

# H-Diplo ESSAY 196

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## *Accidents and Inevitability*

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It might well have seemed inevitable that I would become a historian of postwar Western Europe in general and the European integration process in particular. My childhood was divided mainly between England, Italy, and Belgium, with shorter spells in France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. I was schooled in Italian, French and English. And my father had been a professional historian and then set up Brussels' first serious think-tank in the early 1980s. I grew up in an environment where both history and the state of what was then European Community (EC) politics were constant topics of conversation, where familiarity with other European languages was assumed, and where the default method to explain most things that happened, whether world events or family developments, was to look back at the past in order to establish how we had arrived at where we were. A doctorate on some aspect of the EC's past could only seem a logical step once I got into Oxford to read Modern History and did well enough to be able to aspire to postgraduate work.

Getting there was a rather bumpier ride than anticipated. My initial Ph.D. topic, Japanese-EC relations in the 1980s, was deemed by the university to be social science rather than history, so it was to the social science faculty and social science funding body in the UK that I applied. Both were willing to take me on, but the social sciences faculty, more reasonably with hindsight than it seemed to me at the time, insisted that I needed to do a Masters in International Relations first. Unenthusiastic about IR theory and keen to get stuck into serious research, I therefore approached the history faculty instead. Switching discipline, though, required a rapid identification of new topic. This was selected after a serendipitous conversation that my father got into at a Brussels dinner party revealed that in the autumn of 1990 we were approaching the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Britain's first attempt to join the European Economic Community (EEC). It also involved a change of the funding body. I still vividly remember having to send back the cheque for several thousand pounds to the Economic and Social Research Council ESRC, and cross my fingers that the Arts and Humanities Funding Board (AHRB, as it then was) would replace it entirely—something that did not really happen, although I did win some AHRB support. And then there was the small matter of finding a supervisor. Oxford in those days had the rather alarming attitude of assuming that from within its ranks it could supervise any topic under the sun and so had offered me a place without considering the issue. But it turned out that it did not really have any historians of post-1945 Europe, meaning that I was initially assigned to a political scientist who was nice enough but did not understand at all what I wanted to do or how I ought to do it. Disaster was only averted because entirely by coincidence the Oxford social sciences faculty advertised for a new post and appointed Anne Deighton. Luckily for me, she did have a history background, understood very well what I was aiming to do, and proved an ideal supervisor when she took over from my second year onwards. But it was a very fortuitous escape.

Nor was the research entirely straightforward. The unique selling point of my doctorate was meant to be the fact that, with my European languages and knowledge of the way in which the Community operated, I would be able to look less at why and how the British had applied to join in 1961, but instead focus on how the six founder members of the then EEC had responded. This would be a Brussels-centred rather than London-centred enquiry. But getting hold of the primary sources in Brussels that I was hoping for proved much harder than anticipated, largely because I was one of the very first historians to seek to gain access to these materials. Each of the Community institutions had an archive, but those who ran them were much more accustomed to supplying materials to Eurocrats in search of a bit of background information than they were to

welcoming a Ph.D. student wanting to do a really systematic trawl through their records. My requests were thus met more with mystification than deliberate obstruction, but the result was the same, ensuring that I spent a significant portion of my Brussels-based second year deeply worried that I would not be able to see any of the hoped-for papers. Thankfully, the dam then burst, and I was given more material than I could cope with, including one category of document that I ought not to have been shown at all, but which, because the papers were not officially open, nobody had thought to remove from the folders. Very reasonably, however, the archivists acknowledged that the mistake was theirs, and allowed me to go on using these ‘forbidden’ materials, provided I promised not to cite them directly in the published version of my doctorate. In the end, I therefore had a source base that was almost too rich rather than too poor. But there had been moments when this outcome looked unlikely.

Looking back at my doctoral years I now realise that I was also very fortunate to have stumbled, more by chance than by judgment, upon a very fashionable topic. European integration was a boom topic in the early 1990s, and for the first time a significant number of historians were getting involved in an academic debate about the nature of the Community that had hitherto been dominated by lawyers, political scientists and economists. There was also particular interest surrounding the EC’s first encounter with ‘enlargement’—the process by which new members joined the EC/European Union (EU)—and the story of how the British had sought to join and how their approach had been initially received by the ‘Six’ founder members and ultimately blocked by General Charles de Gaulle was a central feature of a number of big conferences. I was hence able to make my debut as a paper-giver well before I had completed my doctorate and to begin to get to know several of those working on similar and adjacent topics. This had its downsides. I once spent a nearly sleepless night during my first year having been told by friends at my college that they had just met a young woman who was doing the same topic as me; it turned out that she was from Czechoslovakia and had done most of her doctorate *before* the Iron Curtain had come down, meaning that she had written her analysis without any real access to the archives of the countries that she was studying. It was only now in 1990, at the very tail end of her own doctorate, that she was able to travel to Britain. But the booming field and the multiple conferences that I was invited to also meant that I was able to develop very quickly a combined professional and friendship group many members of which I am still in touch with today, nearly thirty years on. As Ph.D. students and PRO buddies (the British National Archives were then always referred to as the Public Record Office) we endlessly discussed our research, swapped nerdy information about sources, and read each other’s draft chapters; essentially what is still happening three decades later! And even more importantly, the fashionability of the topic meant that when I did complete my doctorate, I had an expertise that was of interest on the job market, albeit more often in politics departments than in history ones. Getting on the job ladder was still difficult, but much less so than it would have been with a comparable international but Europe-centred political history topic in more recent times.

The politics of the field that I was joining though turned out to be quite challenging to navigate. This was not so much a question of handling attacks from those who disliked both the process of European integration and all of those who studied it, although I did have to run the gauntlet of the LSE historian, Alan Sked, who had founded the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), when I was interviewed for the LSE position I eventually secured. It was more the deep chasm between those historians who believed that what was happening in Europe was a fundamentally political process, explicable largely by geo-political factors, and others, led by Alan Milward, who prioritised economic explanations instead. The two sets of arguments should not to have been mutually exclusive. Most experts in 2020 would probably resort to a combination of both—I certainly would. But in the early 1990s such a messy middle way was seen as impossible; instead there was immense pressure to side either with the geo-politics people or with the economists. For an emerging young scholar this was tricky to deal with and meant that innocent choices about who one sat next to at dinner or who one agreed to be on a panel with were assigned a significance that they should not have had.

More insidious still were the largely unstated but profound assumptions about the importance of nationality in determining what one did or did not write about. This was an era where most edited volumes—and my field was one where edited volumes were of real importance—were composed of chapters in which an eminent French historian would be asked to look at France and a particular aspect or moment of the integration process, a German professor would contribute the chapter on Germany, a Belgian that on Belgium and so on. This meant that it was very hard to avoid the assumption that my contributions would all be on Britain, despite the fact that my expertise was as much centred on French, Italian, or German history as it was on that of my own country. I did end up doing quite a lot of papers on ‘Britain and...’ but I tried hard to

resist. In the end, I was saved by the fact that, as the debate began to centre ever more on the Community's formative period from 1958-1970, as opposed to the origins of the integration process in the 1940s and 1950s, somebody had to be asked to do the paper on the European Commission—which of course was, as de Gaulle had famously complained, *apatride* (without a fatherland) and hence exempt from the usual national rule. So I shifted from being the Brit who would be asked to write on the UK, and instead became the weirdo who had actually knew his way around the archives of the Commission and the Council of Ministers. Despite occasional difficulties, though, I gained a huge amount from my long exposure to the conference circuit, from a succession of irresistible invitations to often beautiful towns and cities scattered across Europe, to an extensive range of contacts from most European countries. These last are of immense value to anyone who seeks, slightly unreasonably, to write about a process involving six, then nine, then ten, twelve and fifteen countries (I have yet to attempt to write about the post-2004 Union of 25+), since when perplexed by some seemingly irrational aspect of Danish or Greek behaviour at EC/EU level, I can nearly always drop an email to a friend and fellow scholar who knows that country better than I do and ask what on earth was going on.

When I arrived at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), I was fortunate enough to join a department with a strong and growing interest in Cold War history. Odd Arne Westad was hired, at a more senior level the same year (1998), as was Nigel Ashton, but the department already had scholars like Jussi Hanhimäki who had a strong reputation in the field. And very quickly I found myself getting involved in discussions of the Cold War and of Europe's particular role within it. This soon began to have an impact on my research as well as my teaching.

The big query that I found myself confronting was why my two main scholarly interests, European integration history and the history of Europe in the Cold War overlapped so little? They were processes or phenomena taking place over much of the same period, they both deeply affected Western Europe during the postwar decades, and they involved a remarkably similar cast list of characters, from British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to French President de Gaulle. And yet bizarrely the two historiographies largely ignored one another, with books about Europe in the Cold War all but disregarding the integration process, and European integration primers overlooking the enveloping Cold War. This was something that needed to be looked at, both to explain the mutual disregard, and to determine whether there was actually more interaction between the two than previous accounts had spotted. My career move from Oxford to London had thus shaped my research agenda, as well as affecting where I taught and where I earned my keep.

The other big influence on my research interests, but also the whole tenor of discussion within the historiography of European integration, has been the contemporary evolution of the EC/EU. Historians are often a bit cagey about admitting the degree to which current politics affect their work. The ideal of the lone scholar working on his or her sources, impervious to outside distraction, still holds much attraction. But my experience has tended to emphasise the degree to which what happens now, what I read about in the papers, and my fears or hopes for the imminent future, do deeply affect the questions that I ask and to some extent at least the answers that I arrive at. And I am pretty certain that this is not only my professional failing. Thus in the early 1990s, when I first joined the debate about European integration, there was an energy and an enthusiasm to the historical debate, but also a sense of the inevitability of progress in one particular direction that was directly linked to the then booming fortunes of the European Community/Union. In more recent times, however, as the EU has dealt with a succession of crises, from the rejection by Dutch and French voters of the putative constitution in 2005 to the Eurozone crisis of recent years, the mood has become more sombre. It strikes me as no coincidence that Martin Gilbert's provocative denunciation of much of the writing on the EC/EU's development as 'whig history' or Kiran Patel's important and revisionist new book *Project Europe* both date from the era of crises rather than the boom years.<sup>1</sup> And it will be one of those crises, Brexit, that looks likely to shape my own intellectual trajectory. For almost as soon as the news of the 2016 referendum outcome broke, I had realised that the obvious next writing task I should take on would be a history of Britain's four decades of EC/EU membership, beginning, middle and end. It will be an odd task, dissecting how Britain has affected and been affected by a process that it will no longer be part of. In some ways it will be, to borrow a phrase coined by

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Gilbert, 'Narrating the Process: Questioning the Progressive Story of European Integration', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 46:3 (June 2008): 641-662; Kiran Klaus Patel, *Project Europe: A History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

another colleague who also felt compelled to react to recent events by exploring the theme historically, my version of 'Brexit therapy'. But I hope too that it will be a reminder that to properly understand the contemporary world, we crucially need serious historical work on the relatively recent past.

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