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Rich, vivid, and ignored: History in European studies

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Abstract

This article examines the place of history as a discipline in the wider field of European studies in 2015. It first observes that history is largely marginalised both in public and academic debates about Europe's current predicament, and explores the possible reasons for this state of affairs. It then brings to the fore the emergence of a rich and vivid historiography in the last decade, and argues that the latter leaves no excuse to colleagues from other disciplines for not engaging with historians' work of immediate intellectual relevance to their field of inquiry.

Riche, vivante et ignorée: l'histoire dans les études européennes

Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol

Cet article analyse la place de l'histoire en tant que discipline au sein du champ des études européennes en 2015. Il observe d'abord que l'histoire est largement marginalisée dans les débats aussi bien publics qu'universitaires à propos de la situation actuelle de l'Europe, et explore les raisons qui peuvent expliquer cette situation. Il rappelle ensuite l'émergence, au cours des dernières années, d'une historiographie riche et vivante, et soutient que ceci ne laisse aucune excuse aux autres disciplines pour ne pas s'intéresser aux travaux des historiens qui sont d'une pertinence intellectuelle immédiate à leur champ d'enquête.

History has an awkward relationship with the wider academic field of European studies. While analyses of the current European predicament are replete with references to the past, history as a discipline is somewhat marginalised in the academic and media environment of 2015. Whenever a debate is organised on the current state of European integration, political scientists and economists lead the discussions, while historians stand out by their deafening silence. Is there someone to blame for this sorry state of affairs, and if yes who? The following pages argue that while historians can surely be criticised for having marginalised themselves on regular occasions, the last decade has brought about significant changes. In particular, the emergence of a rich and vivid historiography leaves no excuse to colleagues from other disciplines for not engaging with historians' work of immediate intellectual relevance to their field of inquiry. This historiography *is* an integral part of the field of EU studies, a vast and complex research field over which no single discipline ought to claim, whether implicitly or explicitly, to have a monopoly.

The variable of adjustment

European Studies are not a coherent field. There is rarely one such department in universities across the globe. Most of my research belongs to the field, broadly defined, of European Studies but I started my academic career at the London School of Economics' (LSE) International History Department, then moved to the Economic and Social History Department of the University of Glasgow, and now work in the same University but in the Adam Smith Business School. In short, and except since 2015 as Visiting Professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, I have never been affiliated with a European Studies institute, faculty or department, even though I did graduate in the European Studies section at the Strasbourg's *Institut d'Études politiques*, mostly studied European integration at the LSE for my Masters, and took my doctorate at the European University Institute

(EUI). European Studies very much cut across not just a range of disciplines – anthropology, economics, history, law, political science – but also a whole range of academic departments.

The respective weight of each of these disciplines within the field of European Studies is completely uneven. A quick glance at the programme of the Council for European Studies’ (CES) annual conference gives the impression that political science heavily dominates EU studies. Very few historians are present in the programme. A detailed examination of the composition of the CES governing bodies is also very telling. The 2015 CES Executive Committee is composed of 9 academics: one anthropologist, several sociologists and political scientists, but no historians. The 2015 CES Program Committee has 6 members, including one historian, two political scientists and three sociologists. Finally, the CES Local Organizing Committee has 8 members, with one historian on board. Economists and lawyers are completely absent from *all* three committees; anthropologists and historians are strongly under-represented; while political scientists, and, to a lesser extent, sociologists, are heavily over-represented. This leaves us with one simple question: why can’t the CES various committees better reflect the academic diversity of the field of European studies that they are supposed to represent?

	2015 Programme Committee	2015 Local Organising Committee	2015 CES Executive Committee	Total
Anthropology	0	0	1	1
Economics	0	0	0	0
History	1	1	0	2
Law	0	0	0	0
Political Science	2	6	5	13

Sociology	3	0	3	6
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Table 1 – 2015 Council for European Studies committees’ breakdown by EU studies’ discipline¹

A recent study surveying what Eurozone academics think about Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) reform interestingly shows a much different picture from that of the CES programme and governing bodies (De Ville and Berckvens 2015). Half of the 900 respondents surveyed were economists, one-third political scientists, 1/8th EU law scholars. Where were historians? I will come back to this issue later. These two examples – the CES committees and the academics chosen as representatives of the field of EU studies in the De Ville and Berckvens’ survey – show the dominance of political science (in both cases) and economists (in the second case only) over EU studies. This situation may reflect funding trends, academics’ interests, students’ interests. But it also tells a story of power: the central narrative, in spite of the generic title of *European studies* is the narrative and methodology of one (at best two) specific discipline(s) among them. No genuine and balanced inter-disciplinary research effort exists within European studies, in spite of the existence of such a generic denomination that would just call for it.

The situation within the field of history itself is not terribly encouraging either. Analysing European cooperation processes in a genuinely transnational (above and below the state) and supranational (the development of an independent EEC/EU polity) manner is little fashionable. It suffices to look, again, at the programme of any regular big national or international (economic) history conference to see that these approaches are in the minority (if at all present), and that instead national, inward-looking narratives are still heavily dominant. This can be due to a variety of reasons that this article does not intend to explore in detail – it suffices here to mention a few. For example, personal

¹ It must be noted that the distinction between political scientists and sociologists may be sometimes blurred. I have here ranked them according to the PhD’s discipline.

preconceptions about the object of study are certainly still very vivid. The old mistaken assumption according to which “studying European integration history” equals “writing a diplomatic history of what one clerk writes to another clerk” and in any case “being a Europhile” still has much currency among many historians. In addition, the complexity inherent to European cooperation processes makes the topics much more difficult and time-consuming to grasp and master. It certainly does not help that some scholars write in a very jargonistic way about such a recondite subject. At the expense of being diplomatically incorrect, it must also be added that the inability to master the eccentricities of different languages at the same time may be another reason for the relative isolation of historians of European integration/cooperation processes. Any European integration history-related research requires, at the very least, a good passive command of English, French, and German, arguably also Italian, which is not so frequent among academics, even among those that do master the topic.

This overall state of play invites reflection. Such a regrettable lack of cooperation among disciplines, which couples with an often appalling ignorance of each other’s work, is relatively peculiar to the field of European studies. In other fields, in particular international relations, connections do happen, as the volume *Bridges and Boundaries* showed a few years ago (Elman and Elman, 2001) and Marc Trachtenberg’s recent *The Cold War and After* (Trachtenberg 2012) confirmed. About a decade ago, the initiative to create the LSE Cold War Studies Centre, later transformed into the LSE IDEAS centre (now part of the LSE’s Institute of Global Affairs), bringing together academics from the LSE’s International History and International Relations (IR) departments show that synergies between historians and political scientists can happen, and produce results. This is certainly not to suggest that cooperation between IR and international history is pursued in ideal manner, but it exists; while in European studies, historians’ and political scientists’ literatures and initiatives are still very much siloed, in spite of a number of initiatives taken by historians in the past few years to address and engage with political scientists’ works.

A dialogue of the deaf

The effort made in this special issue of *Politique Européenne* is thus, unfortunately, very much the exception rather than the rule. Why can't the different disciplines composing the field of European studies actually talk to each other? A variety of reasons can explain this state of affairs, but it is difficult to weigh their relative importance. For a start, internal disciplinary rules and pressures contribute to explain why European studies' disciplines talk so little to each other. Citations' systems in political science do not invite a political scientist to quote an historian, while there is an obvious and strong incentive to quote the work of other political scientists. This, in turn, leaves little time for properly reading and engaging with historians' work. Political science research on the EU has thus increasingly grown introverted in disciplinary terms.

In addition to this, one of the traditional misunderstandings between historians and political scientists (to a lesser degree sociologists) is about the role and uses of theory. Political scientists take for granted that theoretical concepts are needed to explain European integration. Historians do not function that way. I am certainly not arguing here that historians are deprived of any theoretical biases in their studies. You can be a Marxist historian (Eric Hobsbawm), a neo-liberal/conservative (Niall Ferguson) or a European federalist (Walter Lipgens). But these are personal, individual inclinations that exist for any academic and in any discipline. In the case of most historians, theory will not drive the research question in the way that it does in both economics and political science.

In an historian's eyes, a frantic search for theoretical concepts is surprising when looking at the past 'big questions' that have been searched and partly answered now. Which theoretical concept has helped us understand the Great Depression? The outbreak of the Second World War? The Cold

War? To name but a few, Barry Eichengreen or Harold James have helped us understand the Great Depression; Ian Kershaw the Second World War and most importantly Hitler; Arne Westad the Cold War. Theories have their uses in an *ad hoc* fashion in the historian's argument: International Relations theories for the cold war, and Keynesianism for the interwar period, for example. Yet the historian's craft is not to replace these with a new all-encompassing theory but to provide a complex and multi-factored reconstruction of causal relationships that happened in the past.

Theoretical concepts provide important insights and frameworks in which to think European integration. What historians assert is that theoretical frameworks are not the alpha and omega of research in all disciplines of EU studies. The other disciplines of European studies should better know the methodology of historical research in order to understand the different (or lack of) use made of theories. While aware of theoretical debates and engaging with them, an historian is more interested into the collection and questioning of the (primary) sources that can support an interpretation of an event, rather than seeing an analysis fit into a given theory. Sometimes, let's face it, theory-building occurs at the expense of what actually happened, as was the case with Andrew Moravcsik's 'liberal intergovernmentalism' in the 2000s (Lieshout, Segers and van der Leuten 2004) and is yet again the case with the 'new intergovernmentalism' of the 2010s (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). The 'new intergovernmentalism' outlined by Christopher Bickerton, Dermot Hodson and Uwe Puetter in a recent issue of the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, before the publication of their edited volume, is indeed just the latest example in a long series of political science writings that completely ignores the history literature (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). Presenting what they see as a new theory explaining the ways in which post-Maastricht European integration differs from the pre-Maastricht period, the authors pay no attention to anything historians may have written on the topic – a literature which, moreover, often contradicts their generalisations.

For a few years, from the zenith of Alan Milward's writings until around the turn to the twentieth-first century, historians often ignored political scientists (Warlouzet 2014). Milward used to engage with – and was taken into some consideration by – political scientists, but he was often alone in his profession in this case. Historians worked this out. Historians have “met politics” (Kaiser 2008). A very vivid historiography developed over the past ten years, a point that must be stressed, as I am not sure that each and every reader of *Politique Européenne* is aware of this. This article does not intend to provide a comprehensive historiographical overview which can be found elsewhere (Varsori 2001, Kaiser 2005, Warlouzet 2014), but in a nutshell, this article can remind that recent historical literature contributed to provide a re-reading of the 1960s (Ludlow 1997, 2006 and 2007, Seidel 2010, Warlouzet 2011), most importantly the 1970s (Beers 2015, Karamouzi 2014, Migani 2008, Mourlon-Druol 2012, Romano 2009), and is now entering into the 1980s (James 2012, Patel and Weisbrode 2013, Varsori 2010). This literature re-assessed the dynamics of European integration (Kaiser, Leucht and Rasmussen 2008); reframed its development into wider globalisation processes (Bussière 2012); put greater emphasis on the legal dimension (Davies and Rasmussen 2012) and addressed and/or challenged political science findings. All this can be of course criticised: perhaps this historiography did not address what it should have done in political science, perhaps it overlooked some other aspects of European integration. The point stands, however, that it made the effort to catch up with political science literature. It has been so both at a theoretical level (Kaiser, Leucht and Rasmussen 2008) and in practice in number of case-studies (Knudsen 2009, Mourlon-Druol 2012). By contrast, I regularly read political science journals and unfortunately I find very few examples, if any, of articles that properly engage with the historical literature as and when the opportunity arises. Footnoting Alan Milward here and there is not enough, as much as footnoting Andrew Moravcsik and then claim to have “engaged with political science literature” is insufficient. “Properly engage” means establishing a meaningful connection with the literature, taking into account its main findings and interpretations, compare and contrast these with others, and draw conclusions.

The survey of EMU attitudes mentioned earlier is an excellent example of how history can be blatantly ignored. Ferdi De Ville and Dieter Berckvens present their methodology in the following terms: “To analyse the opinion of academics on these EMU reform proposals, we have identified more than 900 academics working in one of the 18 euro area Member States, in a Faculty of Economics, Political Science or Law. Thereby the survey population was explicitly limited to academic experts on euro area policy.” The message is crystal clear and outrageous: if you are an historian, you cannot be an “academic expert on euro area policy.” Historians simply do not count, except, in the light of the authors’ methodology, the few economic historians who may be working in an Economics faculty.

What history is, and what it is not

This example reflects a wider misunderstanding about how we perceive the role of history in explaining today’s European predicament. Political science, law, economics can and do provide immediate commentary, interpretation, and possible solutions to the challenges of the present day. Historians can do that too, and a few prominent (economic) historians regularly comment on the news in the United States and Western Europe, such as Barry Eichengreen, Harold James and Albrecht Ritschl.² But many historians are reluctant to do this, or do it in such a qualified and nuanced fashion that they cannot compete with other disciplines: historians’ talks are neither catchy nor punchy. They are not ready-to-use either. An historian will typically be interested in looking at long-term developments, continuity and change. Media commentary – or, more generally, any

² See, among others, Eichengreen’s recent *Hall of Mirrors* (Eichengreen 2015), Harold James’ regular column in *Project Syndicate* (www.project-syndicate.org) and Albrecht Ritschl’s multiple interviews and columns about German and Greek public debt (Ritschl 2011a and 2011b).

external engagement beyond academia – requires instantaneous praise or criticism regarding latest developments. In addition, the historians’ classic methodological bias – namely, to ground their interpretation in original documents – makes them wary to comment on developments for which such sources are not yet available and are unlikely to be disclosed for a long time. In addition, journalists do very little to improve the situation as they keep on instinctively calling for the commentary on present-day developments of an economist, then a political scientist, but very rarely of an historian.

Why aren’t historians catchy? The historian’s methodology, in spite of history being one of the oldest academic disciplines on this planet, seems to be widely misunderstood. The historian seeks a painstaking reconstruction of the past through a careful weighing of the primary evidence available; produces as a consequence complex and qualified answers; is reluctant to generalise because he/she has always in mind the exception that will disprove the rule. Historians tend to be very reluctant to isolate one factor from the others, as historical reasoning is *precisely* about understanding the complex chain and interrelations of causalities.

Why is there such a misunderstanding about the role of history in present-day policymaking?

History – as much as political science, economics or law – can bring much to policymaking. Harold James identified three ways in which we may draw on the past, linked to three ‘Ps’: policies, patterns, and possibilities (James 2012). Policy advice is the most common option: a look into the past can provide a sense of predictability about a specific policy outcome. That is what happened immediately after the 2008 financial crisis. Whatever the school of thought, policymakers and commentators used historical interpretations based on the macroeconomic policy lessons of the 1930s – hence also Eichengreen’s *Hall of Mirrors* mentioned earlier. The second way is linked to patterns of development and takes a step further towards generalisation of outcomes. History could offer a set of precedents on which to draw some analogies. Reinhart and Rogoff’s influential

volume *This Time is Different* is one such example (Reinhart and Rogoff, 2009). The third way is related to the core of the discipline: explain why what happened happened as it did and not as it could have done; it is about restoring the array of multiple possibilities that existed before a given outcome. It is a reminder of the fragility of all configurations (political, economic, social); and that trying to apply ‘historical lessons’ can be very bad policy advice. History shows that one path is not the only path available, tries to tone down false confidence and cheer up exaggerated despair.

Recent historiographical trends

This article cannot be a review of all recent historical literature related to European integration – Laurent Warlouzet, in this very journal, has very recently provided a comprehensive picture of the evolution of the research agenda in recent years (Warlouzet 2014). What this article can do, however, is to outline a number of routes that have now emerged over the past ten years, and some indications as to where future research could evolve.

First, the author of these lines cannot but call for more economic history research on European integration. Surprisingly, given the current economic climate, political and cultural history still heavily dominates (European integration) historiography. Also probably as a matter of personal taste, research into EU governance should be further developed: the development of the European Council (Mourlon-Druol 2010, Mourlon-Druol and Romero 2014), transnational dynamics (Kaiser 2007), supranational dynamics (Ludlow 2006).

Second, in terms of methodology, the quest for multi-lingual, multi-archival research aimed at studying the European level of developments rather than just one country *and* European integration should be a central ambition. In the past decade, some authors have applied this methodology and

this brought many rewards (Kaiser 2007, Knudsen 2009, Ludlow 2006, Mourlon-Druol 2012, Romano 2016). Of course, this involves sound linguistic skills and time-consuming research in multiple (and often remote) archival repositories – an enterprise that is not always doable for each and every research topic. But the more we move into researching recent years, the more the emergence of a European polity becomes a critical dimension of study that such a methodology explores best.

Third, a greater emphasis on decentring EU studies is still an important avenue for research, and this in three ways. In investigating the embeddedness of European integration into wider global dynamics to start with (Bussière 2012, Romero 2011); then by further developing the history of European co-operations rather than integration so as to definitely overcome the possible teleological bias (Gilbert 2008, Patel 2013, Warlouzet 2014); and finally by analysing the relations between Western European integration and the Eastern bloc (Romano 2014 and 2016, Romano and Romero 2014).

Conclusions

Should we continue to study the EU? Yes we should, and of course we should study more its history, bearing in mind two important elements. First, that we should not just study ‘the EU’ in the sense of its internal dynamics, but instead understand their embeddedness in global developments. Second, European studies’ academics should develop a genuine inter-disciplinary discussion based on a mutual understanding of the methodologies and idiosyncrasies of each of the EU studies’ disciplines, on an equal footing. In 2008, Wolfram Kaiser wrote that “It [was] high time that history-sensitive political scientists and social science-literate contemporary historians make more of the unexplored opportunities of interdisciplinary cooperation” (Kaiser 2008). About 7 years later,

it must be said that many historians have now moved forward, but many economists and political scientists have yet considerable work to do.

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