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

ANDRÉ GERRITS

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

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

Discourse, disciplines and strategies

In terms of the splitters and joiners in EU studies, Van Middelaar is firmly in the latter camp. He does not shun the broad-brush view; he seems to enjoy the big picture. If every advantage has its disadvantage, in the case of *De passage naar Europa*, the drawbacks are twofold: firstly, topping one metaphor with another, Van Middelaar is occasionally guilty of stylistical overacting. Secondly – and more importantly – the book is well-argued and structured, but lacks a consistent theoretical framework. Van Middelaar introduces a series of theoretical – or rather abstract, analytical – notions, which the reader expects will guide him through the extensive empirical analysis (covering the full five decades of European integration); only a few of these notions are systematically applied throughout the text, however.

Van Middelaar distinguishes between three European ‘discourses’: the Europe of the ‘clerks’ (or the ‘offices’, as he puts it), the Europe of the ‘states’, and the Europe of the ‘citizens’. He couples these discourses with three academic disciplines. The Europe of the offices is linked with the traditional ‘scholars of integration’: economists, political and other social scientists. This discourse is primarily driven by bureaucratic instincts. It is Van Middelaar’s variation on neo-functionalism. The discourse of the Europe of the states argues that the interests of the Member States are best served by cooperation among national governments. This is how Van Middelaar rephrases the traditional approach of intergovernmentalism: the realm of historians and specialists in International Relations. Finally, the Europe of the citizens exemplifies the ambition to transfer specific power and prerogatives from the national states to European institutions. The Europe of the citizens is still under construction, however, practically as well as theoretically. Its discourse has no clear connection with any specific academic discipline, as yet.

Van Middelaar’s extensive and rather eclectic analytical exercise (discourses linked to disciplines and mixed with theories of integration) is not systematically followed-up in the descriptive part of the book. Although Van Middelaar seems to have most affinity with the historians’ approach, his book lacks a critical evaluation of the merits of the various disciplines in understanding the mechanisms of European cooperation and integration. In the final part of the book, Van Middelaar connects these discourses with three different strategies aimed at winning over the public, to generate public legitimacy. The ‘states’ follow what he perceives as the ‘Roman approach’, i.e. the attempt to create a sense of common ‘advantage’ though concrete

achievements of a material or immaterial kind: from peace to a strong currency. This clearly resonates with the pragmatic, output-oriented quality of intergovernmental cooperation. The ‘citizens’ approach focuses on the attempt to forge a sense of belonging, of togetherness, dubbed by Van Middelaar as the ‘German’ strategy of creating common bonds or partnerships (the German language has a beautiful word for this: *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, or ‘community of fate’). Finally, the European clerks, ensconced in their steel-and-glass structures in Brussels, have devised another, ‘Greek’ strategy: the ‘choir’. This aims not so much at the creation of a common identity or a clear sense of advantage or common interest, but attempts instead to generate something like a ‘common cause’ – a Union in search of a people.

Three policy ‘spheres’

Discourses, disciplines and strategies for legitimacy seem only indirectly linked with the major analytical novelty introduced by Van Middelaar: the differentiation between three European policy ‘spheres’. The European states interact on three different levels, he argues, or within three concentric circles, each having its own ordering and moving principles. The inner sphere is the community: the institutional outcome of the 1951 Treaty Establishing the European Steel and Coal Community. The inner sphere is the European project, the Commission, the bureaucracy: the ‘Europe of the offices’. The ‘outer sphere’ is the total of all sovereign states in Europe, within and without the Union. Politics in the outer sphere is driven by national self-interest; order is (traditionally) achieved through borders and balances of power. Inter-state relations in the outer sphere may be extremely dynamic, but they are least affected by the processes of change on the European continent. Concerning European politics in this outer sphere, Van Middelaar focuses on the question of representation: who speaks on behalf of Europe? Representation, he rightly argues, gives substance (the capacity to speak and to act) to geo-political entities such as states and international organizations, including the European Union. In this respect, he argues, nothing has really changed in the outer sphere. To date, no single actor can convincingly pretend to speak on behalf of Europe. (This is Van Middelaar’s way of saying that the European Union has little foreign policy to speak of.) The French president Nicolas Sarkozy, in his capacity as President of the European Council, came closest to playing the role of a true representative of Europe – during the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Van Middelaar seems, however, to slightly overstate the effect of Sarkozy’s peacemaking efforts. Sarkozy’s intervention was certainly instrumental in brokering a cease-fire between the warring countries, but whether it really stopped the Russians from occupying the Georgian capital of Tbilisi seems doubtful. The voice of Europe is heard in Moscow, but only to the extent that Moscow wants to hear it.

1 Andrew Moravcsik, ‘What can we learn from the Collapse of the European Constitutional Project?’, *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 47:2 (2006) 219-241, here 238.

2 Luuk van Middelaar, *De passage naar Europa. Geschiedenis van een begin* (Dissertatie Universiteit van Amsterdam 2009; Groningen 2009).

De passage naar Europa is primarily concerned with the intermediate sphere of European politics: the zone between the outer (non-EU) and the inner (EU) spheres. The intermediate sphere is where national states, governments and parliaments interact with one another and with the Community institutions in Brussels. It is the political realm of the Member States, driven by the pursuit of national interest, in combination with a growing awareness of commonality, of shared aims and ambitions. Van Middelaar's analysis, imaginatively and expressively formulated, concurs with the dominant academic interpretations of European cooperation: the member states continue to be the crucial actors in the building of 'Europe'. The power for (further) reform remains with the national states, Van Middelaar stresses. He does not discuss the challenging follow-up issue of whether the Member States have actually benefited from the process of integration in terms of capabilities and legitimacy – an argument famously posited by the economic historian Alan Milward.³

European policymaking in the intermediate sphere, crucially important to the integration process, largely lacks form and structure. Van Middelaar seems rather optimistic as to whether the Lisbon Treaty will provide the structure the intermediate sphere so urgently needs. He appears to attach great relevance to the newly created position of (semi-permanent) president of the Council. It is a 'revolutionary change', he asserts. The chairman of the Council does not speak on behalf of 'Brussels'; but he or she represents the *joint* member states, as the Treaty does not permit him / her to 'exercise a national mandate' (290). This will enable the chairman, Van Middelaar expects, to more effectively represent the European Union internally and internationally. It remains to be seen how revolutionary these changes will really be. It seems that the historian Van Middelaar gets somewhat carried away by the events of his own time. In any event, his optimistic interpretation has not yet been born out by events during the early days of Van Rompuy's presidency. Very few Europeans – the Belgians excepted perhaps – feel themselves represented by the new president of the Council. And very few non-Europeans consider the president to be *the* representative of Europe. And even if other countries were to perceive Van Rompuy as Europe's representative, this would not necessarily be a good thing for the European Union. More than Van Middelaar cares to admit, the appointment of Van Rompuy (and his 'foreign minister', High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton), is typical of the type of compromises entered into in the intermediate sphere. *Die Welt* characterized the appointment of these two relatively minor politicians to such crucial (i.e. visible) EU positions as an act of European 'Selbstverzwergung' ('self-dwarfing', or deliberately making oneself into a

³ Alan Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation State* (Berkeley, Cal. 1992).

dwarf).⁴ As yet, it seems that the presidency has added another institution to the intermediate sphere of European politics, thereby creating less, rather than more, substance and structure. Being himself an adviser to Van Rompuy, Van Middelaar is however in a unique position to prove himself right, and to give greater import to his own optimistic prophecy.

Time and fortuna

De passage naar Europa consists of three parts, all of which focus on the dynamics of European integration, and more in particular on the relations (in terms of power, influence, decision-making capacity) between Member States themselves, as well as between Member States and the 'inner circle', i.e. Brussels. Although Van Middelaar's analysis largely concurs with the intergovernmental approach to European integration research, he seems to carefully avoid any explicit theoretical position. *De passage naar Europa* is analytically rich and creative: but for a doctoral dissertation – or for any academic study of the European integration process for that matter – the book is remarkably a-theoretical. This is particularly notable in the second part on the book, on the Union's external relations. Van Middelaar shows little interest in the academic debates on the nature, the role and the relevance of the European Union as an international 'actor'. How to define the 'power' of the EU: hard, soft, normative? How do others perceive the Union: as an irrelevant or declining actor, a new 'empire', a force for good – or as a predominantly conservative, inward-looking 'institution'? And how do these perceptions impact on the external relations of the Union?

Van Middelaar introduces two notions which seem fundamentally incompatible with any approach to political change informed by theory, namely 'time' and '*fortuna*' (the unexpected 'visitor at the door') (185). Machiavelli notwithstanding, time and chance/luck/coincidence are concepts which one rarely meets in political science or other social science texts. They are inherently imprecise and disputable, and extremely difficult to apply to any structural or comparative analysis. This, however, as Van Middelaar implicitly assumes, does not make these notions any less important. There are ample reasons to accept time and coincidence as relevant aspects of the drawn-out, complicated and faltering process of European integration. Van Middelaar considers time and *fortuna* as particularly relevant in the intermediate zone of European politics, which seems very reasonable. The EU has little controlling power in an area dominated by Member States and outside of its jurisdiction. However – and this is an important issue – it seems debatable whether Eastern

⁴ *Die Welt*, November 21, 2009 (<http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article5286203/Europas-Selbstverzwergung-schockt-die-USA.html>).

enlargement, the most crucial change 'Europe' experienced during the post-Cold War decades, is the most evident example of either time or *fortuna*, as Van Middelaar seems to suggest.

Europe and the European Union transformed dramatically during the 1990s and 2000s, and Van Middelaar rightly stresses the importance of the unexpected and unruly as aspects of these processes of change. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of the Union were indeed neither inevitable, nor predetermined. His assertion, however, that the Members States of the European Union dragged their feet and hesitated before finally accepting the membership of eight (and later ten) post-communist countries seems unfair and unfounded. In my interpretation, the dual processes of the EU deepening and enlarging from the early 1990s represent a rather unique example of political imagination and brinkmanship. In comparison with the extended accession trajectory of the United Kingdom (which covered almost two decades), and taking into account the basic consensus among Western European elites and populations on the principle of enlargement, as well as the far more extensive and complicated letter, spirit and practice of European integration of the 1990s, Eastern enlargement occurred at a historic speed, and surprisingly smoothly. The fall of communism may have come unexpectedly and caused a great deal of confusion and uncertainty (in other words: *fortuna* hit the continent dramatically), but given the historic dimension of the changes, the European Union acted decisively and convincingly. If politics is



◀ East Berliners drive their traditional Trabant, or 'Trabi' cars through Checkpoint Charlie and are greeted by cheering West-Berliners.
Picture-alliance/dpa.

mostly about how states (governments) effectively deal with the time variable, with unexpected events and uncertainties, then the enlargement strategy – which covers the outer, the inner and the intermediate spheres of European integration – may be considered a prime example, perhaps even *the* prime example, of EU Politics with a capital P.

The history of European integration 'has been told a thousand times' (203), and it may be considered an act of intellectual courage to add another general study to the huge pile of books and articles already published. *De passage naar Europa* is far from an average academic study of European integration. It leaves the reader (this reader in anyway) with the question of why going through a book of more than 500 pages which covers the well-known territory of European integration is such a rewarding experience. *De passage naar Europa* is empirically sound (mostly based on written sources), and theoretically meagre, but particularly strong in terms of interpretation. And it is well-written. Van Middelaar links discourse, decision-making and legitimacy in an overall analytical framework which is intellectually convincing and esthetically attractive. *De passage naar Europa* is a great read. It cannot be easy to translate Van Middelaar's rich and creative style, but the English version of the book currently in preparation will be an important service to all those who would otherwise have missed this significant contribution to the historiography of European integration. ◀

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