required because of the approval procedure, for example, or where the circulation of technical data requires some additional procedure to be carried out, it calls for such an extra injection of energy that, were it not for the administrative requirement, only those for whom it was their main task or an act of faith would undertake it.

Getting to know who does what involves an enormous amount of basic information gathering, which requires the goodwill of the other parties concerned - in some cases the Member States, in others political or sectoral counterparts.

The ambition of the Commission (in the sense of the Commissioners as a body) is to be the supreme coordinator. This guiding principle, which is found at the top of so many administrative bodies, becomes through constant reiteration a defining marker of Commission culture, echoed by staff: *"We are the Commission, not DG x or y: we form a single entity, working for the same cause"*. But the distribution of responsibilities in the Commission among the different Directorates-General is riddled with ambiguity and a source of conflicts of a different sort. When an Irishman tells us that *"whoever shouts the loudest carries the day"*, then any debate about the objective rationality of choices or compromises seems to exist at the level of folk theory only.

The need for coordination is one result of differences. These may be technical or political, but they are seen to be embodied in the department, the DG, or the Commission in contacts with others of the same rank or with institutional partners. The hierarchical or dominant position of

those concerned has always to be taken into account. The voice of a Commissioner, a Director-General and an administrator do not all carry the same weight, and the lead department is in a stronger position than the others.

The goal of perfect coordination is the world without frontiers that Europe is beginning to construct for itself. In practice, however, it faces strong and powerful oppositions of will. The anthropologists could observe that Commission official represents and defends the interests of his or her department within the Commission in much the same way that the Member States pursue their national interests in the name of the general European interest. The assertion of individual points of view are not necessarily seen to undermine the ideal prospect of "cohesion" if equal treatment is more or less guaranteed. The Commission is ideally meant to assert an identity both indivisible and unique; to this end, "coordination" should ideally be combined for some with appeals for "transparency" and a new "information policy" for both external and internal purposes.

#### **A question of management?**

The whole question of 'management' has become important in the Commission. A few lines here on some of the assumptions involved, and on a few of the problems, might help to allow further reflection on this issue.

For many historians of management studies, management theories derive largely and unproblematically from Anglo-American traditions and preoccupations. The assumptions with which management theorists and consultants have worked have often constructed a human nature out of Anglo-American preoccupations. The presumed motivations of working men (and, later, women) have therefore ranged historically from simple 'economic stimuli' (salary levels) to 'emotional stimuli' of belonging and participation, and then on in the 1960s to questions of autonomy, the realization of 'self' and more individual responsibility.

In keeping with these ideas of the 1960s, various new schools of thought gathered appeal. One of these was 'transactionalism', drawn from the assumptions of psychology and psychoanalysis. It seemed to have the merit, in the 1960s, of both taking the individual into account and then reasserting organizational rationality through the language of the market place (through 'transactions'). Life was modelled as a 'game', an interaction of *egos* through processes of mutual stimulation and exchange. Thirty years later, in a manual on 'management' now produced annually by management consultants for Commission officials, transactional analysis is briefly mentioned as an approach suiting French officials better than do other theories of more obvious Anglo-American derivation (see the manuals entitled *Programme de Développement au Management*, Cegos). This has caused wry comments from officials of

other national backgrounds: "*The French live in a world, you see, where relations have a pay-off*".

Following the relative confidence of the 1960s and 1970s, it was felt for a while within management studies that perhaps there was a certain 'ethnocentricity' about many of the assumptions of management theory. As a result, 'cross-cultural management' studies came into vogue. However, management theory works within a positivist paradigm that dictates that culture has to be defined before it can be 'operationalized'. Culture has to be something that is operationalizable, otherwise it cannot be measured; and if it cannot be measured, with rigorous patterns of causation and the like, then it is not scientific. Within this view, culture has a positive definition which includes things such as norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, expectations and roles (all reified as separate areas in some way) and these are then deemed to have an 'influence' on management. It is as if there is a list of everything in life - but this everything then has arrows going between itself and something else called 'management' or the 'organization'. There is also, however, in the same cross-cultural management studies, an implicitly negative definition of culture. The cultures so defined inhabit a taxonomy alongside economics, politics and everything else with which organizations are principally preoccupied, and the definitions of cultures themselves are the work of the theorists rather than of those studied. Questions about "*does culture influence management/an organization?*" are inevitably produced by such a paradigm and are at the same time of limited use. If culture is everything, then it *embraces* management. If it is not everything, then by its very definition its influence is minimal. The question is already answered. Not surprisingly perhaps, the value and vogue of cross-cultural management studies have recently begun to wane.

The notion of 'culture' is, however, still alive in the management field. On an older model of national cultures, it assumes the possibility of internal uniformity and homogeneity as a source of corporate identity. For many in the Commission, such ideas have seemed very attractive.

As it has entered the Commission, management theory often seems to take the composite form of a cross-cultural perspective mixed with some notional aim of a single corporate culture. In this best-of-both-worlds scenario, different national cultures or different DGs will work in 'synergy', and then clearly agreed, rational rules and procedures will form the basis of a single culture and identity. 'Synergy' is an important and emotive word in many parts of the Commission, and can elide with other elusive, unifying ideals ranging from 'coordination' to '*esprit européen*'.

The attraction of management theory seems to have increased progressively in the Commission after the 1973 enlargement. Those from northern Europe were the main

instigators of management consciousness. The 'anarchy' which they perceived in the Commission could possibly be resolved, it was felt, by synergy and the establishment of clear and rational procedures, a single Commission culture. A sense of instability is constantly encouraged by the changes of Commissioners, the different loyalties of client group, nationality, religion, and political party, the tensions between vertical and horizontal sectors or structures, and the sometimes independent and competing agendas of *cabinets* and of *cabinets* and departments: all these sources of disorder, and more, might at least be attenuated, it has been felt, by "*proper management*".

Such hopes have been neither readily nor easily fulfilled. Management courses that have been offered, sometimes under external pressure, are unevenly distributed and very short. More than this, however, 'management' has not been able to come up with the cross-cultural panacea that it has sometimes seemed to offer. It has often, instead, become bogged down in some of the very problems and differences it was meant to solve. The formal launch of management in the Commission does not seem to have been helped by the fact that it was a Danish Commissioner who first insisted on some management training for all officials, and then a Danish firm of management consultants was employed to carry out the educative process. This is a favourite story about 'management' from southern European officials, and this is a story told with the full force and relish of imputed corruption (a point explained at the beginning of the last chapter). More recently, there has been widespread discussion and consultation on the possibilities of decentralization, including the decentralization of recruitment to the level of the DG. Some who would normally favour decentralization nevertheless fear a greater element of arbitrariness and irrationality from such a move: "*You know what we mean.*" The unions are generally opposed to the change, although one of the largest unions, a union of openly left-wing leanings, claims to be in favour if the "*whole of social dialogue*" were decentralized. (This would mean some local staff representatives also being involved in recruitment at the decentralized level as they are now in the centralized procedures of DG IX.) The other largest union claims no political allegiance but is externally seen as right-wing; according to one representative, it is largely made up of northern Europeans where the other union seemed to appeal to southern Europeans more. This second union is formally against the change altogether. One member explained that they did not want recruitment to "*fall entirely into a southern mould*". Northern Europeans have generally pushed for decentralization on the grounds of more responsibility, teamwork, coordination and order. Like so much else, the ideal of decentralization, too, seems to be elusive, as it seems to risk disappearing in practice into all that it is not meant to be.

Several DGs have had to lose or gain units and Directorates in recent months, and efforts have had to be made in each instance to construct new departmental coherence. In at least two



instances, DGs undergoing upheavals of this kind have organized 'management working groups' where problems might be discussed and solutions proposed, with the aim of creating a new DG culture. However, the issues which have arisen have invariably evoked the sorts of problems discussed elsewhere in this report. Apparently straightforward issues such as filing and mailing systems and questions of information and communication have not easily yielded simple procedural agreement. They have, instead, evoked and revitalized tensions between different traditions of centralization and decentralization, different understandings of what constitutes information and how it should be obtained, and different understandings of what filing is and who it is for. All such issues and more have been privately dressed on occasion in the kinds of mutual perceptions between southern and northern Europe already described. Management theories do not have space for different notions of personhood, and do not sit easily still with the nuances of personal alliance and loyalty through which the Commission departments often work.

Ultimately, where some northern Europeans might imagine that through 'management' they are creating a unified and rational organization in which the human workers are considered, cared for and responsible, many from southern Europe more readily see a loss of democracy, the erection of impersonal rules that no one will follow, the impossible eradication of personal strategies and loyalties, and a new dawn of anarchy with their own sense of structure and control under threat. The discourse of order and disorder or rationality and irrationality (and so on) in which 'management' gains both attraction and criticism has a certain autonomy, however, and is - as has been noted at the beginning of the last chapter - independent of any national or northern/southern differences or attributions. There are many in the Commission, from both northern and southern Europe, who see the advantage of clear rules and a certain rigour but who see the end therein of "*creativity*" and "*imagination*". Some of the difficulties and ambiguities of the Commission, internal and external, are thereby underlined: "*We would be a bureaucracy*".

## CONCLUSION

An anthropological study of an institution as complex as the Commission is not easy. We had to penetrate a world that is, in some respects, a closed book to the general public, but at the same time we had to keep our distance so that we could grasp people's own perceptions and the significance of their actions within the different contexts of this institution. Coverage of a number of DGs meant that we were able to make comparisons. Also, observing staff at work, and following the progress of a number of 'dossiers' at different levels of responsibility, helped us to understand the logic and perceptions constructing the daily round at the Commission. The study also allowed us to examine some of our own preconceived ideas about organizations of this kind, assumptions that might be commonly held about it being like a

government department, an international bureaucracy, or a multinational company, for example. Depending on the area observed, the Commission does present some of the features of well-known models. But a superficial glance, informed by preconceived models, would merely flatten the most striking features of life as it is lived at the Commission. Against a backdrop of received wisdom about the "Brussels technocracy" plus the ability of Commission staff to switch effortlessly from self-complacency to pessimism, we had to take a critical and self-aware look at this institution in which Europe is being constructed. Two maxims of which we regularly received reminders were (a) never lose sight of the historical background and (b) never forget that this organization, emanating from a sense of shared venture, is built on a "confluence of cultures".

One important point here relates to the special nature of the Commission. There is a tendency to think of the Commission as an ordinary administration, along the lines of a national civil service. Some of the people we met made the point that the Commission was conceived as a target-oriented administration, then became more and more cumbersome with successive enlargements, and is now virtually unmanageable. If the Commission is seen in this light, one conclusion might be that better management could break down the walls that have been erected between departments, make optimum use of human resources, and counteract the rigidity of administrative structures. But this diagnosis presupposes that the Commission is an homogeneous entity or that it presents all the features, negative and positive, of organizations that have experienced rapid growth.

Our approach presents a somewhat different picture. Our daily contacts with Commission staff in the different DGs presented us with officials' self-perceptions of being not simply bureaucrats but also intellectuals. Staff are constantly required to question what they are doing - to question the significance of Community activity, Europe's future, the complex nature of relations between the Commission and traditional institutions in the Member States and, last but not least, the relativity of their personal views in a multicultural structure. It was stressed that what made life at the Commission rich and varied was the situation of cultures and traditions combining in the service of a joint enterprise which remains, by definition, unfinished. At the same time, there is no doubt that this pluralism is also felt to have a centrifugal effect which counterbalances all the more classic understandings of administrative integration. It does not lend itself to conventional forms of administrative hierarchy. It can even be a source of instability and confrontation.

But the constant confrontation of cultural differences can be dynamic too. One feature that is, at the same time, felt to set the Commission apart is its capacity to integrate and shape this diversity by steering a course between two perceived dangers: (a) homogeneity, or the

"creation of a uniform and soulless army of functionaries", and (b) heterogeneity, which might mean an acceptance of the dominance of national loyalties. In effect, the whole dynamic of the European venture, the organization of tasks and the resultant power structure, make it possible both to integrate and exploit cultural differences. But this situation also makes for differences and complexity, leading to recurring cries about "*coordination*" and "*information flows*". Internal communication problems, access to information and the unofficial power this confers, are traced back in large measure to a unity/pluralism dialectic seen to permeate the Commission. Outside criticism of the "Brussels technocracy" ignores this dialectic, felt by some to be an internal hallmark of the institution.

This anthropological approach to the Commission has briefly drawn attention to notions of history and memory which would merit separate examination. Staff are constantly looking to the future: their work is directed to a future day which never dawns. An obsession with "*finalizing*", with bringing things to a conclusion, is ever present in the Commission, yet the idea of Europe is an ever moving target. At the same time, the need for reflexivity, which came up time and time again, suggests a quest to realign the dimensions of the present and the future on a past that many feel has been taken from them. The virtual absence of symbols and rituals, to which anthropologists are particularly sensitive, is significant. This is a real lack which clouds the idea of Europe, even among its main protagonists.

Is it merely a communication problem - a matter of inadequate relational or media techniques? There is, (for many officials), a genuine problem with the image of its staff that the Commission projects to the general public. It can feel as if the intercultural complexity that, for many, makes the institution so rich, or that even turns it into a "European melting pot", is being concealed; as if "efficiency" and "high performance" are being emphasized instead, creating an image that has rebounded on its promoters since the reaction of the general public has been suspicion and rejection. One motivation expressed in support of this study has been that it might help people to understand what officials actually do or what their preoccupations are, and the kinds of problems they encounter daily. This is at least the conclusions we drew from our trip into what we now realise is a little-known world.