



Fondation
Jean Monnet
pour l'Europe

The Building of Europe: history and current challenges

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1. Introduction

The Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe was created by Jean Monnet himself in 1978 in Lausanne in Switzerland. Monnet was the initiator of the first European Community, the Coal and Steel Community, in 1950, and then became the first President of its High Authority, from 1952 to 1955. He was one of the founding fathers of European integration and became the first Honorary Citizen of Europe in 1976. All his personal archives, plus several others such as those of Robert Schuman, Robert Marjolin, a copy of Jacques Delors' personal papers during his presidency of the European Commission, are kept at the Foundation in Lausanne.

I believe that history cannot help us predict the future, but that it can help us better understand current challenges. It is easier to know where we are when we know where we come from.

Another thing to say is that the origins of European integration are as much – or even more – political than economic. Today, European economic integration has made much more progress than political integration. The thoughts of the founding fathers regarding the politics of integration are henceforth still current and useful.

So, in my conference tonight, I will not try to predict the future. A joke says that it is already hard enough for historians to predict the past! The very recent French presidential election shows us how a single event can be complex and can change the fate of things. I will rather try to make some reflections on current challenges with history in mind.

2. Motivations for European integration

It is always necessary to have in mind the question 'why?', that means to consider the motivations for the integration process. When Jean Monnet made his revolutionary proposal to establish a Coal and Steel Community to the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman in 1950, he had three basic objectives in mind: the promotion of peace, prosperity and liberty.

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This was happening at a very dangerous time. The iron curtain had fallen over Europe, the cold war was raging, it was soon to become hot and bloody in Korea. Europe as a geographical entity and an old civilization had witnessed the horrors and destructions of the two World Wars. Paul Valéry's words written after World War I were more actual than ever: 'We later civilizations... we too know that we are mortal [...] we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life'. The Shoah and the invention of the atomic bomb were leaving their indelible mark over Europe and the rest of the world. For the first time in its history, mankind had won the power to destruct civilization – and perhaps even human life – on the planet.

Already during World War II, Jean Monnet was aware that the future peace settlement would have to avoid making the same mistakes as in the past. Monnet realized that the future winners of the war would have to propose a peace based on equality of treatment to the new Germany that would emerge from the war. This principle of equality would prevent protectionism and rearmament, and help trust surge. The Coal and Steel Community scheme would exactly do this and put in common the industrial sectors that had been at the heart of the war effort of European countries.

Monnet wanted to prevent war between East and West. To do so, he believed that Western Europe would have to unify and be an equal partner of the United States. A united and strong Western bloc would look for peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union and help the development of what was then called the third world.

Monnet always insisted on the fact that the European Community should be based on the rule of law and be open to the accession of democratic European countries that were willing to accept the existing treaties.

Monnet's thought was geared towards action. He was thinking a lot, but never in abstract terms. From our perspective, we may say that Monnet – and the other founding fathers of the united Europe – were thinking in the terms of Immanuel Kant. They believed in the virtuous circle between peace, economic openness and the building of institutions.

Nowadays, peace may seem to be a granted gift for us Europeans. But we know that the threat of war – or war itself – is never far away, even on the European continent. Europe's periphery, in the South and in the East, is disruptive and threatening. If the EU were to disappear, who knows how long it would take for nationalism and its excesses to create again the conditions of war in the heart of the continent? Then, terrorism, like a cancer, is threatening the daily life and security of Europeans.

3. Need for protection and cohesion

My analysis is that Europeans are calling for more protection and that the social fabric of European countries is demanding a fight against the excesses of polarisation, be it between people, social groups and territories. To promote these new needs, Europeans must act together. To defend their values and interests, they must act more like a single actor on the world stage. The world is arguably becoming more multipolar and less multilateral. To deal with this new reality, European countries need more unity in foreign affairs and in defence and security issues. I do not make a plea for a protectionist EU, but the Union should be more able to act worldwide like a strategic and smart power.

I believe that European integration should not have as an objective the weakening of transatlantic ties. The continuous US involvement in European affairs since World War II has brought stability and reassurance. However, Europe should be ready to act together in case of a US withdrawal: if it is not for now, who knows what will be the situation in 30, 50 or 100 years? Deriving from Monnet's thought, we may say that in the expression 'equal partners' he put forward, the two words are equally important.

Europeans should be aware that they share common values and interests beyond special circumstances. They should never allow other entities worldwide to try to get their way by dividing them.

De facto solidarities have been strengthened by the process of integration, but I fear that the broad feeling of a common destiny and the need for more solidarity between the peoples of Europe has weakened over the recent years. We have witnessed growing divisions between North and South, and East and West. Like precious flowers in a garden, solidarity should be better taken care of.

4. Sovereignty and institutions

The fight against the excesses of national sovereignty was always at the heart of Monnet's thought and action. In fields of common interest, close countries gain from exercising in common their sovereignty. They might even regain sovereignty that otherwise would be lost to other political and economic actors. Regional integration can be a powerful tool to prevent the excesses from globalisation.

For Monnet, purely intergovernmental organisations were not enough, as a single country might block the decision-making process. With the Community method, similarly to a federal construction, a decision-making process is designed so that decisions can be taken effectively. The Community method designed in the Treaty of Rome from 1957 weakens the mechanism of the Coal and Steel Community. Even if the Commission is involved in the legislative process, it has to share the executive power with the representatives of national governments.

In today's European Union, legislation is ordinarily adopted by the Council and Parliament. This bicameral process is typical of a federal entity. The Commission, however, has kept the sole right of initiative. When we look at the executive branch, things become more blurred. De facto, it is shared by the European Council, the Council and the Commission. To be over simplistic, we may say that the European Parliament, like any national parliament, is democratic given its election by direct universal suffrage, that the Council acts like a Senate, that the European Council is like a collective head of state, and that the Commission is close to a government chosen by the head of state and the parliament, being dismissable by the latter. As for the Court of Justice, it acts more and more like a Supreme Court.

5. Democracy

National democracy and European democracy clearly complement each other and establish an EU system that is democratic. But could it be more democratic? And, are citizens aware that it is a democratic system? We can identify here several problems and difficulties.

Firstly, like any federation in the world, its central institutions may seem distant to citizens. Isn't 'Brussels' somehow like 'Washington' for example?

Secondly, we witness a crisis of democracy in many countries – not only in Europe and not only at the European level. Populism is on the rise. How could the EU be immune to such a pervasive trend?

Thirdly, the collective will of member states is to keep for themselves an important share of the executive authority, and the establishment of the European Council in 1974 has not changed the situation. Each member of the European Council has a national legitimacy, but shouldn't the European Council as an institution give more weight to the Commission that is responsible at EU level in front of the European Parliament? Citizens do not perceive – rightly – the Commission as the central government of the EU. They are not aware – wrongly – of its political legitimacy and the limits imposed by Member States.

Fourthly, democracy in Europe still has to be developed at EU level, especially if the Union is to take new responsibility in economic and fiscal policy or security and defence issues.

Fifthly, communication on what the EU can do and what it cannot, and how it actually works, is deficient. We suffer from the lack of development of a European public, political and media space.

We should clearly say that the EU is a common good of the Europeans, and that like any human endeavour, it can always be improved by taking into account the lessons of experience. Criticism and proposals should always be welcome, but the dismissing or dismembering of the Union should not be a program alone.

6. A history of crises and revivals

When we look at the history of integration, we see the existence of waves of crises and revivals. In 1954, the European Defence Community and the project for a European Political Community were stillborn. The revival led to the European Economic Community in 1958. Even if the ambition was still very much political and allowed some supranationality, the path would be durably changed and common action would touch more economic and even technical issues.

Then the French presidency of General Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s saw one of the key member states reject supranationality and develop a different world view. As a measure of revival, majority voting in the Council was developed later, in the 1980s and subsequently.

The period from 1973 to 1984 was a period of great challenges and neo protectionism. It severely weakened the common market. The outcome was the project to complete the internal market between 1985 and 1992.

Then came the end of the cold war and of Soviet domination over Central, Eastern and Northern Europe, with the disintegration of the USSR itself. The pursuit of monetary unification on the one hand and of the geographical enlargement of the EU on the other made sense and could be seen as complementary.

One generation after the end of the cold war, taking into account the current state of the EU, something must have obviously gone wrong. But what?

7. Globalisation and Europeanisation

For citizens, the effects of globalisation and of Europeanisation are often seen as entangled and complementary. The process of globalisation is highly complex. It may be good as a whole, but it has created winners and losers – in Europe and elsewhere – in terms of persons, industries and territories. The process has been poorly managed politically, negative effects have come too rapidly for many, and too many have suffered from the lack of a political and social contract to give them hope and time to adapt. Technical progress and the speed of innovation have not made things easier. Many losers of globalisation in Europe feel even weaker because of important flows of immigration.

Several European crises were born due to external factors. The Eurosclerosis of the 1970s had to do with global monetary turmoil and oil shocks, and the economic crisis developing after 2008 was initiated due to the sub primes crisis coming from America and following excessive financial liberalisation worldwide since the 1980s. After starting in the financial realm, events turned into an economic crisis, a series of national debt crises, and a crisis of confidence. Very often, the attitude of the Europeans has not helped. To external shocks, they have added internal divisions, lack of preparation and short-term views. What strikes us in the recent years has been the superposition of various types of crises.

History should be a source of optimism as it shows that crises can be solved, even if not immediately. However, never in the history of integration has there been such a congruence of crises.

As the world has become more connected and integrated in economic terms, the more traditional groupings seen as being capable of bringing protection have been on the rise. The EU has been too new in the social mind of many Europeans to become the reference. Even worse: the Union has been seen as the gate to globalisation. The resilience of the old idea that national sovereignty can alone be the solution has made a spectacular comeback.

In this context, Brexit may appear as a kind of paradox. The simultaneous development and weakening of the EU for a generation has been largely congruent to British views of integration. The British crisis was first of all internal to the Conservative Party, and this since the second part of the 1980s. The tactics of the previous Conservative leadership backfired and led to the Brexit vote in June 2016 by a relatively small margin (51.9% to 48.1%). Still, this vote will change the fate of the country – and possibly of Europe.

8. Where we stand

With recent national votes in Austria, the Netherlands and France, the populist wave seems to have been contained – at least for now. The German elections, taking place in September, should not change the European course of the country. We must nevertheless wait for them to have a chance to relaunch the dynamic of integration. A new European revival is certainly possible but of course never granted. We may argue that there will be a one and a half year long window opportunity to consolidate the foundations of the common house and give hope to citizens. Improvements will

have to be visible by the time of the next European elections in 2019. If not, anti-European movements will surge and could destroy the Union from inside in a few years.

The European Union and its member states should concentrate on tangible results for citizens, for example by delivering more employment and security. Differentiation in integration is certainly one of the keys to progress. National officials, even more than European institutions, must explain to their citizens what the EU brings to them and how 'non-Europe' would be a threatening prospect. The development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and of police and judicial cooperation must be accelerated. If we do not want national borders to make an even greater comeback, strong European external borders are indispensable. There is also work ahead in the field of economic, fiscal and social policy, at least at the level of the Euro zone.

Treaty reform is like a Pandora box: after endless institutional debates over the last thirty years, the last thing Europe needs now is such a debate with several national referenda. Whenever an institutional reform will be possible in the future, its winners should be parliaments – European and national – as well as the civil society on the one hand, and a greater clarity, capacity to act and legitimacy regarding executive authority on the other.

The conclusion of Jean Monnet's Memoirs written some 40 years ago stays true: 'Where this necessity will lead, and toward what kind of Europe, I cannot say. It is impossible to foresee today the decisions that could be taken in a new context tomorrow. The essential thing is to hold fast to the few fixed principles that have guided us since the beginning: gradually to create among Europeans the broadest common interest, served by common democratic institutions to which the necessary sovereignty has been delegated. [...] What we are preparing, through the work of the Community, is probably without precedent. The Community itself is founded on institutions, and they need strengthening; but the true political authority which the democracies of Europe will one day establish still has to be conceived and built.'