

A very short history of the European Project for teachers

The European Union is a dynamic organisation that adapts to changing circumstances. Too often resources available have focused on the structures, with scarce, if any, pedagogical awareness. Students are rarely faced with an overview of change and continuity in EU history, and are not enabled to grasp the position of the EU within European history: this often results in a perception of the EU as something “else”, not coherent with the history of our Continent - whereas it is actually an organic part of it. The topic itself is often overlooked in schools, partly because it's perceived as boring and partly because teachers often feel uncertain about the topic themselves.

This very short history of the European project is meant for teachers on the run, who are pressed to follow their curriculum, but would also like to provide their students with the tools to understand the Europe around them.

We will go about it by pointing out some topical moments for the European project. Since key turning points by themselves cannot provide students with a complete understanding of history, those ‘topical moments’ will rather be a carefully selected ‘peepholes’ that should enable teachers and students alike to start a conversation on the character of the historical period that revolved around a key point in time. The events will be a pointer to context, causes, and tendencies - rather than a history digest.

Origins

Richard Nikolaus von Coudenhove-Kalergi humanises the first theme we want to point out. Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894 - 1972) was an Austrian-Japanese nobleman (holding in different periods Czechoslovak and French citizenship) who dedicated himself to build a political union in Europe. It was an elitist project which meant to build a union that would ensure the establishment of a peaceful Europe. This personal view illustrates the birth of the European project with its shadows (elitism) and lights (peace, anti nationalism) fuelled by Kalergi's very personal background, against the backdrop of the authoritarian regimes of the time. His book, *Paneuropa* (1923), although not the first to call for a political union in Europe, can be considered as the beginning of its modern phase.

While there was a widespread desire to get on with life and to prevent violent conflict in Europe, it still holds true that the decisions that led the way to our modern Union were made by those who found themselves at the helms of power at the time. The 1920s saw the first significant rapprochement between France and Germany. Prime Minister Aristide Briand and Chancellor Stresemann were the engines that kindled hopes for peace and European entente over that decade. A useful source is Briand's speech in favour of a European Union in the League of Nations (1929), and his Memorandum on the Organisation of a Regime of European Federal Union (1930). Yet again, Briand' and Stresemann's efforts were those of a committed elite, and they arguably missed the chance to build a shared anti-nationalist and pro-peace narrative with the rest of the population.

Dark Years & Rebirth

In 1940, a group of anti-fascist activists was exiled to the southern Italian island of Ventotene. What Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi, Eugenio Colorni, and Ursula Hirschmann wrote there became known as the Ventotene Manifesto. The text is the ideological drive of European federalist viewpoint to this day, and was instrumental in informing the post-1945 debate on a European political community. A good source to learn more about European federalism would be the documents of the Hague Congress (1948) and the early European Movement.

However, also after the war, in 1946, Winston Churchill delivered a well-known speech in Zurich about a Pan-European Union.

The convergence of three different points of view (Kalergi's cosmopolitan elitism, Spinelli's leftist federalism, and Briand' and Churchill's soundly grounded political realism) are very important to the founding of the modern European project. This rare convergence of ideas from different political perspectives made it politically viable to advance the project of the European Union.

Were it not for this convergence of intents, Schuman's 1950 declaration may not have happened, nor would have had any effect on the political landscape. But it did: it inaugurated a decade of ups and downs which culminated in 1957 with the Treaties of Rome - and in 1960 with the birth of the European Communities' earliest rival: the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Nevertheless, divergent opinions about the purpose and future of Europe continued; the British government, afraid of the potential development of the project into a political union, had decided not to participate, and was the leading founder of the EFTA. But even within the ECC's members' political elites views diverged between supranationalist, federalists, and supporter of a simply economic union. In addition, very vocal leftist and pro-Soviet political forces (a very strong minority in Western Europe) saw the European project as the attempt of the capitalist forces to unite and subdue the Continent's workers, and to form a solid block opposing the Soviet Union.

These points of view, though, all stemmed from the political elites. There was little involvement of the population in this discourse: the booming economy and the sense of a common purpose across EEC Member States, a block of liberal democracies opposing the URSS to the East and the authoritarian regimes in the South (i.e. Spain and Portugal), enabled a tacit consensus on the European project, which was hardly ever put into question.

Europe under De Gaulle

1959-1969 is the time span of Charles de Gaulle's Presidency of France. His tenure determined the direction of the European Community - for good and for bad. A look at the 1961 Fouchet Plan shows the failed attempt by the French President to avoid a further political union in Europe. De Gaulle's vision for the continent was that of a third Superpower, able to broker between USSR and the USA, but led by France and firmly intergovernmental. De Gaulle's position is exemplary of how the European project is an organic evolution of European history, and not something alien as it is often perceived. The European Community was an element, and at times a player, in the Cold War. Its Member States had their own perspectives, and the ECC as a block had its own objectives, sometimes diverging from what the US aimed for. The way different parties viewed the role of Europe within the bigger picture of the global contraposition of the Cold War directly affected their view on the evolution of the European project itself: some were convinced that the national administrations should have a free hand in dealing with the Superpowers (De Gaulle, for

instance); others saw the collective force of a united Europe, where common institutions would lead the way, as the only possibility for Europe to play a significant role between East and West (Western Germany leaders tended to see it this way).

De Gaulle shaped the Community in other ways: he firmly refused twice to allow Britain in (thus delaying the UK's access to the EC to 1973); and he had a very difficult relationship with the ambitious then-President of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein. The Commission was at the time a not-so-powerful body, and it simply provided the Community with administrative guidance. But Hallstein wanted it to command more competences, while also increasing the powers of the other Community institutions the Member States: the standoff culminated in the so-called Crisis of the empty chair. France deserted Council meetings for six months, thus effectively blocking the decision making. The strain caused on the French economy pushed France to the negotiating table, but de Gaulle obtained the right for Member States to veto any Council decision which would impact on national interest: a strong veto power which stayed unaltered until the late 1980s. The Commission, on the other hand, increased in importance and in 1967 became the only executive body of the European Community.

At the same time, President De Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer signed the Elysée Treaty (1963), which put in place a consultation routine between the two administrations which still functions today. The Treaty was not surprising at all: after all, the whole ECC stood on the bases of the newly found Franco-German entente. The agreement was also in line with De Gaulle's strategy of keeping governments firmly at the helm of European politics: the Elysée Treaty, after all, did sideline the ECC institutions.

Although West German governments had shown at times a commitment to a different view of Europe, their attitude was realistic rather than federalist: the Elysée Treaty was signed one year after the European Common Agricultural Policy came into force. While this policy was the consequence of many causes (explained in detail in Part 3), the political drive behind it was, again, a Franco-German understanding: the German government was sure to have access in the French market, while accepting to be a net contributor to the European subsidies that greatly benefitted French farmers.

Europe, community of democracies?

1979 was the year of the first direct elections for the European Parliament, an institution that has been fighting for more competences from its birth (1950s) until today. It is now able to produce laws on the majority of subjects on equal footing with the Council (where member States sit). But, are direct elections for the Parliament a sufficient guarantee for democracy? While a basic condition for a fully functioning democracy, a directly (or sometimes indirectly) elected Parliament does not by itself guarantee an accountable governance that is expression of the popular will. In order to guarantee it, a Parliament must have a solid role in policy making, a significant influence on the government, and a fair safeguard for minority parties. It is up to debate whether the current European Parliament is fully respecting such conditions - but it is widely agreed that it has been accumulating competences and increasing influence on policy making and as co-legislator over the years.

The 1980s are also the years of another enlargement, this time southwards: Greece, Portugal, and Spain all entered the Community after years of military dictatorship. Each of these Mediterranean countries faced its own peculiar challenges; all of them, though, had to struggle through economic and political reconstruction. An extremely interesting overview on this is provided for by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE), a documentation centre that offers a summary and a collection of documents in English, French, and German. The section on the enlargement to the South ([here](#)), in particular,

offers a complete view of how the EC institutions and its Member States played a role in the re-establishment of democracy and in easing the economic troubles. Of particular relevance is the economic support that the German government offered, during the 1980s, to Greece.

The federalists are at it again

The wave of optimism left by the 1979 Parliamentary direct elections gave Spinelli, now a Member of the European Parliament, hope that the federalisation of the European Community was within reach. He thus authored a parliamentary report (1984), proposing a new Treaty establishing a European Union. It was approved by the Parliament, but shot down by Member States (only the Italian Parliament discussed it). His attempt did, however, contribute to the negotiations for the agreements that, on 1993, led to the birth of the European Union. Spinelli reports foreshadowed the EU as we know it today: the different competences between States and EU institutions were rationalised, the European Parliament was put on the same level as the Council as co-legislator, the Commission consolidated its executive powers.

EU's long birth

What happened in the late 1980s was (i) the Schengen agreement, which lifted border controls between some European countries and was not part of the EC framework, and (ii) a long negotiation period that led to the Single European Act and the Treaty of Maastricht. This is the birth of the European Union as we know it: the Maastricht Treaty officially unified the European Communities into one entity, the EU, laid down rules for the adoption of a common currency, and structured the EU in three pillars: the Community pillar, supranational, and two intergovernmental pillars (for defence, foreign policy, justice and home affairs). The Schengen agreement was extended to the EU area in 1995.

At this point, the EU was considered as the natural home for almost all European countries. There was a consensus, a sort of shared perception, that the EU was naturally destined to ultimately englobe the entire continent. But it was still a top-down discourse, and populations were still not engaged, besides routine consultations: the French population had for instance approved the Treaty of Maastricht by a slim 51%, testifying the beginning of a potential disaffection; political elites, however did not take this warnings into account.

However, the EU was at that time a wealthy and promising block, and its big internal market was an important incentive for those countries which had not accessed it yet. The end of the Cold War (the "end of history", indeed) had eased the tensions between East and West, lowered the public pressure for a national defence policy, and neutral countries such as Finland and Austria could now aspire to access the Union. Indeed, the 1990s saw the EU grow bigger: new countries joined in, such as Austria, Finland, Sweden; the Euro entered into legal force (1999) and then became the physical currency of the countries which had not opted out in Maastricht (UK and Denmark).

In the 2000s, the *momentum* continued with the biggest enlargement to date took place: especially notable was the entry of countries which used to be on Soviet side of the iron curtain. This enlargement changed completely the face of the EU: it added more complexity to the institutional structure (more Members of the Parliament, more Commissioners, different voting rules in the Council...). English became the *de facto* vehicular language of the EU, whereas until then it had been on equal footing with French and, on a somewhat lesser note, German. It also altered EU economic stance: in just few years, the EU became the stage of a dramatic economic difference between its Member States. The shockwave, conjuncted with the sudden arrival of the financial crisis (2008), finally put the enlargement

momentum to a stop. The shock also had the effect of reverting, for the first time, the once-positive trend of public support for the EU.

European support for the EU was waning, while support for a federalist EU, as we will see in the next section, had almost disappeared altogether.

What next?

In 2003 a big European Convention convened to draft an ambitious Constitutional Treaty, meant to provide the EU with an actual Constitution, which may have led the way to a Federal Union. The Convention was a special body consisting of representatives from the EU institutions, Member States' Parliaments and Governments, and observers from regional authorities and trade unions. It approved a text, but French and Dutch citizens rejected the project by way of referendums. Some other countries, such as Spain and Luxembourg, did hold referendums too, and the Constitution was approved with significant margins. The value of referendums as a major leeway to democracy could be put under question: where does sovereignty lie when it comes to European-wide consultations? Should each country convene national referendum, thus potentially allowing for a minority of citizens to impose their will on the majority, or should the overall vote of all EU citizens count? This is no minor question, as it is illustrated by the debates on the Scottish and Catalanian referendums, where fiercely conflicting views arose as to whether all citizens, or only Scottish / Catalanian citizens, should vote.

A different text, similar in construction but much less ambitious, was then approved in a simpler fashion by Member States, which met in Lisbon and agreed on a new Treaty: the current Treaty of Lisbon, the text of reference for the EU.

The difference in principle between the two texts is significant: the Lisbon Treaty is not a Constitution, and was drafted by governments only. While it did include some of the proposals of the rejected text, such as increased powers for the Parliament and a closer cooperation on foreign affairs (establishment of a European External Action Service, whose chief official is also Vice-President of the Commission), it remained a firmly intergovernmental construction. The post-Lisbon EU certainly has important supranational elements, but its constitutive text was produced by an intergovernmental conference, and it ultimately rests on the Member States' governments willingness of keep it in function. The fundamental difference is further illustrated by the current standoff between the European Commission and some EU countries on Schengen and on civic rights.