

Elites: Privileged Vectors of European Construction

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ABSTRACT

The process of identifying elites has been the subject of theoretical analyses developed in political sociology. Historians have also contributed to the study of the “decision-making groups” at work during the beginnings of European construction.

European elites from a number of states in North-western Europe mobilized around the creation of the first communities. The question of their enlargement led to a degree of divergence upon the accession of Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Later, the impact of the transformations that took place during the 1980s sparked new debates but did not call into question the fundamental role of elites in European construction.



The historiography of European construction has strongly emphasized an important aspect of the European movement from the beginning: the role of *elites* in its conception and initial implementation.

How should the concept of elites be understood? The question is not new, as it has been at the centre of numerous studies in political sociology going back to the interwar period, when the well-known works of Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca were published. As Renata Dwan underline, in the classical theory of elites, power in most societies is concentrated within the hands of minorities, who exercise their monopoly to decisively influence the activities of these societies. This argument highlights the role of consensus within these acting minorities. The study by Wright

Mills, which came after the Second World War, also underlines the institutional foundations of the process that forms elites. In his opinion these individuals derive their power from the dominant position they hold in the institutional structures of a society, whether part of political, military, or economic organizations. Influential actors in these three sectors act in synergy and form a conscious, coherent, and cohesive power elite.

More recent studies have re-evaluated the process of identifying elites by conducting a rigorous analysis of the decision-making process. Examination of decision-making groups reveals the role of experts, political networks, and interest groups. For example, the work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye has shown the importance of studying the transnational networks that have thrived during the communication revolution. This approach is particularly relevant for examining the role of elites in the process of European construction. It emphasizes both the constitution of networks favourable to initiatives of cooperation, as well as opposition groups which sometimes represent effective curbs on the implementation of European projects.

Finally, the question of the renewing of elites calls for a reflection on the notion of generations, as well as the evolution of issues within societies affected by rapid transformations. The notion of new elites is understood very differently in Eastern and Western Europe, hence the value of contributions on this subject covering the period of European construction that followed the second global conflict.

The first pro-European associations were created before this world war and led by figures from the world of politics and civil society but were rarely the result of a democratic process. When the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Aristide Briand proposed the creation of “a kind of federal link between European states” in September 1929, he was speaking to representatives at the League of Nations (LN).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the idea of European cooperation progressed at The Hague Congress in May 1948. However, examining the composition of the various delegations shows that they included figures that were already committed to or known for their European convictions.

The first assembly of the Council of Europe, created in May 1949, was not elected by universal suffrage, but was composed of parliamentary representatives designated by each government. When the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was created in April 1951, the parliamentary assembly was not elected by universal suffrage. The same was true six years later when the European Economic Community was created in Rome. Prosopographic studies of the members of these assemblies clearly establish that they were the representatives of elites. The first election of the European Parliament with universal suffrage did not take place until 1979.

The role of elites in the first phase of European construction, at the time of the creation of the first Communities (1950-1957)

After the launch in June 1947 of the Marshall Plan, which played an important role in European reconstruction, it was important to avoid a return to protectionism. In fact, numerous Frenchmen, notably from the PCF, along with Germans from Schumacher's SPD, were in favour of neutrality or rapprochement with the USSR. Hence the idea of a customs union, initially proposed to only a limited number of states that had to meet certain challenges. This union was proposed to nations that had opposed one another during the global conflict. Therein lay the interest of the Franco-German rapprochement, which was suggested immediately after the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany on May 23, 1949.

The birth of the ECSC is often cited to illustrate the aim of its creators, notably Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. The four partners from the Benelux countries and Italy came together around a small working group headed by Jean Monnet, who was the plan commissioner at the time, and Robert Schuman, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Bidault government. In April 1950, the group developed a proposal for a “carbon-steel pool” that was initially presented to the young German Federal Republic. The primary objective was to consolidate the peace at work,

which was once again threatened by manifestations of the Cold War in Central Europe, where Soviet ambitions raised worries of renewed hostility on the Old Continent. The initial deployments of the Korean War also stoked fears of a more global conflagration. The search for peace was the key concern of European leaders, and it was therefore necessary to inscribe within the upcoming treaties a series of negotiated rules of international law designed to avoid new conflicts.

The personality of these elites also deserves close attention during this pivotal period for European construction.

Jean Monnet had the initial intuition, as he bore witness to in his *Mémoires*. He had formerly been the deputy general secretary of the League of Nations and at the end of the Second World War served as a member of the Comité français de libération nationale (CFLN). Following the conflict, he served as the Commissioner-General of the French National Planning Board. His method was one of “small steps” that used “de facto solidarities” to create new relations between states. The links established before the Second World War between steel workers from the Rhineland promoted the call for a “customs union,” which was a central concern of economic elites given the considerable role in reconstruction played by coal and steel at the time, a major problem of the post-war period. Yet this was not without its divisions, as circles in the French steel industry were hostile to the Schuman plan, which they likened to state intervention. However, steel consumers, such as the public carmaker Renault, supported it.

The primary actor in the process was the statesman Robert Schuman. The son of a father from the Lorraine and a mother from Luxembourg, he served as a lawyer in Metz, as well as a parliamentary representative for the Moselle. He was a convinced Christian and was arrested by the German authorities in 1941. After the war he took an active part in creating the Council of Europe on May 5, 1949. He served as minister of Foreign Affairs under the Fourth French Republic and played an essential role in the Franco-German rapprochement, as his contacts with Konrad Adenauer during the interwar period promoted excellent relations with the first Chancellor of the FRG.

The first Community, the ECSC, which was based on the Treaty of Paris (1951) and entered into effect on July 23, 1952 for a duration of 50 years, reflected the success of Schuman’s policy of “small steps.” While Federal Germany was France’s primary partner, the presence of Germany’s former ally Italy reflected a desire for reconciliation between states that had formerly been enemies. The other partners (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg) were also territories that had been occupied by the Third Reich. It was a daring gamble, yet this community would nevertheless have to constitute the initial nucleus of the future European Union.

As the historian Éric Roussel has clearly shown, the institutions that were initially planned did not include a parliament, although the ECSC assembly which was instituted consisted ultimately of representatives from national parliaments.

The success of the ECSC should not obscure the difficulties faced by the six Community member states when they tried to extend the field of integration to other domains. Two failures come to mind. The first is the rejection of the treaty instituting the European Defence Community (EDC). The Treaty of Paris signed on May 27, 1952 was sent for ratification to the Six. The French national assembly rejected it in August 1954, under the government of Pierre Mendès France, a rejection that prevented the continuation of the European Political Community (EPC). However, three years after this double failure, on March 27, 1957, the treaties of Rome establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) were signed, and later ratified by the six members of the ECSC.

The negotiations held in Brussels have been the subject of a great deal of converging analysis, which once again emphasizes the essential role of experts in both cases.

Historians have clearly shown the impact of the economic and political context. Since the Messina conference in

Italy in June 1955, the Six were favourable to a European relaunch in the economic area, and discussed various sensitive sectors, notably energy. The Suez crisis one year later, which showed the vulnerability of supply routes coming from the Suez Canal (August-November 1956), was invoked to conclude negotiations in view of the creation of Euratom. Qualification is nevertheless called for, as a majority of political, administrative (ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs), and business elites were hostile to the Common Market.

Among experts, Louis Armand contributed a great deal to defining the structures and missions of a nuclear Community. During negotiations, the French delegation was more favourable to the creation of this new community, while the Belgians proved more reluctant.

Jean Monnet's action committee, called "Action Committee for the United States of Europe," would play an essential role. It was created in October 1955, and brought together experts as well as militants from various socialist, Christian democratic, and liberal movements from the Europe of Six. For example, the leaders of non-communist trade unions were invited to participate in the committee, but not representatives from the economic elite. This initiative showed a concern for including engaged actors beyond the traditional representation of elites.

For the European Economic Community (EEC), the negotiations took place essentially in Brussels, at the small chateau of Val-Duchesse under the authority of Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian minister of Foreign Affairs. The meetings of the intergovernmental committee, which included "experts"—as well as union and national representatives—alongside official national delegates, showed the advantages of unofficial deliberations in advance of the official meetings, which took place beginning with the Venice conference (May 29-30, 1956).

However, as with the ECSC, supporters for the creation of the democratic assembly sought by the "federalists" were too much in the minority to impose the principle of an assembly elected by universal suffrage, which would prevail only much later in 1979!

The birth of the first Communities from 1950 to 1957 thus highlights the key role of elites in both the process of creating these institutions and in the implementation of their programs.

Elites, essential vectors in the process of European construction from the 1960s to the 1990s.

The historiography of European construction has clearly identified a process for reforming the Community, one that coincides with these successive enlargements.

The Hague conference in December 1969 proposed reforms of a certain scope, in view of the Community's enlargement. This extension of the European space was carried out in two phases: the entry of Great Britain, Ireland, and Denmark (1973) within the union, and then that of the Southern states, with the accession of Greece (on January 1, 1981), and later Spain and Portugal (January 1, 1986).

This extension helped diversify the populations involved. We are therefore far from the "initial nucleus" revolving around the first six Western European members.

For that matter, the original project built around the creation of a large economic market was broadened to other prospects, which mobilized European citizens around projects involving fairly diverse subjects in social and cultural areas, as well as the specific domains of foreign policy and defence. For example, with the presidency of Jacques Delors from 1985 to 1995, ambitious prospects mobilized citizens, engaged in areas as diverse as education and the promotion of social rights, as well as the promotion of the "Economic and Monetary Union" in the mid-term, which had already translated into the European Monetary System a few years earlier (EMS, 1978-1979).

These economic reforms took their place in a long movement of democratization aiming to grant a greater role to

citizens, who denounced the excessive role of elites in the initial process of European construction. Only a few of the stages will be presented here.

Heads of state and government studied the reform in December 1974 as part of a French proposal, made under the mandate of President Giscard d'Estaing. The European Parliament gave its political commission the task of developing a new proposal and entrusted the Dutch socialist Schelto Patijn with drafting a report: it was approved by the same commission, and voted on in plenary session on January 14, 1975, garnering 106 votes for and 2 against, with 17 abstentions (communists and Gaullists). The central arrangements provided for representatives to the European Parliament to be elected by direct universal suffrage for five years, and for the first election to take place on the first Sunday of May 1978 "at the latest." This reform was essential, although its implementation proved complex due to the absence of coherent European political parties, and the limits of the European public sphere. Have we seen greater participation among citizens since then?

Between the ambitious projects of reformers, notably within Parliament, and the wishes formulated by public opinion, the debate surrounding democratization—something that is at the heart of Europe—was a process that evolved in accordance with the enlargement that unfurled over the long term from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Institutions evolved towards more democratic practices, although citizen participation in elections for the European Parliament, which were organized by member states, revealed limited participation. In a work entitled *La France au risque de l'Europe*, Anne Dulphy and Christine Manigand used the French case to show the limits of the Europeanization process, and also emphasized the *communication deficit* of the European Communities. The issues nevertheless remain highly complex.

For example, since the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the question of *food security* has given rise to highly complex regulations. Two specialized studies have shown that the experts called upon are veterinarians, who are not always reliable advisors, and a number of crises such as "mad cow" revealed the conflicts of interest present at other levels of governance. Were economic actors, producers, and consumers hurt by practices conceived by very small circles of minorities? When asked about the subject, the former director general of Agriculture for the European Commission, Guy Legras, confirmed the "excesses" of certain experts, as well as the communication deficit in the sector.

The problems present in the European Community of Six, and later of Nine and Twelve, grew worse with the process of enlargement, which created a vast and increasingly less homogenous community from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Jacques Delors, who was a member of the plan's commission, and advisor to Jacques Chaban-Delmas at Matignon under Georges Pompidou, moved to the left. He was elected to the European parliament as a socialist in 1979.

As the Minister of the Economy under François Mitterrand, he was part of the new elites, and as the President of the European Commission in 1985 took part in developing the Single European Act, which sought to reinforce the policy of "economic and social cohesion." This Single Act, which was instituted in February 1986 and took effect in January 1987, helped to prepare broader reforms that would come later, after the fall of the Berlin wall and would be included in the Maastricht Treaty (February 1992). He offered strong leadership in the implementation of this treaty and helped open up the European Economic Community towards the East. He was a pivotal actor of the European Union that was instituted in 1992, striving to strengthen the remit of Parliament.

The Community initiated certain democratic reforms during the first stages of its growth by granting broader powers to the elected Assembly. Delors also tried to resolve the gap between a Europe perceived as elitist and European citizens, by providing more concrete answers: lower prices for products through the Single Market (for example airline tickets), freedom of movement for students, research, and tourists, no more border controls etc.

Can it be maintained that from this point onwards the new Community of Twelve, which became the European Union, constituted a European political sphere? The elites who had played a major role during the initial period of European construction appeared less often at the forefront but continued to inspire policies led by different actors.

Did the process of enlargement help construct a democratic space?

The years following the process of German reunification were marked by profound transformations in Eastern Europe, and by requests for membership on the part of new European partners.

During the first stage (1997-1998), the elites of the first states involved (Estonia, Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia) played an essential role in the negotiations that began on November 10, 1998 in Brussels. After 1998, other partners joined them, although the role of Commission advisors became preeminent, and local elites played a more modest role.

Ten states joined the Union in the spring of 2004, with Bulgaria and Romania following in 2007.

The studies conducted by political scientists and sociologists on the European elections of 2004, 2009, and 2014 show the low participation of citizens from these new member states, in advance of the more recent development of populism.

An important conference held at the Maison de l'Europe in Paris in January 2012 on the "Rise of populism in Europe" showed the force of national resistance to the Commission's wish for "Europeanization," four years before *Brexit* on June 23, 2016, which revealed the extent of hostility towards further integration with the European Union.

Analyses of the behaviour of populist circles reveal a fragmentation of opinion in the strata from which the former elites were recruited.

The issues of migration and the effects of economic crises have crystallized opposition to Europe in circles long considered to be Europeanist. For example, some moderates agree with both the Right and the Left, who are highly critical of the Schengen Agreement, and fear lax policies that are too open towards the flow of refugees.

The German Chancellor recently gauged—in the very region where she is from—the extent of identity politics and reservations towards a policy of openness at borders, which is deemed to be dangerous for the security of EU citizens. The rise of the Far Right confirms this analysis. In the United Kingdom, these problems have had an important role in the movement of opinion that led to *Brexit*.

Parliamentary elections in Europe should henceforth be analysed in light of these facts.

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