

Book Review: The Passage to Europe: How A Continent Became A Union

by Blog Admin

June 21, 2013

Given the current economic crisis and questions about the legitimacy of the European Union, what is the future of European integration? As the EU faces its most serious economic and political test, **Luuk Van Middelaar's** account of its history asks us to reconsider the forces that underpin the EU, hold it together and drive it forward. **Renaud Thillaye** finds that this timely book reinforces the notion that we can accept the current uncertainty about the future of the EU, while remaining confident about its purpose.



The Passage to Europe: How a Continent Became a Union. Luuk van Middelaar. Yale University Press. May 2013.

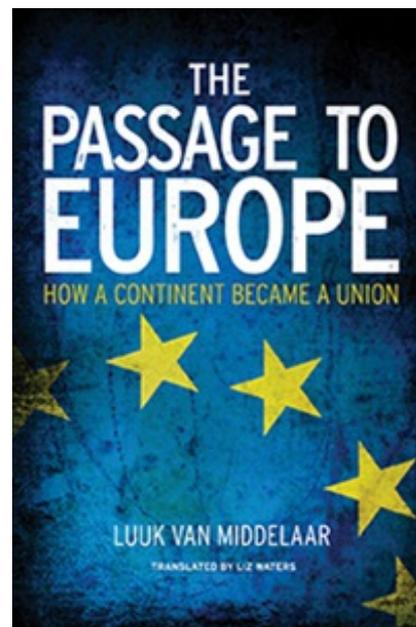
Find this book:

Yet another history of the EU? Yes, but Luuk Van Middelaar's *The Passage to Europe* contains strikingly little jargon and looks at the continent's history through a long-term lens. This helps a great deal to make better sense of what has happened in the last 60 years. The author is a Dutch historian and political philosopher and has been working at the European Council as Herman Van Rompuy's speechwriter since 2010. He is the author of the much acclaimed Stockholm lecture when the EU was awarded the Nobel Price for Peace. *The Passage* was first published in 2009 in Dutch, to much acclaim, and its recent translation into English does it justice.

Three readings of the EU's history

The book includes three main sections, covering respectively the emergence of a common political space, the impact of external events on the EU's history and the quest for legitimacy. In the first section, Van Middelaar shows that there was no such thing as the irresistible rise of a new political entity superseding its member states. Van Middelaar distinguishes between the "outer sphere" of geopolitics, the "inner sphere" of the Community and the "intermediate sphere" of member states sitting at the same table and trying to speak with one voice. The inner sphere displayed self-confidence and boldness in the early years of European integration, but this logic came to an end with the 1965-66 Empty Chair Crisis and the ensuing Luxembourg Compromise. As the author puts it, that moment marked the "coming of age" of the intermediate sphere, namely the right for member states to invoke "vital national interests" (a formula today enshrined in the Treaty on the European Union), in order, not so much to block, but rather to craft more acceptable compromises.

Far from being the step backwards seen by many, this episode confirmed that EU institutions could not ditch national politics, and that more time ought to be dedicated to discussions among heads of states and governments. The creation of the European Council in 1974 and its recent consecration as a central EU institution provides a space where national leaders are forced to speak in the name both of their country and of the common European interest. The use of majority voting remains rare and is more a theoretical threat compelling member states to agree than anything else.



kindle edition

amazon

The second section reflects on the extent to which history has determined the EU's direction of travel. Taking Machiavelli's side against more determinist visions of history, Van Middelaar looks at how "fortuna" – a term that translates as chance, or events – has shaped the EU. This section relates to well-known episodes such as the Korean War and the Suez Crisis in the 1950s, the Oil shocks of the 1970s, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the September 11 attacks of 2001. Each of these moments brought about new initiatives and gave a push to common undertakings such as the European Political Cooperation, the Economic and Monetary Union and cooperation in criminal justice. One of the conclusions is that one should accept the uncertainty about the EU's future while staying confident about its *raison d'être*. Did not Schuman himself confirm after his famous declaration on May 9th 1950 that his plan was, indeed, a "leap into the unknown"?

The third section provides fascinating insights into the EU's quest for legitimacy. Any political entity needs a minimum degree of allegiance from its constituents. This can take several routes. EU students are familiar with the notions of "input" and "output" legitimacy – recently completed by "demos" legitimacy. Van Middelaar rebrands these three approaches as a German strategy based on identity building, a Roman strategy focused on providing the people with material benefits, and a Greek strategy seeking their active participation to decisions. The German and the Roman ways having shown their limits, and the author seems to place much hope in a greater involvement of national parliaments in EU politics.

Lessons and limits

Though embedded in history, *The Passage* is a very timely contribution to the debate about the future of Europe. A first lesson is that there is no reason to fear centrifugal forces and disintegration across the board. As the UK's longstanding attempt to join the club in the 1960s testifies, magnetic forces bringing member states to the common table are very strong. Despite the likelihood of anti-EU votes at next year's European elections, a majority of people feel intuitively that "the whole thing makes sense". They might want to see a change in the way EU decisions are taken and impact on their lives, but they know that the world out there is full of traps and dangers.

The second lesson is that EU integration is not what we usually think. Rather than a leap forward to a federal paradise, the rise of the EU looks like – in Van Middelaar's words – the "birth of purgatory": an in-between in which member states are condemned to live with each other. A striking feature of recent economic governance reforms is that new transfers of resources and sovereignty, despite all their rationale, have been turned down so far. Instead, a tighter regime of coordination combining peer pressure, rules and conditional solidarity has been preferred. Cross-national conversation has intensified, with national spheres more closely interlinked to one another.

Inevitably, Van Middelaar has been criticised for downplaying the role of Community institutions and putting all the emphasis on the European Council. Arguably, more problematic is the possible stage of exhaustion that the EU project has reached. One of the main questions faced by Europeans is whether they have the time to fine-tune their sensitivities while the need for common solutions to the economic and banking crisis, the energy transition, or to security challenges is still pressing. Will an intensification of coordination be enough and will the public continue to give a permissive consensus? Or is it not necessary to consider again pooling some resources and sovereignty in a limited number of fields where simplification and clarification would both improve effectiveness and legitimacy? Van Middelaar's faith in external events and pressures, and in the role of national parliaments, is not entirely reassuring.

Like all great novels, *The Passage to Europe* tells us something about our (European) condition. The good news is that the EU is by far the most interesting political innovation of the last 60 years, and this might only be the beginning. Our weakness is that it is slow, complex and it requires a new spirit of coordination and a great deal of political education if we want it to work.

This review has also appeared at [Policy Network](#).

Renaud Thillaye is senior researcher at Policy Network. He writes on EU affairs and French politics. He is the author of the Policy Network paper *Francois Hollande after one year*. [Read reviews by Renaud](#).