Democratizing Europe, Reaching out to the Citizen?

The Transforming Powers of the European Parliament

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Heir of the Common Assembly of the Coal and Steel Community and almost devoid of parliamentary powers at the outset, the European Parliament (EP) has changed more radically than any other organ set up by the Communities since the 1950s. It acquired budgetary powers in 1970, moved from an assembly of national delegates to one that is directly elected in 1979, extended its legislative powers in virtually every treaty reform from the Single European Act onwards, acquired the right to formally confirm the Commission (or refuse to do so), in addition to the right to revoke it, which it possessed from the very beginning. Upon the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, long-time Member of the EP Elmar Brok (European People's Party) stated that «[n]o Treaty of the European Union before has ever strengthened parliamentary rights so much and so clearly embraced the principles of representative democracy».[1] Indeed, the EP is a unique transnational political actor, as it has more clout and real decision-making power than any other transnational parliamentary body in international politics.

Yet what the European Parliament is today, and how it became what it is, is hardly understood beyond a narrow circle of experts.[2] The historiography of European integration has been dominated, until recently, by an International Relations-approach focussing on treaty negotiations, crises, and governments.[3] Alternative approaches

1. Elmar Brok calls it enthusiastically the «treaty of parliaments». E. BROK, *Das Europäische Parlament nach dem Lissabon-Vertrag*, in: D. DIALER, E. LICHTENBERGER, H. NEISSER (Hrsg.), *Das Europäische Parlament: Institution, Vision und Wirklichkeit*, Innsbruck University Press, Innsbruck, 2010, pp.77-89, here 77.
2. See for example H.M. ENZENSBERGER, *Sanftes Monster Brüssel oder Die Entmündigung Europas*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2011.
3. The first timely publication with a sense of history was A.-M. HOUDBINE, J.-R. VERGÈS, *Le Parlement européen dans la construction de l'Europe des Six*, PUF, Paris, 1966. The first study with a truly historical approach was P. SCALINGI, *The European Parliament: The Three-Decade Search for a United Europe*, Greenwood Press, London, 1980. It is still very useful for the early phase. For the last two decades see J. PRIESTLEY, *Six Battles That Shaped Europe's Parliament*, John Harper, London, 2008. A systematic overview is presented by B. RITTBERGER, *Building Europe's Parliament: Democratic Representation Beyond the Nation-State*, Oxford University Press, Oxford [u.a.], 2005. See also Rittberger's articles, *The creation and empowerment of the European Parliament*, in: *Journal of common market studies*, 41(2003), pp.203-225; and the same, *"No integration without representation!" European integration, parliamentary democracy, and two forgotten Communities*, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13(2006), pp.1211-1229. A kind of official history delivers Y. MÉNY, *Building Parliament: 50 Years of European Parliament: History 1958-2008*, European Communities, Luxembourg, 2009.

have focussed on European integration as a bureaucratic elite project, run by European and national administrators, and discredited by a lamentable democratic deficit, or depicted European integration as an exercise in rational market organization required by the necessity to gain competitiveness against other world regions. These interpretations may not be false, but seem rather one-sided, since they leave out other important facets such as the emerging European public sphere, the generally convergent characteristics of contemporary European societies and welfare states, including those in Eastern Central Europe since 1989, and, last but not least, the transformations European institutions and, in particular, the EP have undergone in the course of sixty years, which gives them a much more democratic outlook than in the early 1960s.

Whether one includes the EP in the history of European integration or not amounts to opting for one or another analytical narrative or model of interpretation. Whichever choice historians make – and each should make it according to his or her best understanding -, determines what kind of historical consciousness historians transmit to future generations who want to understand the origins, driving forces and coordinates of European integration. Yet if we acknowledge with Elmar Brok that the European Parliament came out a winner of every single institutional reform of the EC and the European Union since it was first granted budgetary powers in 1970, then historians are obliged to include the EP in the narrative.

Hartmut Kaelble's history of democracy in Europe, although chiefly concerned with «national paths» to democracy, has provided an important impulse for situating the European Parliament in this larger story.[4] To understand why and to which degree the EP was able to transform its status, one has to identify both the changing external conditions and, the dynamics triggered by inner-parliamentary organization, procedures, outreach functions, and the leadership roles of individual MEPs and groups within the EP. In this way the transnational character – as opposed to the intergovernmental level – of European integration may receive its due attention.

Structuring the EP's history: Preliminary Suggestions

From the beginning, the EP has made major contributions to the debate on the «Leitbilder» and the «finalité» of European integration. Despite formidable obstacles and long periods of stagnation, no other institution is better entitled to claim to be the cradle of the world's only supranational democracy – "supranational" here being understood as a term referring to a polity emerging above the nation-state. Putting the emphasis on citizens' involvement in the European project, on social and human rights, economic progress, on Europe's need to determine its own destiny and increasingly also on Europe's role in the world, the European Parliament constantly

4. H. KAELBLE, *Wege zur Demokratie : von der Französischen Revolution zur Europäischen Union*, DVA, Stuttgart 2001.

tried to push governments further towards deepening and consolidating the European edifice.

The democratization of European integration is a history without upheavals or popular revolutions. Rather, it somewhat resembles the 19th century British path of gradual political modernization. Looking at turning points rather than overarching continuities, the EP`s history may be structured into three phases. During the first phase, from 1952 to 1969, the EP was almost devoid of parliamentary powers, yet among its Members featured proportionately more former and future Prime Ministers, Ministers, and Commissioners than in any other period of European integration history. This paradox underlines the crucial importance which major politicians in the Europe of the Six attached to the progress of European integration and to its democratization: Indeed, European federalists regarded the empowerment of the EP as the single most crucial element for establishing a European Bundesstaat, a federation. Accordingly, this period featured dramatic, if vain, battles for parliamentary power at the supranational level. Thus, the ad hoc Assembly wrote the constitution for European Political Union in 1953, which failed to materialize when the French National Assembly rejected the Defence Community in 1954. Yet the draft constitution erected a monumental Leitbild which shaped the debates on the final purpose and architecture of the European edifice for decades. Transformed into the Parliamentary Assembly of the three Communities by 1958, and before renaming itself "European Parliament" in 1962/64, the EP emphasized from the very beginning the necessity of providing the integration process with democratic legitimacy. Accordingly, MEPs pursued direct elections as primary objective from 1959 onwards and presented them both as instrumental for the involvement of citizens in the European project, and as a prerequisite for gaining real budgetary and legislative powers. The Belgian socialist Fernand Dehousse presided over the Parliamentary Committee elaborating the first draft convention concerning direct elections in 1959-1960. Other leading figures in this period were the German Christian democrat Hans Furler and the Italian liberal Gaetano Martin who provide lots of materials in their memoirs about the EP's involvement in the battle over the Fouchet plan (1960-1962) and budgetary powers, which led to the Empty Chair Crisis (1965).[5]

The second phase in the EP`s history begins with the Hague Summit of the heads of state and government in 1969, which gave a new impulse to European integration, and culminated in the draft treaty on European Union adopted by the EP in 1984. The Hague Summit paved the way for the adoption of the Luxemburg Treaty by the six member states in 1970, which provided the EP for the first time with a minor degree of control over the EC's budget. This right was extended in the Treaty of Paris of 1975. During the same period, in 1974, the heads of state and government endorsed the principle of direct elections in accordance with Article 138 of the Treaty of the European Economic Community. Not everything changed in 1979, when the delegations from the national parliaments of the Member states were replaced with di-

5. H. FURLER, *Im neuen Europa: Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen im Europäischen Parlament*, Societaets-Verlag, Frankfurt/Main 1963; G. MARTINO, *Foi en l'Europe*, Félice le Monnier, Firenze 1967.

rectly elected MEPs. Yet the new democratic legitimacy clearly gave MEPs enough confidence to dare a more confrontational approach when necessary. The first battle of the directly elected Parliament was fought over its powers to amend the draft budget proposed by the Commission and adopted by the Council of Ministers. For the first time in its history, the EP rejected the 1980 budget, because the Council of Ministers had refused to accept the moderate, most reasonable amendments which included the first attempt by the EP to curtail agricultural subsidies. After a stalemate lasting six months, the EP achieved at least a partial victory.[6] After the first direct elections, the EP's President also succeeded in being recognized by the governments of both member states and non-member states, as official spokesperson for that assembly, and began to be received by heads of state and government. This was due in part to the moral authority and personal integrity displayed by Simone Veil, the first President of the directly elected assembly who is also the subject of one of the contributions of this special issue. The re-dynamization of the integration process by the famous draft treaty on European Union, initiated by Altiero Spinelli and the Crocodile Club has already attracted much scholarly attention.

The next major battle concerned legislative co-decision making which was regarded by MEPs as the next automatic step to follow. Once more, only continued struggle resulted in progress. The Single European Act marked a first breakthrough. It added, for selected community policy fields, a co-decision procedure. Given the European Communities' enhanced competences and financial resources, participatory legislative powers could no longer be withheld. Thus, the consultative powers of the EP were gradually transformed into real co-decision-making. This also encompassed executive control and the right to endorse the members of the European Commission. Here, the power conflict between the EP and the European Council came to a head in the 1990s, when corruption within the European Commission and the refusal by the Commissioner Edith Cresson to step down led to the resignation of the entire Commission. By the 1990s, overcoming the democratic deficit became a generally accepted strategy to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the integration process and reduce the distance between "Europe" and its citizens. In each successive treaty from Maastricht to Lisbon the EP`s competences were enhanced. By consequence, the EP acquired wider controlling and legislative powers than some of the member states` national parliaments. The EP has not only reminded decision-makers repeatedly of the wider objectives of European integration but also shaped its course and pushed it forward at crucial junctures. In the process, the EP has gained political legitimacy at least among political elites, while enhancing its powers and its status.

6. Best account from an EP perspective in J. PRIESTLEY, op.cit., pp.6-23.

Perspectives and Approaches

How and to what extent the EP, in the course of its own transformation, also became a transforming actor of Europe may be considered an overarching question for the articles of this special issue. Several complementary approaches are pursued to provide some preliminary answers. Some other approaches and questions may, of course, also render important results. But the main objective here is to provide further impetus for transnational historical research on the EP and to offer a platform for researchers currently working on the EP`s history.

The first approach presented here and featuring prominently in the articles by Jürgen Mittag, Hinnerk Meyer, Jan-Henrik Meyer, and Christian Salm, focuses on political party formation, party networks and intra- and inter-party cooperation within and beyond the EP. Generally, in the late 19th and 20th century party-formation took place on a national basis, as parties were founded to address national public opinion and to mould the political will within the nation-state. Even subnational parties like the Flemish People's Party or the Bavarian Christian Social Union focus primarily on the national decision-making level. In the early part of the 20th century only communist parties were strongly oriented towards transnational cooperation, they were guided, however, by the primacy of "democratic centralism" with Moscow acting as steering committee (even though, in practice, this principle was not always upheld).

Nonetheless, most political parties belonged to transnational political and ideational movements shaped by similar experiences within different societies, and by the transfer of political ideas between them. The broad political orientations which developed their main characteristics chiefly in the course of the 19th century – Conservatism, Liberalism, Socialism, Christian Democracy, even fascism and right-wing populism – had never been purely national phenomena. On the contrary, to understand these political movements it is necessary to put them in their larger trans- and international context. In this way, party networks and party federations present a crucial object of transnational historical research. Within them, experiences, ideas, social practices, cultural particularities and symbolic systems interact across frontiers. They may produce interdependence, routine flows, common value systems and a shared sense of belonging. The development of a sense of common interests, in turn, fosters informal and institutional forms of cooperation and common action.

In the light of such interconnections between the national and international dimensions of party formation processes, one wonders why political parties are so rarely perceived in their transnational context. Apparently social historians have approached transnational history too exclusively from a social history angle, party history has focussed too narrowly on national party histories and become unfashionable, and historians of European integration and international relations have too long neglected the parliamentary dimension as being irrelevant to decision-making.

Studies on the origins and evolution of the EP's party system as published in this special issue of the Journal of European Integration History contribute to highlighting the "transnationality" of modern parties. By investigating the cooperation of political

parties within a European framework, they underline the central role parties have played with respect to the Europeanization of national societies within Europe, and in shaping the evolution of European "statehood". By concentrating on network-building and cooperation, several authors put the distinctive features of European parties in the centre of their analysis, namely their efforts to promote their ideas about elections, representative democracy, and other aspects of government, welfare, society, and the rule of law. Cooperation among parties is necessary when they want their ideas about the shape of the European edifice to prevail. Thus, parties reflect the degree to which societies are becoming Europeanized – a process which (supposedly) precedes institutional integration. In parallel, party cooperation contributes to the Europeanization of society and state. Hence they form a crucial nexus between state and society, and are important actors with respect to the genesis of a European demos, which, in turn, is the precondition for the generation of a true European democracy.

Up until now, such a European demos exists at best in embryonic form. Although it is difficult to measure, one could argue that European society, the European public sphere, and European identity were and remain relatively weaker than their national pendants. Nonetheless, it is of crucial importance for our understanding of European integration to grasp how the national and European facets of society, public sphere and identity have interacted and been altered in the process. It is as illusory to assume a static relation as it is naïve to assume that the path towards more "Europeanness" is linear.

The transnational dimension of European integration can also be focussed upon by a biographic or prosopographic approach centred on MEPs. The political scientist Roger Scully has recently investigated if the parliamentary experience transforms parliamentarians into Europeans, and under what circumstances institutional socialization takes place.[7] Surely, numerous biographies of national career politicians turned into MEPs suggest that, somehow, they all became "Europeans" – and, subjectively, their claims may be right.[8] But the range of questions to be posed to MEPs can be widened, especially when one considers a broader time frame: What motivates individuals to try out the European adventure and become a kind of traveller between Luxemburg, Brussels, Strasbourg (and their home district)? How are they recruited on the national levels? How do their perceptions and visions of Europe change in the course of their "European experience"? And how did particular parliamentarians shape parliamentary life and the European integration process?

MEPs have been from the very beginning strongly involved in networking activities both within parliament as well as with the European Commission, national parliaments and party groups, labour and entrepreneurial associations as well as other interests groups and, last but not least, civil society. This networking necessarily transgresses national borders, institutional and party lines, and is tantamount to a kind

7. An example based on recent MEPs is R. SCULLY, *Becoming Europeans? Attitudes, behaviour, and socialization in the European Parliament*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2005.
8. See, for example, P. PFLIMLIN, *Mémoires d'un Européen de la IVe à la Ve République*, Fayard, Paris, 1991.

of permanent transnational information exchange about national models and standards, practices, experiences, power structures, political and ethical dilemmas and the like. Multiple cooperative experiences in working committees, plenary debates, and debates with interested groups outside the EP, lay the basis for consensual politics, as parliamentary practice in the EP demonstrates. In addition, most MEPs slip into the role of a transmitter and, in many cases, a kind of 'translator' between the local, the national, and the European levels, at least in those countries where the MEP represents a true electoral district, rather than being nominated on a national party list. The parliamentary experience is thus of a special kind. What strategies do parliamentarians develop to get re-elected and to transmit knowledge among their electorate? How did MEPs conceive of their role and mission within the EP? Two essays explore some of these issues, Sandro Guerrieri's article on Italian MEPs, and Aurélie Gfeller's on Simone Veil.

A third group of essays, namely those by Jan-Henrik Meyer and Christian Salm, analyze the characteristics of parliamentary politics in a transnational context and the EP's role in the emergence and evolution of new policy fields: namely, environmental and development policy. In both cases, the preponderance of cross-party consensus-building in the parliamentary committees, and the identification of common European values – and interests – as a basis for European policies were prominent features. Parliamentary politics seems to be less «politicized» in an ideological and tactical sense, and more expertise-driven than in national assemblies, because the «government» – the European Commission – is not partisan, but collegial, and stands to a certain extent above the parties. Most interesting is also the evolution of parliamentary functions with respect to policy fields in which the EP had no real power. Devoid of the right of initiative and, until the 1980s, of true legislative powers, declaratory politics had to serve as a substitute for actual decision-making. Nonetheless, as Meyer and Salm show in their case studies, the EP exercised a kind of discourse- (Diskursmacht), and agenda-setting power due to its political authority as a representative organ. It also succeeded in initiating forms of informal consultations with the European Commission in the early stages of a legislative process. This cooperation became formalized over time, alleviated the formal predominance of the Council of Ministers, and provided parliamentary committees with informal influence, which they exercised with prudence.

As the declaratory and discursive function of the EP predominated its early phase, it is no surprise that the EP contributed to an imagined European identity through its discourse and, later, by adopting or encouraging the invention of common symbols for the European polity. Emma de Angelis highlights the discursive construction of European identity in the context of the East-West conflict as well as its transformation after the collapse of the Warsaw pact and Eastern enlargement, which necessitated a somewhat idiosyncratic redefinition of «Europe».

Observations on the EP's perception in opinion polls by Anne Dulphy and Christine Manigand close this collection. Here new questions emerge about the connection between particular national electoral systems (e.g. national lists defined top-down or

locally rooted candidates elected bottom-up) and the identification of MEPs with a particular local context on the one hand, and about the link between the electoral system and the perception of MEPs as «close» or «removed» from local or regional politics. In other words, the lower or higher level of interest in the EP in public opinion could be related to the relative «rootedness» of MEPs in particular local and regional settings: MEPs who are successfully implanted in regional and local contexts seem to serve better as transmitters of the European idea than MEPs who are nominated by a national party leadership or who have no connexion to an electoral district at all. Hence, a «Europe of the citizens» – which has been an elusive prospect so far – requires a strong linkage to the local level.

In contrast to a classic, rather one-dimensional diplomatic history of European integrations, the articles assembled here contribute to a more multi-dimensional European integration history which pays due attention to the European institutional level. In addition, they help to avoid the oversimplified view that European politics is all about national interests, based upon the assumption that the nation-state system is inalterable, and perpetual. However one thinks about the EP and European democracy, the contested role of the European assembly puts us right back to the core of the debate on the finalité, the deeper sense and purpose of the European project.