

Building Bridges over Troubled Waters

EU Civil Servants and the Transcendence of Distance and Difference

Seamus Montgomery

ABSTRACT

This Forum contribution presents fragmented accounts of historical narratives collected while conducting ethnographic fieldwork among civil servants in and around the European Commission in Brussels, Belgium. It focuses on the roles that heritage-making practices play in articulating European identity and belonging within these institutional spaces. In the ongoing debates over ‘bridges’ and ‘walls’, Commission officials advocate building the former and tearing down the latter. The European heritage narratives they enact tell the story of a supranational community formed from the expansion of external borders and the elimination of internal ones. Through the transcendence of borders, both physical and cognitive, geographic distances and social differences are made increasingly irrelevant. Their efforts in this regard are nonetheless hindered by futurist temporalities that orient Europeanness in opposition to the past.

KEYWORDS

borders, European Commission, EU integration, heritage-making, temporality, Brussels

Before the global coronavirus pandemic became ‘the biggest challenge in EU history’ (Zalan 2020), this distinction was given to several pivotal events unfolding on the geopolitical landscape in which the figurations of ‘bridges’ and ‘walls’ were salient tropes. At the height of the migrant/refugee crisis, the call for bridge-building came from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and others who argued the necessity of showing EU-wide ‘solidarity’ in accommodating those fleeing war and persecution – if not out of a sense of humanitarian duty, then out of an obligation to preserve freedom of movement across Europe. During the campaigns for the 2016 EU membership referendum in the United Kingdom, those in favour of Brexit vowed to ‘take back control of our laws, money and borders’ while those against maintained that Britain and Europe were ‘better together’. Across the pond, Donald Trump entered the office of the presidency on a promise to ‘build the



wall' and expand the Mexico–United States land barrier. The debates gave rise to new political identities, bridge-builders and wall-builders, which have eclipsed the traditional political axis of left and right in matters of socio-economic policy. As models for the ideal state society, the dual structural metaphors invoke corollary epistemic oppositions of openness/closedness, inwardness/outwardness, protectionism/free trade and nationalism/globalism. Wall-builders are the 'somewheres' who articulate their identities and belongings in the ethno-national vernacular of blood and soil (Goodhart 2017). Bridge builders are the 'anywheres' or 'nowheres' (May 2016), 'whose hearts lie in Paris or London, whose money is in New York or Cyprus, and whose loyalty is to Brussels' (Krastev 2017: 56). At stake is the significance of national borders, both physical and social, in the contemporary stage of globalisation.

This Forum contribution analyses certain ways in which civil servants working in the European Commission position themselves in these debates while invoking a shared supranational European heritage. Its findings are drawn from fieldwork I carried out over eighteen months while embedded in the institutional spaces of the 'Brussels bubble', an inner-city concentration of bureaucrats, politicians, representatives, journalists, lawyers, consultants, advisors, diplomats, lobbyists, activists and other stakeholders working in and around the European Union's institutions headquartered in central Belgium. Among international cities, Brussels is second only to Dubai: more than six in ten of its residents were born abroad. Its European Quarter is a comfortable habitat for those with a multinational background and a tendency to fly the nest. The social bubble is a professional and epistemic community of foreigners who understand their disinclination towards national borders as a direct consequence of working to foster cultural exchange on a European scale.

For those who take part in the creation and implementation of European-level policies, Europe signifies a meaningful cultural construction for a supranational community arising out of an original relation to internecine conflict. EU officials articulate Europeanness in ways that act as vehicles for transcending geographical distance and cultural difference. The effectuality of their engagements in European supranational heritage-making are nevertheless inhibited by a self-consciously futurist orientation, wherein Europe is an unfinished project under permanent construction that is comprehensible only in reference to an uncertain and undefined eventuality whose realisation is forever postponed.

Making Peace from Coal and Steel

‘Watch your step. This road is unfinished, like Europe’. Leon has come to collect me at the tram station at Tervuren, a Flemish suburb of Brussels whose quiet streets and manicured lawns are where many officials go to retire. ‘You know, it’s like a lot of things that you build: you can build a beautiful house, but the foundations you have to be very careful with’. Recruited in his mid-forties into the first cohort of UK civil servants to leave Britain for Brussels in 1973, Leon counts himself among ‘the original pioneers’ of the European integration project. His use of symbolism emboldens me – if not for the way it evokes the central metaphor of Shore’s (2000) landmark study of institutional Europe-building processes, then for how readily he delivers it.

The First and Second World Wars provide the prologue and *mise en scène* for the EU creation story. As Feargal, a director in DG Education and Culture (EAC)¹ states: ‘The shared history of the wars of the twentieth century is huge. The shared understanding that Europe passed through these terrible moments and nearly killed itself, self-destructed – or more or less did, twice – that’s very powerful. It’s shared by everybody here’. Officials see themselves as an historical community that arose out of ‘an original relation to war’ (Ricoeur 2006: 82). I often hear them speak of this roughly thirty-year period as not two separate events but as a single civil war in which Europeans fought themselves. As Arnaud, a director in the DG for Humanitarian Aid, explains: ‘There is no such thing as a “First and Second World War”. We have undergone in Europe a major civil war which started in 1914 and finished up in 1945’. The EU’s institutions, agencies and services originate in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which reorganised the two industries in the Ruhr and Lorraine under a central administrative authority. ‘They used coal and steel, the two ingredients that were used for war, to make people mutually interdependent. There wouldn’t be these arms races anymore, and people would see the grand possibilities’ (Leon). Adversarial nations that played oppositional leading roles as protagonist and antagonist throughout the affair are now institutionally bound to one another in a relationship of mutually assured construction.

Officials point to an ensuing ‘long peace’ by limiting what constitutes ‘war’ to armed struggles between member states. Interruptions that fall outside this category, such as the Balkan Wars, the Srebrenica massacre, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Russian occupation of Crimea and the so-called War on Terror, are redacted from the

official EU story. Maja, a lawyer in the legal service, recounts to me the girlhood she spent in the mountains of Slovenia: ‘I was growing up right in the middle of the . . . wars – but you don’t call it that because we’re up north. They didn’t really get any impact from that’. Giovanni, a head of sector in DG EAC, spent the last week in Belgrade, where, chatting with a local about some historical event or other, he inadvertently asked, ‘Did it happen during the war?’ ‘Which war?’ was the response. This made him reflect on how different the perceptions can be across the East–West divide: ‘For an EU citizen, the “War” is the Second World War. For the Western Balkan people, war is much more recent’. Shielded from the Yugoslav wars at a comfortable geographical distance, Europeans living to the north and west of the battlefields have forgotten them to the degree that they fail to remember them as wars at all.

Acts of heritage-making infuse collective memory into processes of identity formation. Storytelling practices are integral to how Commission officials locate themselves in the world, and the yarns they spin imbue their work with broader historical significances beyond the particular and immediate. Two dominant narratives permeate their retellings of the EU creation story. The first sees the EU as a peace project focused on the abolition of nationalism as a necessary precondition for peace. The second envisions the integration of societies as the indirect by-product of an integration of economies. The two narratives embody the tensions existing between two traditions of Western liberalism: the economic liberalism of ‘open markets’, associated with more conservative, right-wing policies; and the social liberalism of ‘open cultures’, associated with more progressive, left-wing ones. Both function as techniques of legitimation that validate and authenticate the long-term integration project and the everyday work of European-level institutions (Calligaro 2015). Once the integration of the social realm is complete, the necessary conditions for future war on the continent are permanently precluded. Interdependencies among trading partners become strengthened to such a degree as to make it an unaffordable prospect in social and cognitive terms as well as in economic ones.

Building Bridges Across State Borders

If the tropes of walls and bridges may be said to signify the strengthening and weakening of state borders, EU policymakers have, since the

ECSC, firmly rooted themselves in the bridge-building camp. In a brochure titled 'Europe without borders: the Schengen area', the Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship paraphrased the official stance on borders:

On a continent where nations once shed blood to defend their territories, today borders only exist on maps ... Removing borders, ensuring safety and building trust took many years after two devastating world wars. The creation of the Schengen area is one of the greatest achievements of the EU and it is irreversible. (European Commission 2015)

For former president Jean-Claude Juncker, borders are 'the worst invention ever made by politicians' (Mamic et al. 2016). The ontogeny of the European project, whereby it developed from a 'community' into a 'union', is uncharacteristic of most international organisations and nation-states around today. The continuous revision of its internal and external borders has produced an unparalleled degree of shapeshifting. Its territories have expanded by way of a series of enlargements to the north, south and east, growing from six member countries to twenty-eight. With each one, the goods, services, capital and people moving across the continent that are considered to be European broadens. The integration project of 'ever closer union' among Europeans is thus a social, cultural and cognitive process in addition to an economic and territorial one.

Meanwhile, an erasure of internal borders has occurred though the creation of the Schengen area and the single market. Leon recalls how, from 1990, the passing of the Schengen Act had the effect of making him less conscious of state borders by allowing him to traverse them while less-than-conscious:

I would get on the train in Brussels and I would hand over a detailed statement of how much Belgian money I was taking with me, how much Italian lira and what other monies I had. I would have to put my passport and all of it in an envelope. When I got to the border with Italy, there was a long pause and then I got all the stuff back, you see! Whereas ten years later, I would just get into my sleeper and pass off, and then I'd wake up at my destination.

Falling asleep in Benelux and waking up in Italy is an experience of physical decontextualisation that blurs the boundaries separating national territories.

Between 2007 and 2017, the number of EU citizens living and working in another member state doubled from eight to seventeen million (European Commission 2018). Each day, two million transcend national borders on their way to and from work. Nine million have

participated in the Erasmus programme in the three decades since its inception. ‘If you ask citizens, “What is the most positive achievement of the EU?”’, remarks Emma, a policy officer in DG EAC, ‘they say, “Peace, free movement of people, the Erasmus programme”. It may sound like a cliché, but this “building bridges” between the countries – that’s really important.’ She relates to me the remarks of a recent Erasmus graduate from Germany who said, ‘I could never fight in a war in Europe because I would think that the person on the other side could be one of my friends I met on Erasmus.’ Commission officials consider the freedom of movement – the right to live, work, study and fall in love without borders – as a sacred value.

Eliminating Spatial Hierarchies and Reinforcing Temporal Ones

Officials articulate an EU heritage characterised by an elimination of internal and external borders leading to the social, economic and cognitive unification among Europe’s inhabitants and the elimination of internecine conflict among its states. Through a permanent transcendence of borders – social, economic, territorial and intersubjective – EU heritage seeks to transcend the particularities of past differences and differing pasts. Brussels-based European identities are thus ways of exploring the world that negate deeply spatial assumptions concerning the relevance of the nation-state for modes of self-recognition and belonging.

The Parliamentarium, a museum in the visitors’ centre beside the European Parliament, is a significant EU memory site. Strolling through the exhibition, I notice a quote on the wall taken from a pamphlet published in 1939: ‘... national sovereignty is the root cause of the most crying evils of our time and of the steady march of humanity back to tragic disaster and barbarism ... The only final remedy for this supreme and catastrophic evil of our time is a federal union of the peoples’ (Lothian 1939). If war was Europe’s downfall, nationalism and the fetishisation of national borders was its original sin. One policy officer’s characterisation of the French and German nations in the first half of the twentieth century is particularly infantilizing:

‘No! It’s mine!’ ‘No, I was here first. Give it to me!’ That was essentially the conversation they were having over the coalfields of Alsace and Lorraine from about 1870 to 1945. When [EU founding fathers] Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman and Altiero Spinelli came along, they did what

any responsible adult would do upon discovering children squabbling on a playground, which is to say, 'Why don't we share?'

In seeking to eliminate spatial hierarchies, EU officials reify and reinforce temporal ones. Nationalism, nationness and national borders exemplify the backwardness, outdatedness and irrationality of yesterday – an instinct to be pacified and a bondage to be liberated from. As Marc Blainey (2016) argues in his outline for a contemporary anthropology of Belgium, these modes of Europeanness are imbued with a certain Belgianness or 'belgitude' whereby nationness is expressed through a studied apprehension toward the reality of 'the nation' itself. The integration process of 'ever closer union' is thus read as a ripening, coming-of-age evolution into a state of Kantian 'maturity' or Baudelairean 'self-elaboration' and out of the moral and intellectual folly of youth (Foucault and Rabinow 1984). Officials regard it as an elevated mode of transcending place, frontiers and the primordial trappings of ethnonational belonging.

Nation-building is a full-time endeavour. A nation is a modern ideological construct that is the product of continuous processes by which 'dead languages can be revived, traditions invented, quite fictitious pristine purities restored' (Gellner 1983: 56). Representations of historicised memory delineate the boundaries between societies that imagine themselves as mutually different, requiring 'every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalisation of its own history' (Nora 1989: 15). In an age of memorialisation preoccupied with the production and circulation of memory sites, Europeanness nonetheless struggles to invent the kinds of memories and traditions that come easily to nations and work so effectively to their advantage. In contrast to modes of nationness that gaze back at a time when the nation state was the centremost unit in which collective identity and belonging were expressed, the EU is paradigmatically and self-consciously futurist in orientation: it 'propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so' (Sartre 1973: 28). Like the road leading from the platform at Tervuren, Europe is an unfinished project under permanent construction, existing in a state of suspended animation and perpetual becoming. 'The political aim of the European project has never been clarified. But what is most interesting for the anthropologist is that it must not be clarified' (Abélès 2000: 36). The final act is left open-ended; there is a known direction of travel but no discernible terminus. Commission officials are future-making creatures for whom the future is a cultural fact (Appadurai 2013) and 'the enemy becomes not a particular opponent but the recent past' (Connerton 2009: 51).

Making an enemy of the past by equating it with nationalism and equating nationalism with war, they aspire not to venerate the ghosts of yesterday but to exorcise them from the body politic. Once war is made a thing of history, history is made the story of war. By consequence, EU heritage-making efforts are limited to selecting recycled fragments of pre-existing national histories which are reconfigured into a pastiche that is ambiguous, decontextualised and open-ended enough to include five hundred million citizens at once. As it makes little sense to speak of common origins, the engineers of European society feel more comfortable speaking of common destinies.

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Seamus Montgomery, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology and the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society at the University of Oxford.
E-mail: seamus.montgomery@anthro.ox.ac.uk

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Notes

1. Labour in the permanent administration of the EU Commission is divided among thirty-three departments or directorates-general, each with its own policy area and workplace environment.

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