



Vol. 42 No. 24 · 17 December 2020

The European Coup

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BY REPUTE, literature on the European Union and its prehistory is notoriously intractable: dull, technical, infested with jargon – matter for specialists, not general readers. From the beginning, however, beneath an unattractive surface it developed considerable intellectual energy, even ingenuity, as contrasting interpretations and standpoints confronted one another. But for some sixty years after the Schuman Plan was unveiled in 1950, there was a striking displacement in this body of writing. Virtually without exception, the most original and influential work was produced not by Europeans, but Americans. Whether the angle of attack was political science, economics, law, sociology, philosophy or history, the major contributions – Haas, Moravcsik, Schmitter, Eichengreen, Weiler, Fligstein, Siedentop, Gillingham – came from the United States, with a singleton from England before its accession to the Common Market, in the pioneering reconstruction of Alan Milward.

This has finally changed. In the last decade Europe has generated a set of thinkers about its integration who command the field, while the US, increasingly absorbed in itself, has largely vacated it. Among these, one stands out. By reason of both the reception and the quality of his work, the Dutch philosopher-historian Luuk van Middelaar can be termed, in Gramsci's vocabulary, the first organic intellectual of the EU. Though related, applause and achievement are not the same. *The Passage to Europe: How a Continent Became a Union*, which catapulted van Middelaar to fame and the precincts of power, is a remarkable work. The tones in which it was received are of another order. 'There are books,' a Belgian reviewer declared, 'before which a chronicler is reduced to a single form of commentary: an advertisement.' The author himself has posted forty encomia on his website, in seven or eight languages, tributes ransacking the lexicon of admiration: 'supremely erudite', 'brilliant', 'beautifully written', 'a gripping narrative of personalities and events that reads like a Bildungsroman', 'all the fields of human knowledge and culture are convoked in abounding richness', 'near Voltairean', 'a Treitschke with the tongue of Foucault'. Even the austere *European Journal of International Law* thought it 'read like a thriller'.

Signal amid this enthusiasm has been a lack of curiosity about the author himself. To understand *The Passage to Europe*, however, a sense of where van Middelaar comes from is required. Born in 1973 in Eindhoven, the company town of Phillips in Brabant, he took history and philosophy at the University of Groningen in the early 1990s. There he joined the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, or VVD, the Dutch variant of a liberal party, and studied under the philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit, a sui generis thinker whose ideas left a lasting mark. Good political thought, for Ankersmit, was never of the sort personified by Rawls: an abstract system of principles detached from concrete reality. It was always a response to urgent historical problems, produced by thinkers – Bodin, Hobbes, Locke, Burke or Tocqueville – who were immersed in the great conflicts of their time: religious strife, civil war, revolution, democracy. The first and most original was Machiavelli, confronting the crisis of Italy's division at the turn of the 16th century.

His novel idea of *raison d'état* became a central tradition in European political thought, and one formative of modern writing about history.

For Machiavelli, statecraft was the art of mastering the contingency of fortune with a virtuoso existential decision capable of giving shape to a political order that, without fearing conflict, would prove as stable as any such order could hope to be. In this, he prefigured a problematic that would in different ways haunt Western thought down to our own time. What, Ankersmit asked, is the appropriate definition of representation? Is it a resemblance to what is represented, or a substitute for it? Rousseau mistakenly believed it was the first; Burke showed it was the second. In politics as in painting, representation is not a biometric likeness of what is represented, but an act of a basically aesthetic nature: the creation of something new, which was never imagined or existed before. It was an effect of style, beyond fact or value. The creative politician perceived a possibility, glimpsed by no one else, of founding a new conception of things capable of winning the assent of citizens as if they were so many connoisseurs viewing a painting or a building. The supreme act of such an 'aesthetic politics', as Ankersmit termed it, was the construction of a compromise between conflicting parties, which was at once the condition and core of any modern democracy. 'The politician formulating the most satisfying and lasting compromise in a political conflict is the political "artist" par excellence.' Contrary to received opinion, the origins of such an aesthetic politics did not lie in the Enlightenment, but in Romanticism. Its first glimmering came in the German *Frühromantik*, where Schlegel extolled the manifold of opposites in a clouded language that Carl Schmitt would later attack for vagueness, yet which for just that reason was propitious for compromise. But it was the French *doctrinaires* of the Restoration, Guizot above all, who gave full expression to this breakthrough, as they laboured to reconcile what had been irreconcilable – the ultras' nostalgia for the Ancien Régime and the radicals' cult of the French Revolution or Napoleon – in a politics of the *juste milieu*.

Such was the true formula, Ankersmit held, for the parliamentary democracy emergent in the 19th century and perfected in the 20th: the antithesis of the direct democracy preached by Rousseau, which had dishonoured representation by extraditing it to the boundless impulses of a collective political libido. After the Second World War, the genius of compromise on which Western democracy rested would reconcile the conflict between capital and labour with the invention of a welfare state which brought peace between them, while preserving capitalism intact. Today, however, division in society no longer sets one camp against another. Instead, the unprecedented issues of crime, environment, ageing, juridification of every relationship, split human beings inwardly. Such problems, Ankersmit went on, can only be resolved by a strong – though certainly lean – state, as the necessary locus of power. Ignored in a Rawlsian matrix concerned only with rights rather than interests, such a state is the indispensable lever of an aesthetic politics capable of restoring the boundaries between public and private realms in this century.

Ankersmit terms himself a conservative liberal. Distinctive in his work is the combination of a meta-politics generally associated with the radical right – Mussolini vaunted a politics of style, and Benjamin concluded that the aestheticisation of politics was a trademark of fascism – with a politics of the moderate centre: the *juste milieu* of the French liberals of the Restoration as the last word in democratic maturity. Friedrich Meinecke, whose historicism is perhaps the most important single influence on Ankersmit, could be described as another conservative liberal displaying something of the same mixture: in 1918 a founder of the liberal German Democratic Party; in 1939 an enthusiast for Hitler's invasion of Poland. In Ankersmit, *les contraires se touchent* in a more theoretically articulated fashion, capable of another kind of imprint on listeners receptive to it.

Under his guidance, van Middelaar set off for Paris in 1993 to write a master's thesis on French political thought since the war. There he quickly found a local mentor in Marcel Gauchet, a

leading light of the anti-totalitarian galaxy of the 1980s who by that time had become a critic of the promotion of human rights to a central position in democratic thought. In 1999 van Middelbaar published the result of his labours in the Netherlands, *Politicide: De moord op de politiek in de Franse filosofie* ('Politicide: The Murder of Politics in French Philosophy'). Perhaps advised that this penny-dreadful note might not go down well in France, the book never appeared in the country it was about.

Its lurid title captured the crudity of the work, much of it warmed-over Cold War pabulum. Touted in the preface as the first treatment of all three generations of misbegotten French political thought since 1945 (the Marxism of the early Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, the Nietzscheanism of Foucault and Deleuze, and the Kantianism of Ferry and Renault), it glossed Vincent Descombes's critique of the first two as vicious derivations of Kojève, and the rejection by Gauchet and others of the third as pious reversions to the thought-world of the Categorical Imperative. Overall, this was a body of thought that 'invariably led to a defence of terrorism or a declaration of impotence', the two united in a common moralism – active in the Marxists and Nietzscheans, passive in the Kantians – whose effect was to put politics to death. Redemption was to be found in the wisdom of Gauchet's teacher Claude Lefort, whose great work on Machiavelli, taking its cue from the Florentine's masterly analysis of the relations between ruler and ruled, had restored democracy to its proper dignity by redefining it as the empty space of liberty in which contention between different voices and forces could of necessity never end.

Little of this was new in the Paris of Aron and Furet, Rosanvallon and Descombes, though it could hardly fail to please. In the more provincial context of the Netherlands, on the other hand, it was greeted as a revelation. Garlanded with prizes, its author was declared a philosophical prodigy. In 1999 he returned to Paris for further research. The country had been shaken four years earlier by the massive wave of strikes against the package of pension and welfare cuts introduced by Chirac's prime minister Alain Juppé to comply with the budgetary requirements of the Treaty of Maastricht. Confronted with the largest social movement since 1968, France's intelligentsia split. Bourdieu led widespread support for the uprising. Lefort was among those who supported the government, pronouncing the movement against it infected by 'rancour and resentment', 'populism', 'archaeo-Marxism, Maoism and Sartrism'. Unhappily, public opinion did not heed the resuscitator of politics, but expressed overwhelming solidarity with the protests, which ended in humiliating defeat for the government.

Perhaps with a view to seeing how such setbacks might be avoided, van Middelbaar started to study pension systems in the EU at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*. But worse was to follow. Cycling past the place de la Bastille a few months after 9/11, he was appalled to see a rag-tag crowd of youths waving red banners protesting against the American invasion of Afghanistan, and sat down to write a blistering attack on this idiocy, which appeared in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*. After a few more imprecations against Sartre and other advocates of terror, he pointed out that even if bin Laden was not being hidden by the Taliban, no one in their right mind could be against a war on the regime in Kabul. The West stood for the values of civilisation, and was bringing modernity to Afghans and others across the world who craved it. Yet

we Westerners, weighed down by the past, hardly even dare to understand this any longer. The White Man's Burden, that heroic civilising mission depicted by Rudyard Kipling in his proud poem of 1899 as the destiny of the white race, has turned against us and become a true burden, a depressing sense of guilt about colonisation, slavery and economic exploitation of the developing world. Which now prevents us from understanding that colonisation did – indeed! – mean something good for the colonised. Colonisation brought schools, hospitals, science, emancipation of women. Colonisation brought modern reason and freedom within reach of individuals hitherto unable even to be individuals. Sure, colonial crimes occurred – rape, torture, institutional racism – and yet, what a beautiful body of work!

Today, the main political question had become:

Can human rights spread globally without the action of a Napoleon? The answer is no. Anyone who thinks that it can has a moralistic view of reality. Anyone who thinks that good may impose itself on the world without struggle or the use of power is mistaken. Anyone with a basic understanding of politics knows that what is good does not come automatically. That may require an army. A Napoleon. Or a George W. Bush. A price must be paid if we want human rights to spread. We should not blame Napoleon for using violence, but for not going far enough. Napoleon's mistake was that he employed freedom and equality as symbols to help his army win battles rather than incorporating these concepts in sturdy institutions in the constitutions which he scattered across Europe. To continue the analogy: our hope must be that Bush finishes his job thoroughly, dragging Afghanistan into modernity with bombs and abundance.

'And we, meanwhile, are patiently waiting for a modern-day Kipling, who realises that not white but modern people have a world-historical mission: to sing proudly and unabashedly in praise of the Modern Man's Burden,' van Middelaar ended his peroration.

BY THIS TIME he was bored with pensions, and asked a conservative friend in the VVD who was working with the Dutch commissioner in Brussels if he could find him an internship where he might study power close up. An interview was arranged. Van Middelaar has a highly developed sense of self-presentation, which he likes to dramatise. Introducing *Politicide* a decade later, he would write: 'My book did not pass unnoticed. It was a surprise that an unknown 26-year-old should unexpectedly dare to challenge consecrated French thinkers. Without knowing it, I was putting into practice an aphorism of Stendhal: entry into society should be conducted as if it were a duel. And what opponents I had chosen!' It took some nerve to pass off this plagiarism from Nietzsche as his own discovery. Van Middelaar's account of his ascent to Brussels in *The Passage to Europe* is another little piece of theatre. More original and no less theatrical:

In another era, on Tuesday, 27 March 2001, I took the train from Paris, where I was living at the time, to Brussels. I was nervous. A student in political philosophy living in a garret of no more than 18 sq metres, I arduously put on a suit that morning. Approaching the metro, I asked a surprised, well-dressed passer-by whether he could help me fix the knot in my tie. I was on my way to the European quarters in Brussels, where I was to have lunch with the Dutch European commissioner and his personal assistant.

The commissioner with whom he landed a post was Frits Bolkestein. In the Dutch political landscape Bolkestein cut an unusual figure. Son of a president of the court of Amsterdam, after a polymathic education – degrees successively in mathematics, philosophy, Greek, economics (at the LSE) and law – he joined Shell, serving for sixteen years as an overseas executive in East Africa, Central America, London, Indonesia and Paris. In 1976, prompted, he would later explain, by his experience in handling trade unions in El Salvador, where he was posted during one of its death-squad regimes, he became interested in politics, and quit Shell to run for parliament on the VVD

ticket. By this time the ‘pillar’ system of postwar Dutch politics, in which the electorate was divided into four columns, Catholic, Protestant, Labour and the liberal VVD, had been simplified by the merger of Catholic and Protestant forces in the Christian Democratic Appeal, or CDA, and voting had become more fluid. The liberal sector of the system, upper-class and originally anti-clerical, rooted in business and the bureaucracy, was politically the weakest. Though the VVD was a standard, if not invariable, fixture of the coalitions on which all governments were based, there hadn’t been a liberal prime minister since the First World War.

The hallmarks of Dutch political culture, as first criticised by the political scientist Hans Daalder, and later celebrated by the American Arend Lijphart, were an imperative of consensus, a requirement for secrecy in reaching it, and a cult of practicality. Consensus demanded a permanent disposition to accommodation between parties, best reached behind closed doors. Businesslike deals precluded a battle of ideas. The supreme national virtue of *Zakelijkheid* – down-to-earth, no-nonsense practicality, with a self-righteous timbre distinct from its more neutral cousin, the German *Sachlichkeit* – had no time for intellectualism. In the memorable dictum of the country’s current premier, the VVD leader Mark Rutte: ‘vision is like an elephant that obstructs one’s sight.’ For Lijphart the system was an admirably ‘consociational’ democracy. For Daalder, it was a legacy of the ‘regent mentality’ of the country’s pre-democratic patriciate, a merchant class facing neither a powerful nobility nor fractious plebs, settling affairs of state comfortably between themselves without need of concepts or credos, confident of the passivity of the masses. The political elite of postwar Netherlands was their complacent descendant.

Into this scene Bolkestein burst like a bazooka. He had plenty of ideas; and as a fluent writer and eloquent speaker, no inhibitions in aggressively expressing them. He soon made his mark. In the 1980s, the dominant figure in Dutch politics was Ruud Lubbers, a Christian Democrat who led the country for a dozen years and was for a time regarded by Thatcher as the nearest thing to a soulmate she had in Europe. But to her disappointment he domesticated rather than crushed the trade unions, and mindful of the golden rule of consensus, administered only moderate doses of privatisation and welfare reduction. Bolkestein, by contrast, had read his Hayek and was contemptuous of such paltering. What the economy and society of the country needed was a true neoliberal makeover, breaking the clammy grip of corporatism and welfare dependence to release the creativity of the free market. Nor were these tares the only threats to modern liberalism. Culturally speaking, in the 1960s the Dutch elites had surrendered to a local New Left floating hare-brained schemes and upending moral restraints, and were now failing to stem an inrush of Muslim immigration whose religious beliefs and customs were incompatible with Western values. There, Huntington and Kristol were needed to fortify Friedman and Hayek. With this combination of neoliberal and neoconservative ammunition, Bolkestein did battle within the VVD too, catching the tide of a New Right that swelled a season later than in the Anglosphere, generating Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders as successive tribunes of a libertarian economics and Islamophobic politics. Both were formed in the VVD, Wilders serving for a time as Bolkestein’s chief of staff.

But though by 1990 Bolkestein led his party in parliament – a position that did not automatically make him its candidate for premier – he remained in a minority within it. The party, moreover, was now in a coalition headed not even by the Christian Democrats but Labour – Bolkestein declined to become a minister. Invigorated by him, the VVD increased its vote in 1994, and in 1998 achieved its best ever result. But it was still in second place behind Labour, and believing that the Labour leader, Wim Kok, would refuse him the foreign ministry, Bolkestein quit parliament. In his hardline combination of free market economics and anti-immigrant sentiment, he had been the Dutch version of Enoch Powell. Both proved lastingly influential, yet remained outsiders and personal failures. Though Bolkestein was well-read and, compared with the norms of the Dutch elite, at home with ideas, he was not, as he confessed, really an intellectual, more of ‘a politician and pamphleteer’. By background a businessman, and not a dedicated ideologue like Powell, he

lacked the latter's scholarly and poetaster side, and was not a temperamental isolate. Blunt but convivial, he never lacked companions and collaborators. He was not a political failure: though he never became premier, he paved the way for the triumph of the VVD under Rutte, who has been prime minister of the Netherlands for a decade.

By way of compensation for frustration in The Hague, the job Bolkestein took in 1999 at Brussels was and is, after its president, one of the most powerful in the European Commission, the internal market portfolio. It was here that German ordo-liberals once worked to ensure that European integration conformed to the principles of a free market, keeping dirigisme at bay. Bolkestein was a natural in the post, and tutoring van Middelaar in the ways of the Commission evidently found him a good learner, since he extended the younger man's internship. There van Middelaar observed close up, and perhaps even had a speechwriting hand in, the final episode of Bolkestein's public career, the Directive on Services he promulgated in spring 2004, which decreed that firms could in future employ workers at the pay and conditions current in that firm's country of origin rather than of their work – in effect, the lower wages prevailing in the newly incorporated states of Eastern Europe, rather than those customary or obligatory in Western Europe. No decision made by the Commission before or since has caused such an uproar. Deputies agitated, trade unions mobilised, port workers stormed the European Parliament, protesters a hundred thousand strong descended on Brussels. Uniquely, too, the directive had to be watered down, and eventually converted into something not unlike its opposite. By that time, his term of office over, Bolkestein was safely at home in a bespoke chair at the University of Leiden. It may have been another kind of lesson for van Middelaar. Europe was not necessarily always best served by the Commission.

VAN MIDDELAAR'S OWN career proceeded smoothly upwards. After service in Brussels, he became political secretary to Jozias van Aartsen, Bolkestein's successor as leader of the VVD in The Hague. There the muffled world of the Binnenhof, where the Dutch elite transacted discreet business between consenting parties, was revealed to him – it was an eye-opening opportunity, he explained to a friend, to dwell for a time at the centre of power. Van Aartsen, averse to Bolkestein's *tranchant*, came from the temporising moderate wing of the party, to which van Middelaar readily adapted, rising high in his chief's confidence. When a commission including Ankersmit was formed to produce a new manifesto for the party in 2005, van Middelaar wrote the final eighty-page document, *For Freedom*, a carefully weighed composite of (classical, social and neo) liberal themes. Ingredients included a flat tax and clearing beggars off the streets, a directly elected prime minister and the curbing of quangocrats, private pensions and strict compliance with the EU's Stability Pact, help for the neediest but no truck with a basic income. 'The primary responsibility for material well-being lies with the individual himself. Private initiative, self-reliance, entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to roll up one's sleeves are completely normal and in principle accessible to everyone. It is pre-eminently the hard-working middle class who embodies these liberal virtues.'

The VVD could be proud that 'when immigration and integration were still taboo topics', it had been the first to see that 'the unregulated influx of asylum seekers and the uncritical embrace of multiculturalism would cause major problems'. While it did not countenance Islamophobia, it warned Muslims what could be their fate if they sought to introduce fundamentalism into the country: 'In 1535 a group of Anabaptists rebelled in Amsterdam, seeking to build a religious theocracy. The city council crushed this radical uprising, to the great satisfaction of most citizens.' That was a century, according to *For Freedom*, to which people should look for inspiration. The Dutch were now doing well. On average, they were satisfied or very satisfied with their lives. But they should always remember that 'the desire for freedom is the foundation of our nation,' as was not the case for their neighbours:

The origin of our country does not lie in an elusive distant past, as in the case of England or France. Nor was the country forged from above by a strong will, like Germany or Italy. No, our country was born at the end of the 16th century from the tough, concerted effort to wrest freedom from the authority of a tyrannical Spanish king. Freedom and tolerance ignited the light of our Golden Age. These two enabled the miracle of a country inhabited by barely two million people that left every other European country far behind in entrepreneurial spirit, culture, science and political-philosophical wisdom.

Every country has its own brand of smugness. But patriotic uplift and a pledge of regressive taxation were of little avail to the VVD, which under van Aartsen's stewardship was steadily sinking in the polls. Six months later, after telling just two intimates – Rutte and van Middelaar – that he would resign if the party fell below 14 per cent in the upcoming municipal elections, van Aartsen quit when it failed to do so. Rutte became leader, the manifesto was forgotten and van Middelaar out of a job. He retired to his study, and over the next two years wrote the book that would make him famous. Published in 2009 (the English-language edition appeared in 2013), it showed how much he had learned since his time in Paris. *The Passage to Europe* is not the masterpiece of the extravagant bouquets that have greeted it. But it is a work of impressive scholarship and historical imagination, whose range of intellectual reference and polish of style make it unlike anything written about the EU before or since. Van Middelaar took great pains with its literary surface, if not always to its advantage. The title of his book, he once explained, contained a four-fold allusion: to anthropological rites of passage, to Forster's *Passage to India*, to Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* and to a romance by ... Giscard d'Estaing. Epigraphs strewn from Tolstoy to Monty Python by way of Bismarck and Bagehot, Foucault and Arendt, are less than value-added. Such pretensions aside, however, van Middelaar produced something rare in the literature on European integration: an attractively readable account of it. The account, moreover, is powerful and original, fruit of the distinctive blend of philosophy and history taught him by Ankersmit.

It opens by remarking that discourses about Europe have revolved around offices, states and citizens, with corresponding theories about whether it is best conceived in terms of functionalism, inter-governmentalism or constitutionalism: the first oriented to a static present, the second to a familiar past, the third to a longed-for future. Yet none of these passes the critical test of genuine historicity, that flux of unpredictable events which makes of government, van Middelaar writes, citing Pocock, 'a series of devices for dealing with contingent time'. To do so requires, instead, that three different spheres in which integration has unfolded be distinguished: an outer sphere comprising Europe understood as a continent – including states that are not part of the Community – in the world of powers at large, where borders and wars obtain; an inner sphere, comprising the Commission, the Court of Justice and Parliament of today's EU; and an intermediate sphere composed of its member states as they deliberate in the Council of Ministers and its apex, the European Council, where heads of government assemble.

For the founders of modern political thought – Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau – the primordial question was how the state could arise from a condition of nature composed of an anarchy of individuals: how, in particular, could the unanimity required for a pact of civil union to bring a state into being lead to majority decisions once it was constituted? The same puzzle, van Middelaar argues, is posed by the emergence of a unitary European polity out of an anarchic order, not of individuals, but of states themselves. To answer it, he reconstructs the path from sectoral agreements between the original Six – France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg – derived from the Schuman Plan of 1950, which set up the European Coal and Steel Community, to the broader European Economic Community, or 'Common Market', created by the same Six with the Treaty of Rome seven years later. Under the treaty, a permanent Commission situated in Brussels, its personnel appointed by the member states, would submit proposals implementing the articles of the Treaty to a Council of Ministers representing their governments,

with decisions requiring their unanimous consent, with the provision that after eight years majority voting could occur. Once set up, the Commission rapidly started to expand its activities. Its first president, the bumptious German diplomat Walter Hallstein, openly spoke of it as the 'executive' – i.e. government – of Europe, and in 1962 sought to bounce the Council into giving it a substantial tax base, and the hitherto powerless Parliament created by the treaty, regarded by the Commission as an ally, rights over the Community budget. Germany, Italy and the Netherlands backed him. By this time, however, de Gaulle ruled in Paris and he killed the scheme by calmly withdrawing France from the proceedings of the Community, paralysing it. The ensuing 'crisis of the empty chair' was resolved by the so-called Luxembourg Compromise of 1966, which in effect accepted that a decision could not be taken by a majority in the Council if 'very important interests' of a member state were at issue, giving that state a veto. 'Supranationality has gone,' de Gaulle would declare. 'France will remain sovereign.'

The horse, however, had already bolted, through a door unnoticed by de Gaulle. Three years earlier, the European Court of Justice had ruled that national legislation must comply with Community regulations, and where the two conflicted, courts in the country concerned must enforce the latter. Nothing in the Treaty of Rome authorised this. The court invoked the 'spirit' of the treaty, rather than its letter. Van Middelbaar makes no bones about this, celebrating it as 'a masterful move'. True, 'the court was bluffing,' since 'who can know the spirit of a pact?' But it was to be congratulated for doing so: 'The court staged a coup on 5 February 1963 in the name of a new, auto-nomous legal order, while claiming that – although no one had been aware of it – this order was as old as the treaty itself. So its infringement of the status quo was concealed.' Better still, in a second 'handsomely constructed self-affirmation', the court ruled a year later that since Community law overrode national legislation, citizens could appeal to it against the states to which they belonged. It was, in juridical language, of 'direct effect'. In the vocabulary of *The Passage to Europe*, the intermediate sphere where the general had checked the ambitions of the Commission was silently trumped by the strongest actor in the inner sphere.

In the event, the outcome in the intermediate sphere wasn't an impassable obstacle to further European unity. Though the veto remains 'an invisible weapon in negotiations' between member states, van Middelbaar argues that its effect is to foster not conflict but agreement. 'It is the psychological certainty of being able to block a resolution if you truly oppose it that makes consensus possible.' Indeed, even when the principle of majority decisions was formally enshrined in certain areas of the Single European Act of 1987, it was rarely exercised, consensus typically being reached 'not in the shadow of the veto, but in the shadow of the vote'. Should a member state resist a majority decision, it cannot be enforced, short of foreign occupation, but pressure can be put on it to conform by 'other means'. The alchemy of the Union is to achieve unanimity through the threat of majority, rather than to pass from unanimity to majority as imagined in classical theory.

Such was the rule. There was one decisive exception, however. In 1985 the European Council met in Milan to discuss whether, to facilitate the proposed Single European Act, essentially intended to extend the common market from goods to services, the Treaty of Rome should be amended to convert the Community into a Union, which required an inter-governmental conference. Led by France and Germany, which had been secretly planning such revisions beforehand, seven out of the ten member states were in favour. Three – Britain, Denmark and Greece – were opposed. By the convention established at Luxembourg, that was more than enough to block the move. Overnight, however, Italy – host and chair of the meeting – suddenly announced, in the person of its premier, Bettino Craxi, that since convening an inter-governmental conference was a procedural rather than a substantive issue, he was putting it to the vote. Thatcher, along with her allies Papandreou and Schlüter, was outraged. Craxi was not deterred, and the motion passed seven to three. Thatcher was furious, but – she lived to regret this – did not use her veto because

she regarded the SEA as in some degree her own liberalising handiwork, as it was. Van Middelaar can scarcely contain his enthusiasm at the outcome. Taking ‘the opportunity to capitalise on the flow of time’, the ‘brilliance of Craxi’s bluff’ had delivered a ‘magnificent moment of passage’, opening ‘the way to Europe’s permanent renewal’ and endowing ‘the Community with a robust supreme authority’. How was it done? ‘Secret: a coup disguised as a procedural decision.’

After Milan, the ‘gate was unbarred’ to successive treaty revisions: 1986 (Luxembourg-The Hague), 1992 (Maastricht), 1997 (Amsterdam), 2001 (Nice), 2007 (Lisbon) – every one approved by a unanimous decision of the heads of government, each a step further towards a compact European Union, with juridical authority over its member states. The only national court daring to question this constitutional supremacy, the German Bundesverfassungsgericht, after emitting a few grumbles at the Treaty of Lisbon, sensibly set legal niceties aside, since these would have caused ‘an acute political crisis’, and took no action. Lisbon now empowers the European Council, via the discreet device of a *passerelle*, to make treaty alterations without any need for special conferences or ratifications, merely the Italianate blessing of a ‘unanimous non-refusal’ by national parliaments, which would prove so useful during the euro crisis.

If these were the critical episodes that brought the Union as we know it today into being, what of the capacity of Europe to act as a single political body in the face of the outside world? There, van Middelaar explains in a resonant exordium invoking Machiavelli’s famous image of fortune as a raging river that can either flood a landscape with disastrous consequences or be diked and channelled with practical foresight, the Community must contend with aleatory, unpredictable events in the 1960s for ‘history has no plan, no logic’ – and be tested by them. It had to ‘step into the river of time’ and see how far it might master the current, as Machiavelli taught his contemporaries that heroes of virtue could. In the second part of *The Passage to Europe*, van Middelaar looks at how the Community fared when it did so. His story unfolds in three stages. In the first, 1950 to 1957, all six member states relied on an American umbrella for their security; only Paris – typically playing a double game – pretended otherwise. Still, in these years it was France, possessed of political tenacity, bureaucratic discipline, diplomatic skills and an eye for the long term that its partners could not match, which made the running. Determined to recover control of its destiny after 1945, it brought the Community into existence with the Schuman Plan and later gave shape to the intermediate sphere. Germany, needing both America and France for its political redemption after the Third Reich, preferred to operate in the inner sphere. Britain merely wanted not to be excluded, without being willing to participate. Critical to the birth of the Common Market was the shock of Suez in the outer sphere, when the US forced Britain out of the attack on Egypt. Abandoned by its ally on the battlefield, France turned to Europe with the Treaty of Rome, founded on an understanding between Adenauer and Mollet.

A long second phase, lasting from 1958 to 1989, began with the Franco-German deal exchanging the agricultural subsidies Paris wanted for the competition policies patronised by Bonn; after repeated setbacks, it saw eventual British entry into the Community, once France realised that the UK could be a counterweight to the growing economic prowess of Germany. Then came the oil shock of 1973, when ‘Arab aggressors’ in the Middle East imposed an embargo on Europe, and the Bretton Woods system finally collapsed. In this dual crisis, van Middelaar writes, ‘the member states did not transfer their political voice to the institutions of the inner sphere as a way of becoming better able to respond to the demands of the outside world.’ Rather, ‘the heads of state staged a coup, uninvited,’ when at French initiative – Giscard’s incalculable contribution to the unity of the continent – they started regular summits and ‘as a result the in-between world of the member states took shape’, evolving into the European Council, the commanding instance of the Union to come.

The third stage of Europe's encounter with the rapids of time came when East Germany collapsed in 1989. The ensuing crisis led to the deal struck between Kohl and Mitterrand at Strasbourg: France would accept the reunification of Germany, making the Federal Republic the preponderant power in Europe, in exchange for German acceptance of a single currency, dethroning the Deutschmark. Two years later the Treaty of Maastricht sealed this bargain, indeed went further, encompassing the Community within the grander structure of a Union equipped with its own foreign policy, as well as agencies for justice and internal security. Thereafter, the end of the Cold War assured the entry of the former neutrals Austria, Finland and Sweden into the Union, and then its progressive enlargement into Eastern Europe, more than doubling the number of signatories to Maastricht. An important side-effect was to qualify the juridical fiction that all member states were equal by introducing weighted voting in the Council of Ministers, to ensure that newcomers from the East did not by mere number rise above their real station in the Union.

Enlargement was a great achievement. But when 'fortune wreaked havoc', as Yugoslavia descended into a series of civil wars, the new Union proved powerless to dam the waters of disaster. America alone, though it was reluctant to become involved, put a stop to genocide in the Balkans. But when another genocide loomed in Kosovo, Europe 'drew a line in the sand', as Joschka Fischer put it, or as van Middelbaar would have it, 'Nato bombed Serbia. Europe had finally shouldered its regional responsibility,' as it would do again in Libya. But divisions and uncertainties still lay ahead. Europe was irrelevant when 9/11 struck, and split over the war in Iraq. Nevertheless, in 2003 a Franco-German agreement moved the Union forward once more, introducing two vital innovations: the election of the *Spitzenkandidat* of whichever bloc of parties won the most votes in the European Parliament as Commission president; and more consequentially, the creation of a no longer rotating but permanent president of the European Council, appointed by its members for a five-year term, and holding – an 'institutional revolution' – no national office. With this innovation, Europe acquired a figure who could speak for it at the highest international level, where previously it had none. 'That void had now been filled.' Already strengthened, the Union could dispatch crisis missions, military or civilian, across the world, from Kosovo to Iraq, Mali to Afghanistan, and in the war between Russia and Georgia of 2008 stopped the Kremlin from seizing Tbilisi, Sarkozy flying to Moscow and extracting a ceasefire, in the name of 'the ancient French state and the power bloc of Europe'. The upshot, van Middelbaar concludes, is that 'under pressure from inevitable appearances by Fortune, the Union is clambering up into the outer ranges of high politics. In light of the past, this is remarkable.'

IN the third and last part of his book, van Middelaar moves to the problem of locating or constructing, as he puts it, a ‘European “we”’ that accepts the decisions of the Union as its own. In the 18th century, the unworkable fiction of a state of nature out of which by common decision a civil society could arise, gave way to the workable idea of a nation that in fortunate circumstances, as in the Thirteen Colonies of America, could generate a state enjoying *ex post facto* acceptance of the sleight of hand that had circumvented the need for unanimity among them, even if in less fortunate cases – Germany in 1848 – this manoeuvre misfired. What these differing experiences made clear, however, was that in all cases ‘the initiative lies with the representatives,’ who must precede the represented and call them into existence as a collective body. For the summons to be effective, more than power from above and habit from below are required, since if a ‘we’ is to come into being, laws and institutions – and their agents: judges, civil servants, police – must be accepted as in some sense ‘ours’, in the fashion of Hart’s citizens who abide by primary rules (do not steal) because they accept the secondary rules behind them (their legitimacy). Over many years, politicians have striven to create that identity for Europe, for politicians can no more do without a public than a football match without spectators, who may applaud or boo the players but do not question the rules of the game. To date, the efforts of such politicians have been of limited effect. But the geopolitical context has now changed in a direction more favourable to them. For with the end of the Cold War, the division of the planet into First, Second and Third Worlds has disappeared, and big powers – America, China, India, perhaps tomorrow Latin America – detached from what was once the Old World have emerged, demarcating Europeans in a new way.

In seeking to attach Europeans to a Union they can call their own, van Middelaar argues, the projectors of the EU have employed three basic strategies that by historical association may be termed German, Roman and Greek. The German strategy, pursued above all by the Commission in the inner sphere of the EU, has sought, in line with the tradition of Fichte and other 19th-century pioneers of German nationalism, to foster a sense of common identity among Europeans by a work of symbolic animation. Faced with low voter turnout to the Parliament in Strasbourg, the blue and gold flag was lifted from the (unrelated) Council of Europe of 1949, with its nearly fifty members, and ceremonially displayed whenever and wherever bureaucratically possible; Beethoven’s music to Schiller’s ‘Ode to Joy’ was adopted as an official anthem; a pantheon of Founders created to baptise squares, buildings, chairs. Euro coins with appropriate symbols were minted; European values declaimed; European ‘criteria’ for accession codified. All attempts to give a cultural and historical grounding to the political construct of the Union, however, remain somewhat arbitrary so long as it still does not actually encompass geographical Europe. Only when all its states are safely gathered under the roof of the Union can the German strategy come to a natural fruition.

By contrast, the Roman strategy relies, as once the empire founded by Augustus, on material benefits: in classical times, order and provision – protection from barbarians and distribution of grain supplies. Protection is no longer an issue. It is provision that can inspire citizens with loyalty to the Union. Unimpeded travel across borders; inexpensive phone calls; access to hospitals anywhere: these are familiar, everyday advantages conferred by the EU, available to anyone. Rights to live and work anywhere in the Union, though universal too, are more ambiguous: a boon for elites, less so for the masses. Benefits that involve redistribution – so winners and losers – are inevitably more divisive than symbols. The Common Agricultural Policy recalls the corrupting clientelism of ancient Rome, the Cohesion Fund is a source of geographical dispute, ‘compulsory solidarity’ reawakens national animosities. ‘Europe is always a benefactor to some at the expense of others’ – typically taxpayers in the better-off countries, creating little sense of fellowship. Only the UK ever regarded European integration as legitimated simply by economic gains. The Eurobarometer readings of the Commission can measure only Roman-style acclamation.

The Greek strategy banks not on the creation of a sense of Europe as ‘our people’, along German lines, or ‘to our advantage’, along Roman lines, but as a matter of ‘our concern’. In ancient Greece the public was at once ‘spectator and participant’: not ‘as a player’, but like the chorus in Greek tragedy, whose part lay in its ‘voice’, which Nietzsche held more original and important than the action itself. So what a political body in search of a Greek-style public can give it is a voice: that is, a ‘say in decision-making’, or a ‘drama’ that captivates it. Europe, van Middelbaar assures his readers, has made ‘a huge effort’ to grant its population a say in decision-making. But can there be Greek legitimacy without German identity – a European democracy with a *demos*? Commission and Parliament have befriended each other in their quest to become the executive and legislature of the Union. Yet though the Parliament has acquired more and more powers since 1979, it has not won the favour of voters, who have shown less and less interest in it. Bestowal on them of a ‘European citizenship’ which confers no new rights is little more than a marketing gimmick, he argues. The Parliament is not a tribune of the people; it acts like a court musician.

The truth, van Middelbaar confesses, is that European politics fail to excite: the public is bored by them. To become engaged, it needs conflict and drama, but the Union proceeds by consensus. In the past, de-dramatisation of the European project was a great merit of the Commission – Monnet’s ‘flight from history into bureaucracy’ was far-sighted, allowing Brussels to operate out of sight on economic issues after more ambitious schemes like the European Defence Community collapsed. Meetings of the Council are more visible, but in these too disagreements are muffled. So the public still has its doubts about the project. But it is necessary to be realistic. In an existing democracy, citizens come first, electing representatives who come into being at their decision. But the foundation of a democracy reverses this order: first come the representatives, who speak before they are appointed to be such, then come those whom they will represent in the polity they found, or as van Middelbaar more expressively puts it, ‘first the players, then (if necessary) the chorus’. The parenthesis is a tribute to his candour. The upshot? ‘We could come straight out with it and call this second version the “coup sequence”. Every royal or imperial dynasty starts with a power grab; every founder is a usurper.’ Much energy is afterwards invested in smooth inheritance and cultivation of public goodwill, ‘but – as Lady Macbeth’s hands remind us – the founding act can never be completely expunged.’ Still, he continues imperturbably, ‘the legitimacy of power is not necessarily adversely affected by the fact that the public appears only afterwards – so long as it does appear.’ What might best conjure it into being? ‘The European political body,’ he concludes, ‘exists on condition that, in word and deed, it can thrill its manifold public for a moment.’ How might that occur? ‘Great events and crises sunder the closed horizon of waiting, sweeping away the boredom.’

THE PASSAGE TO EUROPE is, unquestionably, a tour de force. It unites an intricate conceptual structure with a set of provocative historical claims, and a wide command of the literature on the origins and vicissitudes of the Union, unfolded in an engaging register that moves fluently from the philosophical to the conversational. It is not difficult to see why it has met with such universal acclaim. Nor, given the pattern of European studies that have accreted round the institutions of the EU, why its tale of triumphant, if still incomplete progress towards the unity of the continent should have elicited so little critical scrutiny. One absence in it is so striking that it has occasionally been noticed. The book says virtually nothing about the economic record of European integration. The early rulings of the European Court, the Single European Act, the advent of Monetary Union, enter the narrative as juridical milestones on the road to union, but their economic outcomes receive no attention. The simple fact that what the Treaty of Rome created was a European Economic Community is whited out; the acronym EEC is nowhere to be found. This is not an oversight on van Middelaar's part. It is a function of his insistence that the objectives of European integration – not a term he favours: he prefers 'European project' – were always political. Economic steps were a means to a political goal, not ends in themselves. In this he is certainly right. But, of course, since the overwhelming bulk of the activities and enactments of the Community that became a Union have always been, as they remain, economic in nature and in impact, the politics of integration cannot realistically be isolated from them.

That said, the primacy of principle accorded to politics by van Middelaar is in itself an incontestable merit of his book. What becomes of politics in his hands is another matter, for a second striking feature of *The Passage to Europe* is the absence, not just of any substantive economic history, but of virtually any sense of the actual political landscape of Europe. A veil of abstraction falls over partisan identities and conflicts. To all intents and purposes, political parties join economic statistics in the oubliette of his retrospect. In three hundred pages, a single brief paragraph adverts to Christian and Social Democrats getting together at the beginnings of the story, before swiftly segueing to the more congenial topic of Charlemagne. The only time an election warrants mention is when de Gaulle is frustrated of a first-round victory by French farmers in 1965, preventing him from going too far in hostility to Brussels, though even then the identity of the party which forced him to a second round remains an anonym. If despite the book's profession of its primacy, it is void of politics in its most commonly used sense, one of the reasons is certainly that at Euro level 'parties' are wraiths without substance: labels for legislators conglomerated out of disparate national outlooks and conditions, with no reality outside the chamber in which they sit, where a kind of permanent grand coalition – in effect, an institutional cartel – effaces even the formal distinctions between them, a residuum of pariahs aside.

Since the European Parliament lacks any of the ordinary character of a legislature, van Middelaar is realistic in terming it essentially a court musician to the powers of the Union. But this does not, of course, mean that the political careers and affiliations of the actors involved in the events around which his narrative revolves can be bracketed as having no bearing. The effect of doing so is blandly apologetic. The background of the judges in Luxembourg, whose decisions made European history, is left a complete blank. As for statesmen, what innocent reader could guess that the hero of the drama at Milan on which van Middelaar dwells with such relish, Bettino Craxi, leader of the Italian Socialist Party, was the single most corrupt Italian politician of his time, a figure so odious to his compatriots that he was pelted by the public with coins of contempt and had to flee the police to Tunisia, living out his days in gilded exile on the proceeds of his extortion of corporate funds and theft of taxpayers' money? Other than extolling Craxi's 'brilliant bluff' in the European Council, van Middelaar breathes not a word about him. In the world of princes, lowly though a court musician may be, the part of a courtier can be more demeaning.

Where politics does intermittently kick into the story, it is in the form of diplomacy, the relation between states as distinct from electoral fronts or social forces. There, *The Passage to Europe* takes transactions between France and Germany as its guiding thread, justly treating them as the decisive powers shaping the course of integration, and the Council devised by France as the controlling institution in the complex machinery of the Union. Though adding little to a familiar picture, van Middelaar depicts the skein of Franco-German relations well, without neglecting those moments when lesser contributors – principally Benelux – left a mark on events. What the dominance of Paris and Bonn/Berlin has meant for the nature of the Union, not episodically but structurally, he leaves aside. The great merit of his account – its central value – is that more clearly and emphatically than any previous writer, he puts the Council where it belongs, as not just the formal apex, but the overmastering instance of the EU, the last but one part of its architecture to come into being, but the most salient of all. In this he can legitimately claim a realism in the tradition of the *raison d'état* transmitted, as Ankersmit would have it, from Machiavelli through Meinecke. Van Middelaar leaves little doubt of the much lower regard in which he holds the Commission, a useful but humdrum factory of rules, and the Parliament, a windy cavern of words. The Council, by contrast, is the seat of authoritative decisions. The Commission and the Parliament are given to utopian temptations of European federalism, for which he barely hides his scorn. The Council is the vehicle of the true sense in which Europe has moved, and is continuing to move, towards ever great union, as a club of states bound together by a common project that does not extinguish their identities as nations, but joins them in a common destiny, a new form of *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*.

How then does the Council reach its decisions? Behind closed doors, in deliberations of which no minutes are kept, that issue in announcements under the seal of consensus. Van Middelaar supplies a graphic, if tactful, description of the psychological and political mechanisms that generate such consensus. That it is reached far beyond any popular say in the matters so decided, in conclaves where no public gaze is admitted, is not cause for any particular complaint or criticism. What his admiration for the Council in effect delivers is a transposition of the 'regent mentality' etched by Daalder from a Dutch onto a European plane: the quiet settling of affairs between elites *in camera*, above the heads of an inert populace. Here van Middelaar departs in one critical respect from Ankersmit, for whom too the future of the Union lay in the sober statecraft of the Council, not the idle fancies of the Commission or Parliament, but who insisted on the difference between the principles of compromise, which he championed, and the vapours of consensus preached by Rawls. In a compromise, the parties reach an agreement without concealing or suppressing their differences. In a consensus, on the other hand, the differences are erased: the authority of the Council is monotone. In this, its pendant is the Court of Justice, which also deliberates in secret and forbids publication of any dissenting judgment, delivering its rulings as unanimous edicts.

LOGICALLY, then, these are the two theatres of van Middelaar's exposition, and encomium, of the ultimate secret of the construction of Europe, the key to understanding its success. That key lies in the term that recurs with compulsive insistence at the turning points of his story: the 'coup'. The court's decisions of 1963 and 1964 establishing the supremacy of Community over national legislation, without any warrant in the Treaty of Rome, were successive brilliant coups; the confection of the European Council was a coup; the imposition of a path to revising the treaty at the Council in Milan was a magnificent coup; the foundation of the Union itself was a coup. In each case, the definition of a coup is an action taken suddenly, by stealth, catching its victims unawares, and confronting them with a *fait accompli* that cannot be reversed. It is not a term associated with any form of democratic politics – just the opposite – and so finds no place, let alone celebration, in the polite vocabulary of liberal politics or jurisprudence. But its central role in van Middelaar's thought is not a caprice. It can be traced to a significant passage in Ankersmit's *Political Representation*, in which he observes of the notion of *arcana imperii* in early modern thought that illumination of it can be found in Gabriel Naudé's 'truly amazing book', *Considérations politiques sur les coups d'état*, to which his attention had probably first been drawn by Meinecke's *Idee der Staatsräson*, where it features as the most important 17th-century sequel to Machiavelli's work.

Linking the two thinkers was the belief that political action could not be judged by ordinary moral standards, since in Naudé's words it required 'bold and extraordinary deeds' that 'exceeded common law' in the interests of 'the public good' – or, as Machiavelli had put it, a ruler should do good 'where he could', but 'enter into evil, where he had to'. Heightening the contrast between them, Naudé radicalised the tension between the two codes of ethical and political conduct. But the more significant ways in which he differed from Machiavelli were historical and individual. Writing a century later, Naudé was living in a world from which the city-states of Renaissance Italy had, with the exception of Venice, vanished, overtaken by far more powerful absolutist monarchies whose invasions had made short work of Machiavelli's dreams of a united peninsula; a world, too, now wracked by the wars of religion unleashed by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, forces beyond Machiavelli's imagination. Naudé was not a diplomat or an office-holder, but a scholar given to acerbic demolitions of every kind of contemporary superstition – magic, astrology, prophecy. We owe to him and his friends perhaps the first version of our notion of what it is to demystify: in his vocabulary, 'déniaiser'.

Born in Paris to a modest family, Naudé was distinguished early on not just by exceptional intellectual gifts, but a keen and lifelong interest in politics, producing his first polemical pamphlet at the age of twenty, followed by a scalding text on the Rosicrucians when he was 22. Still in his twenties, he published a manifesto for a library that would include everything in print or in manuscript and be open to all, announcing what would become the principal passion of his life. Departing for Italy in 1631 as assistant to Cardinal di Bagno, the papal nuncio in Paris who had been reassigned to duties in Rome, Naudé got to know Poussin, corresponded with Mersenne and Grotius, Selden and Peiresc, and became an intimate of Campanella. A firm if unspoken atheist, apprehensive of the power of the Inquisition, he watched with concern the tribulations of Galileo, and read the early Hobbes with a mixture of admiration and alarm at his theological daring; an unrelenting foe of religious and every other sort of imposture, he extolled the intellectual and practical progress he thought the mark of the early 17th century.

Machiavelli composed *The Prince* as a handbook of power in the hope of winning favour with Florence's Medici rulers. Circulated only in manuscript during his life, once published posthumously it rapidly went through multiple editions. Naudé wrote *Considérations politiques sur les coups d'état* while in Rome as librarian for di Bagno. It begins – a literary unicum, Sainte-Beuve thought – with the word 'But'. An identification with Lucretius follows on the opening page.

Machiavelli had ‘broken the ice’ in treating mysteries of state, but he had made the mistake of revealing them to the world at large. Naudé had his work printed – ostensibly, perhaps actually – in just twelve copies, as too explosive for public consumption, and falsely as if produced in Rome, in fact probably in the safety of Leiden. Many of Machiavelli’s maxims are familiar worldwide, but his governing concepts – ‘virtue’ and ‘fortune’ – have lost currency. Naudé’s much more restricted focus gave the world a term that has lasted. His usage of it was wider than its current meaning, a coup d’état denoting not just the sudden overthrow of a regime, but any comparably unexpected action undertaken to found, preserve, alter or aggrandise a state. What defined such a stroke – here Naudé departed from Machiavelli – was always stealth. Ruthless, violent actions to seize or defend power – many are celebrated in *The Prince* – did not qualify, since they might be announced in advance, and conducted in broad daylight. Prior declaration or intimation was incompatible with a coup d’état, whose essence was not just suddenness, but secrecy. It must come as a complete surprise.

Two further features follow, neither to be found in Machiavelli. The first and most conspicuous form taken by what the 18th-century English translation of Naudé called ‘masterstrokes of state’ was spectacularity. Where princes are forced to take extraordinary measures in ‘difficult and desperate circumstances’, there could be no ‘reasons, manifestos, declarations and all that might legitimate an action, precede its effects and operations’. For

in coups d’état one sees the thunderbolt before one hears it growling in the clouds, it strikes before it flames forth, matins are said before the bells are rung, the execution precedes the sentence, everything is done *à la judaïque* – he receives the stroke who thought to give it, dies who thought himself quite safe, suffers who never dreamed of pain; all is done at night, in obscurity, in fog and darkness.

Such political bolts of lightning – the Sicilian Vespers, the massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day, the foundation of Islam – were comparable to those prodigies of nature that ‘do not show themselves every day – comets appear once a century, monsters, floods, eruptions of Vesuvius, earthquakes occur only rarely, and this rarity gives lustre and colour to many things that would lose them if used too frequently.’

Terrifying, awesome, overpowering: such coups were a baroque version of classical *kataplēxis*. But coups could also take an opposite form: so inconspicuous as to be at first nearly invisible. The greatest enterprises or empires could be ‘brought to birth, or to ruin, by means that are of almost no consideration’, like ‘those great rivers that flow impetuously nearly from one end of the earth to the other, and are ordinarily so small at their source that a child can easily step across them’. Nature could produce from a tiny atom of semen an elephant or a whale. ‘It is the same in politics: a small neglected flicker often starts a great blaze.’ What else were ‘the extraordinary changes and revolutions in government and politics’ caused by ‘the spite of two monks armed only with their tongues and a pen’? Had Charles V acted in time, buying off or disposing of Luther, the spark could have been stamped out.

Savonarola, another monk, had sought to bring a revolution to Florence, but in Machiavelli’s judgment, a ‘prophet without arms’ was fated to be destroyed. For Naudé, it was true that Campanella had failed to found a new faith in Calabria for want of arms, but the Reformation had shown that ideology could be a power stronger and more destructive than force:

I hold discourse so powerful that till now I have found nothing that is exempt from its empire; for it is that which persuades and instils belief in the most fantastical religions, incites the most iniquitous wars, lends wings and colour to the blackest actions, calms and appeases the most violent seditions, excites rage and fury in the most peaceable souls, plants and cuts down heresies, instigates revolt in England, conversion in Japan.

If a prince had a dozen preachers of eloquence at his disposition, 'he would be better obeyed in his kingdom than if he had two powerful armies'. Naudé's respect for ideology was founded on contempt for those swayed by it: the 'populace'. Machiavelli had valued the plebs in Rome, seeing in the conflict with the patricians the source of the city's dynamism, and attempted to reproduce an armed citizenry in Florence as the basis for its republic, if to no avail. For Naudé, society was divided intellectually, not politically. There were *esprits forts*, of whose number he was, an enlightened elite of free thinkers able to look steadily at the realities of the natural and social world without the delusions of religion or superstition (for him practically the same); and there were the ignorant, credulous, brutal, excitable masses, lower than beasts – who at least act by natural instinct – in their misuse of reason. Statecraft required that they be controlled by the very stigmata of their gullibility: the deceptions of superstition used to domesticate and bemuse them, as practised by the rulers of the ancient world proclaiming themselves gods, or the genius of Mohammed transcribing the words of God, or the sectaries of the present. 'Since it is natural that most princes treat religion as charlatans and use it as a drug,' he wrote, why should a clear mind be blamed for doing the same? That was why the thunderbolt of the coup d'état should resemble a supernatural event, a wonder petrifying those who witnessed it. Where for Machiavelli fortune was a river that might lead to inundation, but with prudence could be canalised, for Naudé the populace was a treacherous ocean – a recurrent image – swept by high winds and deadly tempests: it had simply to be navigated.

Behind this difference of outlook was a distinctive philosophical vision and a determinate historical context. More radically than for Machiavelli, since not just politically but ontologically, for Naudé, mutability was the rule of all things: 'Since it began its course, the great circle of the universe has never ceased to carry away kingdoms, religions, sects, towns, men, beasts, trees, stones and everything that is found and enclosed within this great machine; the heavens themselves are not exempt from change and corruption.' Only 'weak minds imagine that Rome will always be the seat of the Holy Fathers, and Paris that of the kings of France.' In the face of such cosmic caducity, the mark of an *esprit fort* was 'to see all things, hear all things, do all things, without being troubled, unbalanced, astonished'. Required for such a temper was an ability 'to live in the world as if one were outside it, and below heaven as if one were above it'.

That could seem especially necessary during the period when Naudé was writing, the bright impudence of *La Mandragola* long gone in the crepuscular world that would produce the *Trauerspiel*. By 1639, when he committed his work to print, the Thirty Years' War had been tearing Europe apart and devastating Germany for twenty years. 'If we consider well the state of Europe,' he wrote in *Considérations politiques*, 'it is not difficult to see that it will soon be the theatre of many tragedies.' Two years later his cardinal-patron, who with French backing had high hopes of succeeding Urban VIII, expired and he returned to Paris to work with Richelieu, who died in turn a few months later, after which Naudé secured the post of librarian to Mazarin. He then spent the next seven years criss-crossing France, Germany, Switzerland, Flanders, Holland, Italy and England in pursuit of manuscripts and books for a library which came to hold around forty thousand texts, probably the largest collection in Europe.

A few months later, the Parlement of Paris revolted against the fiscal costs of keeping French armies in the field in Germany and Spain, detonating the Fronde. The common people threw up

barricades, driving Mazarin and the royal family out of the city, and to raise cash for its cause, the Parlement decreed that the library be auctioned off. The Peace of Westphalia, bringing the war in Germany to an end, enabled the royal army to retake Paris, suspending the sale. But in the second round of the Fronde, when Mazarin again had to flee Paris, the Parlement enforced the sale and dispersal of the library in 1652. As if he had foreseen it, everything Naudé had written of the savagery and ignorance of the populace came to life before his eyes, in bourgeois *parlementaires* and plebeian mobs alike. His life's work ruined, he found a post with Queen Christina in Sweden. Like Descartes and Grotius, he did not last long in Stockholm, dying on a trip back to France in 1653. It was a typical 17th-century ending. A precursor of Bayle, who admired him, Naudé was judged by his successor too advanced for his time.

THE WORLD of Naudé was already distant from that of Machiavelli. We live in a world much further away from Naudé's. Militarised absolutism and religious fanaticism, princely generals, feudal estates and clerical ministers, civil wars and urban barricades, famines and witch trials: if we except plagues, what have they in common with a tranquil landscape of ballot-boxes and opinion polls, shopping malls and social media, product regulation and quantitative easing, vegan picnics and emancipated pronouns? Yet there is a connection between *Considérations politiques sur les coups d'état* and *The Passage to Europe*. Coups d'état, in the now received sense of a military putsch, have of course long since disappeared from the continent: the last came in Greece in 1967. But Naudé's definition was ampler, and did not require violence. What links the two works is the celebration of a coup as the courageous founding act of a positive statecraft. For both authors, it is a stroke prepared out of sight, behind closed doors, whose blade precludes consent. What it depends on is surprise, of which a classic form – St Bartholomew's Day – is the ambush. Craxi, conductor of the coup in Milan, vaunted his skills at this, adopting the name of Ghino di Tacco, a 13th-century brigand (one of his killings is recorded by Dante in *Il Purgatorio*), for the columns he wrote in the Italian Socialist Party newspaper. The coups of *The Passage to Europe*, by contrast, are not only bloodless, but their success – just as Naudé had envisaged in such cases – depended on being inconspicuous, even innocuous. What could be more banal than a procedural motion about yet another meeting, or more trivial than a judicial decision over the price of a resin? Yet, as at Wittenberg, so at Luxembourg, in the smallest beginnings were hidden the largest consequences: the division of a unitary faith that had lasted five hundred years; the abrogation of sovereignties that emerged in its wake.

Van Middelaar situates his writing in the tradition of Machiavelli, and in the literature of the EU, not without reason. But in the structure of his argument, he is closer to Naudé. Machiavelli valued 'tumult' as the life blood of a flourishing republic, whose foundation was inconceivable without an active citizenship. Van Middelaar has no time for tumult, and had no hesitation in welcoming the foundation of a union in which citizens were all but passive, neither playing any significant role in its construction nor even taking much notice of it. But why should that matter? The constitution of the United States, after all, was born of a procedural coup, accepted after the fact by its citizens, long internalised as their own and today near worshipped by them. Why shouldn't the European Union reproduce the same happy outcome? The answer should be plain enough. The Thirteen Colonies had fought a victorious revolutionary war and already declared themselves an independent nation. The colonists, united in the prospect of continental expansion, were of one language and origin. The constitution did not undercut such democracy as uniquely in that time each of the states possessed, but assembled and centralised it in a federation. The EU of today is neither the creation of a revolution, nor does it enjoy any homogeneity of culture or language, nor is it united by the intoxicating prospect of expansion. Moreover, and decisively, what degree of federation it has achieved has been bought by crippling rather than enhancing what democracy its constituent nations possess. Comparison with 1783 is a paralogism.

That the EU has been unable to reproduce the bonds of identity and loyalty which tie Americans to the United States and Europeans to their nation-states van Middelaar readily acknowledges, and the memorable concluding meditation of his book has a taxonomy of approaches for overcoming this lack. Of the trio of strategies he sets out, the tenor is not quite even. All are approved, but the German and Roman lines of advance, ‘creating companions in destiny’ and ‘securing clients’, are treated more briefly and sceptically than the Greek, on which the final emphasis falls, under the aegis of a solemn epigraph from Hannah Arendt (already a heroine of *Politicide*) on the historically unique character of the *polis* (the other two have to make do with Julien Benda and Monty Python). Here, it could be thought, democracy would at last acquire its place, hitherto all but entirely absent, in the problematic of *The Passage to Europe*. What part does van Middelaar accord it? Since the Greek public was at once spectator and participant, its example offers two opportunities for a political body in search of an analogue today. ‘First, politics can give the public a say in decision-making. Second, politics can provide the public with drama, with onstage action that captivates it. The genius of Athens bound these two aspects together, inventing both democratic freedom and a public arena.’

There follows a painstaking attempt to show how in various ways – notwithstanding the ‘calamity’ of the Danish utterance of a ‘no’ to Maastricht, happily finessed on the morrow – ‘Europe has made a huge effort to give the population a say in decision-making.’ That the adjective is risible hardly matters; it is the indefinite article and feeble monosyllable of the penultimate phrase, to which van Middelaar reduces Athenian democracy, that delivers the message of his Greek conclusion. The Assembly where all important political issues were directly debated and determined by citizens, which was most famously what Athens actually invented, is never so much as mentioned. Instead, what Athens gave the world was the chorus in Greek drama. That it observes and comments on, but plays no role in the action, is a detail that undermines his attempt to collapse voter into spectator as the higher truth of the *polis*. The title of his chapter is franker: ‘The Greek Strategy: Seducing the Chorus’. For a European public to come into being, what’s needed is not a democracy determined by citizens, but a drama that entrances – ‘thrills’ – them. Politics at its best, Ankersmit had argued, is an exercise in aesthetics.

WHY was Ankersmit so taken with Naudé? After citing the lightning-streaked sky in which one sees ‘the thunderbolt before one hears it growling in the clouds’, and ‘all is done at night, in obscurity, in fog and darkness,’ Ankersmit went on:

The coup is a sudden disruption of, or infraction upon, the natural social and political order: effects precede their causes; everything takes place in obscurity and darkness and belies our natural expectations. In this way the coups d’état curiously seem to anticipate in the domain of history and politics the speculation of 18th-century philosophers on the sublime. We need only recall here how Kant related the sublime to what transcends the imagination’s application of categories of the understanding. For in a similar manner the coup d’état transgresses all our moral expectations: the moral world we are living in is shattered to dust, although a great collective good may have been served by the prince’s immoral behaviour. As the sublime transcends the apparently insurmountable opposition between pain and pleasure or delight, so do the *arcana* transcend the opposition between the moral and the immoral . . . The well-being of society can sometimes only be achieved by crime.

This wasn’t an aside. In an aesthetic politics, the sublime logically occupies the place of an *idée maîtresse*, and Ankersmit devoted his longest work, *Sublime Historical Experience*, to it. Breaking our normal epistemological framework, the sublime is the experience of an overwhelming reality connected with trauma, a compound of majesty and terror, fear and rapture, taking historical form in such great collective ruptures as 1494, 1789, 1861, 1917 or 1989, and to which Tocqueville’s response to the French Revolution stands as the classic reaction. The same kind of experience, a

sudden heightened apprehension of another more intense reality could also, as Huizinga had shown, be aroused in the eyes of the historian by simple everyday objects of the past. Ankersmit thought that an uncanny elision of the two registers of the sublime, the monumental and the microscopic, was underway in an invisible revolution. Out of sight, a huge number of small-scale changes in daily life were so altering our world that their ‘sum may amount to little less than a permanent French Revolution’. But there was a crucial difference. ‘We live, as it were, in the negative’ of the sublime of 1789: ‘a revolution of the same scale, without ideals’. The state was being demolished and the market worshipped, and we were left to float rudderless with flapping sails on a windless sea, where it was only a matter of time before a storm broke and we might be lost. If a Hobbesian war of all against all was not to ensue, the state – the indispensable modern vector of collective self-awareness and self-determination – must be capable of imposing its order once again.

Van Middelaar, early exposed to his teacher’s conception of the sublime as a paradoxical experience of the transcendent in this-worldly form, and of the new ways in which it was taking shape, saluted it. ‘We seem to be in control of the world more than ever, but we can see the consequences of it less than ever – ecology, nuclear bomb, genetic engineering,’ he remarked. ‘The paradox is therefore an extreme polarisation of certainty and uncertainty, of satisfaction about that certainty and of fear of that uncertainty – that is, the kind of paradox in which the sublime typically manifests itself.’ But van Middelaar had another view of the market. If an example of Ankersmit’s case were to be sought, there was, he wrote in *Trouw*,

no finer microcosm of sublime unintended consequences than the bourse. All its traders have the same goal, to get richer, but at times the paradoxical result of this joint endeavour is that they all lose a great deal of money in one fell swoop. That was not their intention. But it is exciting. Last Monday, the impending stock market crash in Amsterdam was definitely a sublime spectacle: the animal roar of the traders and the delighted smile of the red-headed AEX director George Moller, who thought it ‘beautiful’, remarking: ‘We’re now waiting for Wall Street to open this afternoon.’

Longinus may have held that ‘slaves of money’ were insensible to the sublime. But today Mammon itself is an important source of the sublime. Pessimists may think their view that the chances of moral elevation by the sublime are smaller than ever. They are wrong. The first-century rhetorician and the 21st-century stockbroker learn the same lesson from the sublime: respect for indomitable reality.

That was in 2000, fresh from *Politicide*. When van Middelaar returned to Ankersmit’s work after his time in Brussels and The Hague, he was characteristically no less upbeat, but now the object of his admiration, and his difference with Ankersmit, had altered. The fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11 had changed international relations, permanently. They were ruptures of the kind Ankersmit had written about. Did that mean the state was on the way out? Far from it. Before these great events, Europe had become a mere marketplace between East and West. Now, however, states were taking more collective responsibility for the destiny of the continent than ever before. ‘The flight from politics and history that Europe represented for so long is over.’ The sublime was reverting to a more traditional décor.

PUBLISHED in Dutch in 2009, *The Passage to Europe* had a triumphant local reception. Though it was still unknown to a wider European public, its success in the Netherlands was enough to secure van Middelaar the post of speechwriter and special adviser to Herman Van Rompuy when this Belgian prime minister took office as the first full-time president of the European Council, a position created by the Treaty of Lisbon. Van Middelaar would now step onto the stage where the great events to which he had looked forward at the end of his book took place.

Earlier that year, hailing Obama's inauguration in Washington in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, he set out the global context, updating his conception of the Modern Man's Burden:

Obama makes America more powerful. The ability to cast the national interest in terms of a universal mission is deeply embedded in American consciousness. America is a force for good. That is its imperial trump card. Anyone who can credibly identify power with virtue is strong. The president himself knows this very well, and spoke to it in his masterly inaugural speech. Why did he move hundreds of millions? Certainly, because of the colour of his face, the sound of his voice, the moment in time. But also because he said that America, 'the wealthiest and most powerful nation on Earth' is and will remain a beacon of light and freedom, a country that is 'a friend of every nation' and 'willing to lead again'. Obama's audience, inside and outside America, yearned for this message.

This was all the more important since anti-Americanism had been gaining ground worldwide. 'The Statue of Liberty was no longer the symbol of America, but Guantánamo Bay. That's why Obama decided to remove that blemish immediately. Symbolism is power politics.' That the Netherlands, which had relied on America for its safety since 1945, should 'refuse to help polish up the American blazon by accepting a few Guantánamo prisoners' was 'completely incomprehensible'. It was in the Dutch interest 'to strengthen our military protector against rivals like China or Russia'. But there was more to US paramountcy than simple might. Just as barbarians had been attracted to Rome by its aqueducts, villas with underfloor heating, and fine wines, so

besides its military and economic superiority, America's power lies in the global appeal of its lifestyle, racial equality and education. In this sense, Obama won on 4 November not only because he was able to promise a New Deal-like break with a deep crisis. It was striking that not only the poorest but the wealthiest voted for him. For in the long run the richest too served the cause by the display of their lifestyle.

Equipped with these convictions, van Middelaar made his way to Van Rompuy's cabinet, and the four years spent with him resulted in *Alarums and Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage*. Reception has matched that of *The Passage to Europe* – some thirty dithyrambs posted on his website; pre-publication superlatives galore, this time topped by Donald Tusk, the incumbent president of the European Council ('quite simply the most insightful book on Europe's politics today'), and Britain's former ambassador to the EU, Sir Ivan Rogers ('brilliant' – the sixth award of this epithet). But the two books are not on the same level. *The Passage to Europe* could legitimately claim to be a work of political realism. It laid bare central *arcana imperii* of European integration, as Naudé reproached Machiavelli for having done of princely practice – not all of them, of course, and not with any of his predecessors' sense of moral ambiguity, but as no other of the plethora of eulogies, official or academic, of the Union had ever done. *Alarums and Excursions*, though awash with many of the same tropes, is a different kind of exercise.

'During seventy years,' the book begins, 'the preconditions of the miracle play that is a free society disappeared from view', while talk in Europe was all of growth, education, healthcare and suchlike, with little care for the overarching questions of 'state and authority, strategy and war, security and the border, citizenship and opposition'. Then suddenly, crises came one after another: 'banks collapsed, the euro wobbled, Russia attacked Ukraine and annexed Crimea, vast numbers of desperate people attempted to cross into Europe, and Donald Trump pulled the US security rug from underneath the European continent.' Faced with this political cataract, new qualities were required to save the Union: 'speed and determination, a keen judgment of the situation, visible gestures and authoritative words: leadership'. After some missteps, these were forthcoming. 'The Brussels backroom rule-making factory is giving way to political drama on a

continent-wide stage,' just as van Middelaar had hoped would occur in *The Passage to Europe*. The title of its sequel, an Elizabethan stage direction indicating tumult and clamour, captured the nature of the spectacle which this kind of drama offered its audience. No longer Sophocles: Shakespeare. 'Conveying the feverish mood when action becomes imminent, *Alarums and Excursions* tells the inside story of Europe's political metamorphoses and deciphers its consequences for political actors and the public alike.' Happily, all would end well, as through its ordeals the Union reached political maturity. By 2017 'we saw Europe's new politics rise to its full height, not just improvising and taking shape despite itself but acquiring self-knowledge and vitality.'

First had come the troubles of the single currency. There Merkel's declaration that 'if the euro fails, Europe fails' was decisive, heralding the rise of Germany's power in the Union. Did the measures that followed respect the Treaty of Maastricht? No, and so much the better. "Europe" trumped Maastricht.' For Merkel's 'seemingly naive' words concealed a rarely noticed truth: 'the states had committed themselves at the Union's foundation not only to adherence to Union law but to the continued existence of the Union as such. In emergency situations, therefore, breaking with the rules could actually equate to being true to the contract.' The same held good, van Middelaar argued, for the tough financial and political measures taken by Berlin, Frankfurt and Brussels to oust weak governments in Southern Europe, crack down on the gambler Varoufakis, and circumvent the blackmail of Britain's opposition to the Fiscal Compact. Responsibility and solidarity were 'the root melodies of the Union' in conducting Europe away from the 'incalculable risks' of a Greek exit from the euro, while Tsipras's acceptance of medicine harsher even than that just rejected by voters was true to their deeper desire, which was not for a return to the drachma, but for the preservation of their dignity. The green light for banking union won in 2012 was 'miraculous'. Draghi's bond-purchasing programme to prop up the euro was 'likewise a miraculous mixture of solidarity and responsibility'. Even if it was a bit above their heads, 'the "Save the Euro" show captivated the public' and 'got the very best out of the players'.

In the Ukraine, van Middelaar admits, the Commission over-reached itself at the outset, failing to realise how important the country was to the Kremlin. But once the street had thrown Yanukovich out, Putin had annexed Crimea, and in the ensuing civil war a Malaysian airliner had been shot down with a Russian missile, the Council swung into action under the sagacious leadership of Merkel. First backing US sanctions with its own firm blows to Russia's economy, it then negotiated a deal at Minsk restoring the Donbass to Ukraine in exchange for the tacit right of Moscow to prevent Kiev from joining Nato. This was less than a complete victory, since in the Ukrainian civil war neither side has been willing to implement the Minsk deal, and 'the West did not have the will to win and Russia was not willing to lose.' But it was a watershed in Europe's role in the world, marking its 'geopolitical emancipation from America' as an authoritative strategist in its own right – one that had come to understand the 'tragic dilemmas and hard choices' of power politics. Just as the Council had mastered the euro crisis by discarding orthodox rules in the interests of financial stability, so by bracketing the issue of Crimea, in the Ukraine crisis it discarded rigorous enforcement of international law in the interests of peaceful stability. But sanctions were not slackened: they would remain until Russia disgorged its prey.

Refugees posed an even more tragic dilemma for Europe, since they fostered so many tensions between northern and southern, western and eastern member states. The task confronting the EU, for van Middelaar, was to set an ethics of responsibility 'alongside' an ethics of conviction. After the Commission blundered with bureaucratic over-reach in trying to set quotas for the reception of refugees, it was left to Merkel to resolve the crisis by reaching an agreement with Erdoğan that may have been 'ethically and legally questionable', but was vital to prevent populist reactions threatening Schengen. A deal with Sisi in Egypt would be needed too, as one with Gaddafi had been, to keep the time-bomb of demographic explosion in Africa away from Europe's

shores. Warning of ‘political catastrophes’ if the Union’s borders were not secured, Tusk saw the magnitude of the problem and eloquently expressed the pride of Europe in nurturing a ‘spirit of love and freedom’ during these difficult years.

Lastly came the double blow of Brexit and Trump. As Pocock had shown, it was ‘out of the experience of a democratic republic’s own transience and mortality that there may arise a political will to manifest itself as a sovereign player in historical time’, enabling it to remain morally and politically stable in the irrational stream of events. So, for van Middelbaar, it was with the EU. At this Machiavellian moment, Europe, in Merkel’s memorable saying, showed itself able ‘to take its destiny in its own hands’. In Paris, Macron stepped forth to the sound of the ‘Ode to Joy’, and the EU united behind a determination to punish Britain for its desertion. Its stance was perfectly rational: ‘Bluntly put, it would not be in the Union’s interests for things to go well in the post-Brexit UK. Leading European voices considered that the political costs of a “soft” Brexit outweighed the “economic” costs of a hard Brexit.’ So Tusk gave Ireland a veto on the withdrawal process, with Brussels compactly behind Dublin. Yet it was above all the awakening of the decisive power of Germany to the stakes at issue that made Brexit the Union’s finest hour, enabling it to perform more convincingly than in any of its previous crises.

Alarums and Excursions ends with an assessment of the balance sheet of these years for the character of the EU. What they had wrought was a transition from ‘the politics of rules’ to ‘the politics of events’ – unforeseeable events, requiring improvised responses. The institutional consequence was to deepen the change in the relationship between the Union’s constituent parts that had begun with the formation of the European Council in the 1970s and been a leading theme of *The Passage to Europe*. In its day, the rule-factory of the Commission in Brussels had done sterling work as ‘an unrivalled pacifier and creator of prosperity’, and now, faced with Brexit, it continued to show its value by revealing to the public at large ‘just how difficult it is to escape its clutches’. Yet though technically it retained a monopoly of legislative initiative, in practice its proposals often originated in the Council of Ministers. The Commission might then elaborate them, but its federalist instincts had become counterproductive. It was no longer, according to van Middelbaar, ‘the site of development and renewal’.

That role had passed to the Council. If member states were to defend themselves against external attack, and offer their peoples a powerful role in the world, an ‘emancipation of the executive’ of the Union was vital. Meeting six to ten times a year as something like a provisional European government, the Council handles *Chefsachen* – the stuff of high politics, not low regulation – in closed sessions. At these, van Middelbaar can report, all 28 heads of government call each other by their first names, and may find themselves agreeing to decisions they had never imagined beforehand, before emerging together for a beaming ‘family photograph’ in front of the cameras of the one thousand reporters assembled to hear their tidings, whose presence makes ‘failure impossible’, since every summit (with just one upsetting exception) ends with a message of common hope and resolve. Flanked by its trusty ‘Eurogroup’ of finance ministers and above all by the European Central Bank, ‘a monetary version of the passage to Europe’s new politics’ capable of equally decisive action in defence of the single currency, this is not a Council to be garlanded with the academic ribbon of mere legitimacy. What it now wears is something older, firmer and more capacious – the uniform of authority.

True, the Union still wants for one final complement. Opposition is ‘oxygen for political life’, lack of it a danger to any system. The technical, legal and procedural workings of the Commission and the court were low profile, but their ‘dullness was a price worth paying to subdue national resistances, idiosyncrasies and pretensions’. For a time, depoliticised progress towards a closer union was valuable, but by obstructing protest it eventually had the unfortunate side-effect of driving it into mobilisation outside the arena of Brussels. The Council does not proceed so

bureaucratically. But even the politics of events as opposed to rules can be depoliticising, its decisions presented as necessities imposed by a series of emergencies, making opposition impossible. The risk of declaring measures *alternativos* – a favourite formula of Merkel's – is the same. 'A strategy of *faits accomplis* feeds scepticism. The public hears this as "like it or lump it."' What is to be done? It would be better, van Middelaar writes, if opposition could be fostered democratically within the system, 'to stage-manage and pacify social and political conflicts symbolically'. But that could hardly take the form of partisan division in the Union, since the diversity of politics in its member states precludes uniformity of governments in the Council, or blocs in the Parliament, because left or right parties never prevail simultaneously across the EU. In the Council and Parliament alike there is, on the contrary, always a *de facto* Grand Coalition of conservatives, Christian democrats, social democrats and liberals. Only political fringes on the far right and far left lie outside it, but these hold power nowhere in Europe, and their 'polemical' opposition is futile, as Syriza and Podemos discovered. So where is the right sort of opposition to be found? These problems are 'not easily resolved', van Middelaar concludes lamely, his last pages trailing away into the tritest of bromides from Brussels. The Union, of course, needs 'dissensus', inspired by 'the conviction that what unites us as Europeans on this continent is bigger and stronger than anything that divides us'. In effect, consensus by any other name smells as sweet.

THE PRODUCT of services to Van Rompuy at the apex of the EU, *Alarums and Excursions* belongs a sub-class of literature of which *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* by Jonathan Powell and *The World as It Is* by Ben Rhodes are other recent samples: what might be called spin-doctrines of the equerry. Van Rompuy was never a ruler in the sense Blair and Obama were, and van Middelaar never enjoyed the power of Powell and Rhodes. He is, on the other hand, incomparably more intelligent and literate, so *Alarums and Excursions* is a superior exercise in the genre, without need for chest-beating typical of it. But the deterioration since *The Passage to Europe* is plain. The first book was the work of a historian who was an enthusiast for the EU, the second is the product of an apologist in its service. The difference lies in the quotient of evasion and hyperbole in each. *Alarums and Excursions* retains flashes – in its description of the EU response to Brexit; its depiction of the operations of the Council and complexities of the institutional machinery of the new Europe; its emphasis on the strategy of the *fait accompli* in the 'Union method' – of the realist candour that was the leading virtue of his earlier book. Talk of coups is, naturally, no longer acceptable. But the gist of the story is the same. With the demotic touch required of any decent publicist, this time van Middelaar places at the head of his book an epigraph from Miles Davis. It reads: 'I'll play it first and tell you what it is later.' The politics of the EU in a one-liner.

But the price for these moments of frankness has risen. Along with acknowledgment of the 'coercive consensus' of the Council meetings, the charades of Union summitry, the demotion of the Commission, come longer and more laboured efforts to magic into existence a 'public' at one and the same time spectators in a gallery (or, in a more popular variant, fans at a football match) and actors in the scene they are watching (players in the game they are cheering or booing). The contradiction in terms, hazily sketched in *The Passage to Europe*, with its image of a Greek chorus, becomes an extended comedy in *Alarums and Excursions*, whose concluding chapter – the longest in the book – is entitled 'The Opposition Takes the Stage', only to reveal that there is no such opposition. Deontologically, it would be nice if there were, van Middelaar thinks, provided it was not polemical, but so far it hasn't materialised in any acceptable form. Nothing could be worse than expressions of the popular will that contravene the Union method. Think of the referendums on the draft European constitution – mere destruction, not opposition.

As for the main burden of *Alarums and Excursions* – Europe rising to its full height in dealing with the crises besetting it – the roll-call of triumphs rarely rises above the language and level of public relations. Saving Europe, by saving the euro, by withstanding Grexit? Restoring dignity to the

Greeks, by cancelling their votes? That the Union was never in danger from the departure or – Schäuble's proposal – the suspension of Greece from the single currency, only the stake of German and French banks in Greek debt; that the humiliation of commissioners from Brussels dictating laws, policies, regulations in Athens – dignity *à la hollandaise* – aside, the Troika's regime inflicted misery on the poor, the elderly and the young in Greece; that Greek public debt today stands higher than when Papandreou was forced by Berlin and Paris to call off one referendum, or Tsipras capitulated after another. None of this rates a mention.

Ukraine: geopolitical emancipation of Europe from America, resolute sanctions against Russia for annexing Crimea, enlightened interim compromise at Minsk? The realities: EU sanctions followed US sanctions, uniting stupidity and hypocrisy. Stupidity – does any Western politician, no matter how ignorant, really believe that Russia will ever relinquish Crimea, an accidental province of Ukraine, whim of a paper shuffle by Khrushchev for a couple of decades, when it was a hallowed part of Russia for more than two centuries, populated overwhelmingly by Russians? What possible gain could come from making relations with the country an indefinite hostage to the fiction that its recovery could be reversed? Hypocrisy: Europe has never lifted a finger over the annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights by Israel, the South Sahara by Morocco, or the occupation of half of Cyprus by Turkey, though in all these cases seizure was against the will of most or all of the population, enforced by violent repression and ethnic cleansing, unlike Crimea where it was certainly welcomed by a majority, if one exaggerated by Moscow. Borders are inviolable only when it suits the West to say so. As for Minsk, its upshot has been zero.

Refugees: what is there to be proud of in the European record? Attacking Libya (France, Britain, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Denmark), bombing and fighting in Afghanistan (contingents from virtually every member state of the Union) and Syria (France, Britain), increasing refugee flows in each instance: a copybook case of the ethics of responsibility? Bribing Erdoğan with six billion euros to block fugitives from getting to Europe by penning them within Turkey, under a regime boasting a hundred thousand political prisoners: an exercise in the ethics of conviction? There's not a line on the pay-off to Erdoğan in *Alarums and Excursions*, though van Middelaar mercifully spares us Euro-cant on human rights, confining himself to talk of love and freedom as internment camps fester in Lesbos and boats capsize off Lampedusa.

Brexit: a triumph of European statecraft? If the Union's great breakthrough was to advance beyond a politics of rules to one of events, overturning one rule after another in pursuit of financial stability and border security, wouldn't it have made more sense to concede to Cameron the brakes on migration he was asking for to win his referendum, rather than to risk Britain's desertion by invoking immovable principles that are continually being moved? If, when necessity calls, the Treaty of Maastricht's precise and detailed clauses on budgetary discipline and its prohibition of central bank purchase of government debt can be dismissed in the shake of a lamb's tail, why not the far vaguer provisions of the Treaty of Rome on the free movement of labour? From the *Realpolitiker* standpoint advertised by van Middelaar, the logic of pragmatically dodging the blow to the EU from across the Channel should have been obvious. No such thought crosses the mind of his book.

In effect, the expressions of the Union's new political maturity – saving Europe by dignifying Greece, breaking strategically free from America, reconciling responsibility and morality in the Mediterranean, treating sagely with Britain – belong with the splendour of white man's colonialism, the abundance that bombs would bring to Afghanistan, the closure of Guantánamo by Obama, the global beacon of America's racial equality: figments in the mazes of magical realism. But it would be a mistake to dismiss their author on that account. Fantastications can be politically functional, if they answer to the needs of rule. Van Middelaar occupies a unique position in the landscape of the Union today, as the one significant theorist of Europe to marry

long-range thought with proximity to power. The balance in his work between genuine insight and glib ideology may form a shifting terrain, but not one that is to the detriment of his ambition. Having served with Bolkestein and Van Rompuy, he has since attached himself as special adviser to the vice-president of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, another Dutch bruiser who would probably now be its president, had he not, after years spent buttering up Erdoğan as the Commission's point-man in the Union's cash-for-stopping-fugitives deal with Turkey (he claimed most of them were just economic chancers), hectored Poles and Hungarians too stridently for failing to uphold the rule of law. A loud-mouthed transfuge from D66, a Dutch equivalent of Britain's SDP, who is today operative on the right wing of the ultra-moderate Dutch Labour Party, Timmermans was the most vociferous champion of the European Constitutional Treaty – he was one of its drafters – rejected by Dutch voters in 2005, and a key figure in sliding its core content back into the Lisbon Treaty of 2009. Alongside him is a natural berth for an intellectual with an eye to a yet more organic future, as special adviser to Europe itself.

WITH WHOM might such a figure be compared? Not to any contemporary, but there is a historical parallel. Mutatis mutandis, the person and career of Friedrich Gentz, the 'secretary of Europe', as Golo Mann dubbed him in an admiring biography of 1946, suggests a resemblance. Bourgeois son of the director of the Prussian mint, after studying under Kant in Königsberg, where he corrected the proofs of *Critique of Judgment*, Gentz won fame by producing the first European translation of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, with an impassioned preface amplifying its summons to battle against the 'despotic synod' in Paris, whose theories were bent on 'rooting out all that gave happiness to millions'; published single-handed a *Historische Journal* with an international readership, in which he wrote the first systematic comparison of the American and French Revolutions, translated into English by John Quincy Adams; and set out in his *Political Condition of Europe before and after the French Revolution* the first strategic theorisation of the need for the anciens régimes of Europe to transcend traditional balance of power politics and reach an accord to stamp out subversion wherever it raised its head, without consideration of borders or sovereignties – today's *droit d'ingérence*, before it was draped in human rights.

Hired by the court in Vienna as 'the best political writer in Germany' to sway public opinion in favour of the Habsburg monarchy, he was lionised in London – by then he was on Pitt's secret payroll too – where the French envoy observed that 'if there is one man who can be called the champion of the counter-revolution, it is he.' An implacable foe of any settlement with Napoleon, who had trampled on the balance of power in Europe, he became an early associate of Metternich, serving as the secretary to the Congress of Vienna, and under the Restoration drafted the Protocol of Troppau, authorising the assembled monarchies to invade any country afflicted by revolutionary disturbances and crush them in the common interests of order and tranquillity in Europe.

For fifteen years Gentz was Metternich's closest continuous collaborator as policy adviser and propaganda chief, roles in which he displayed, according to Metternich, 'real genius'. Contrasts in background and character set the two men apart, in a common commitment to legitimism. Nine years older than his patron, Gentz was an outsider in the social and political system of Austrian absolutism, as a Prussian and a commoner of no independent means. Metternich was a wealthy aristocrat from the Rhineland, scion of Vienna's plenipotentiary in the Austrian Netherlands when the French Revolution broke out. He was a consummately cool, controlled and self-confident diplomat and politician, where Gentz was explosive and emotional, a gambler and spendthrift. In the current hagiography by Wolfram Siemann, Metternich features as a prince in name and nature alike: visionary statesman of peace; masterly strategist of war; pioneering modern capitalist; impassioned humanitarian; devoted husband, yet as a connoisseur of women, lover of many others; before his time in understanding the intellectual equality of the sexes, not to speak of the

true path to responsible liberty and prosperity.* In a portrait in which no other figure in a potentially crowded canvas is allowed the smallest detraction from the limelight accorded a hero who termed himself ‘the saviour of the world’ (he assures his readers it can only have been in jest), Siemann dismisses Gentz in a paragraph as an ‘ambitious journalist’. The reality is that, far better educated than Metternich, and a better writer, Gentz was also an original thinker of the European counter-revolution, in whose essays and books can be found the leading ideas of the Restoration long before they found scattered expression in the letters and papers left by Metternich, whose only sustained compositions were the self-serving memoirs put together posthumously by his son.

So too Gentz had an independence of mind capable of detaching him from the cause he served. In 1810 he could envisage a rational reorganisation of post-Napoleonic Europe into no more than eleven states, including a politically united Germany and Italy, and an independent Poland and Greece – just what the Congress of Vienna denied. Even as he helped conduct the Congress five years later, he could deliver a lucid judgment on it:

The magniloquent phrases about ‘restitution of the social order’, ‘the recovery of European politics’, ‘enduring peace based on a just apportionment of power’ and so on were trumped up only to quiet the masses and to confer on the Congress some semblance of import and dignity. But the real sense of the gathering was that the victors should share with one another the booty snatched from the vanquished.

Towards the end of his life, he could see the ultimate futility of the enterprise on which he and Metternich had embarked, writing in 1827:

I have always been conscious that despite the majesty and power of my superiors, despite all the single victories we achieved, the spirit of the age would prove mightier in the end than we; that thoroughly as I have despised the press for its extravagancies, it will not lose its ascendancy over all our wisdom; and that guile will no more than force be able to stay the wheel of time.

Such reflections were beyond Metternich, whose encomiast takes care not to let them ruffle his pages. In them, however, contemporary conservatives can find inspiration. For Siemann, Metternich’s career after 1815 offers a premonition of our own times, and inspiration for how to handle them. The epoch of the Restoration? Banish the term, which is a misleading description of the objectives of the prince and his fellow statesman in those years. ‘It would be much more appropriate to describe their aims, and the constraints under which they acted, as giving rise to “security policies”.’ These were required to defend ‘the system of international law established in 1815’ from ‘attempted revolutions and rebellions, or assassinations and seizures of power’, such as the Greek revolt against the Ottomans (best for it to ‘burn itself out beyond the pale of civilisation’ was Metternich’s humanitarian response). For the brand-mark of the period was ‘the hitherto unwritten history of Europe-wide terrorism, which developed between 1817 and 1825. It was only because of this terrorism that nationalism was able to become an unassailable social power.’ In Greece and elsewhere, ‘modern nationalism presented itself as a form of religious salvation and exploited a context of social and economic backwardness,’ thereby generating a ‘universally usable myth’ of utopian dimensions. It is easy, Siemann remarks, to accuse Metternich of repression, but if we look around us today, the counter-measures he took against the jihadis of the period are comparable to ‘the activities of modern intelligence services and other state institutions responsible for safeguarding constitutions’. Do not ‘the holy warriors of 1789, 1813 and 1819 have something in common with those of today’?

The security policies set in place by Metternich were far-sighted not only in dealing firmly with a nationalism spawned by terrorism, but in furnishing the antidote to it. That lay in the ‘historically

evolved legal orders' of the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy, and the fashion in which these were folded into the German Confederation set up at Vienna. In this, Siemann goes on, Metternich was astonishingly modern, as we can see if we consider the contemporary scene in this respect too. 'The European Union follows the same model, guaranteeing national identity under the umbrella of composite statehood' in a way that 'advances the common interests of all'. Perceiving the deadly bacillus carried by the nation-state whose unity 'led only to war', and rightly suppressing it in Italy, Metternich pioneered the vaccine against it. The Concert of Europe created at Vienna has found its historical successor in Brussels.

The political connection between the two is a descent freely affirmed in *The Passage to Europe*, where the founding states of the Community were possessed from the outset of 'a profound consciousness' of the 'legacy of the Concert of Europe', and the meetings of their heads of government, informal at first, then institutionalised as the European Council in 1974, formed 'a contemporary "Vienna 1814-15"'. The historical circumstances of the Union of the 21st century, of course, differ vastly from those of Metternich's system. Composed not of aristocratic monarchies but of electoral democracies, it is in no danger of internecine fighting or revolution. Front lines in the war on terror are in other continents. The commonest arena for nationalism is the football field. Nevertheless, tension, mostly submerged but sporadically visible, is widespread between the elites and the peoples of Europe, as it was in the days of the Restoration, once again requiring extra-territorial interventions to keep public order. No longer military expeditions of the kind sent to crush Spanish or Italian liberals, these now take economic form: dictates of Berlin, Paris or Frankfurt evicting unsuitable governments in Rome and Athens; commissaries of Brussels invigilating the taxes, labour laws, pension systems of other countries for conformity to neoliberal principles, today's legitimism.

In defending and illustrating this system, van Middelaar is the closest thing the Union has produced to a modern Gentz. Like the secretary to Europe, he won his spurs with a philippic against ideological toxins from France: the ideas of 1789, the ideas of 1917. *Politicide*, denouncing latter-day philosophers of terrorism, was his translation of Burke for moderns. Both propagandists yet also original thinkers, each combined gifts of literary eloquence with calculations of *raison d'état*. Both enjoyed a European reception for their political writing beyond that of any contemporary. Gentz exercised real power, though always as a subordinate; van Middelaar to date has not. On the other hand, compared with Gentz's prolific writing, remarkable though it was in its age, van Middelaar's work is of another order of intellectual complexity and sophistication, as befits the distance between the relative simplicities of the Congress system and the labyrinths of the EU.

If Ankersmit gave the original impulse to van Middelaar's outlook in much the same way as Burke to Gentz's, can it be said that in exalting the Restoration as the cradle of democracy, Ankersmit offers another connection between the worlds of the two? Not exactly, since his Restoration was that of Guizot, not Metternich – the censitary rather than absolutist variant of oligarchic rule. In that nuance lies a difference between the teacher and his pupil. Ankersmit transmitted to van Middelaar, along with a conventional anti-communism and commitment to capitalism, his distinctive conception of politics as fundamentally an aesthetic enterprise, his lofty sense of the state and his cult of the sublime. But Ankersmit has also in his way been politically anti-elitist, attacking what has become of democracy in the West as 'an elective aristocracy'. That note is entirely missing in van Middelaar's writing. There, the enemy is on the contrary just what the elites of Europe themselves decry and fear most: 'populism'. Democratic systems have effective oppositions that may one day govern. The European Union is organised in such a way that it does not. But since it is good form to regret its 'democratic deficit', it would be better if it at least appeared to do so. Hence van Middelaar's successive attempts to supply an ersatz opposition – a chorus, a gallery, an audience – that could offer a façade of democracy to the construction he

extols. No thinker agitated the young van Middelaaar more than Jean Baudrillard. But the public invoked in protean guises across so many of his pages is always in substance the same, the neutered onlooker of a spectacle, as depicted by Baudrillard. European democracy? Less diplomatic than his aide, Van Rompuy has voiced the truths of Brussels more bluntly. In Greece, ‘the performance of the troika may have taken place a little too much in the media spotlight’: better in a blackout. What of the continent at large? ‘I believe the Union is overdemocratised’: in so many words.

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Footnotes

* Christopher Clark wrote about Siemann's biography in the LRB of 8 October.