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Teaching EU History *George J. Sheridan, Jr.*

Introducing students to the European Union is a challenging enterprise. This I have learned in teaching a course at the University of Oregon in the European Studies program, designed for a student body with little or no background in the European Union. The course, titled “European Union History,” takes an historical approach to the topic, reflecting my own trajectory of expertise that began with the teaching of European economic history and, since the early 1990s, has focused on contemporary Europe. The reflections in the present essay convey some of the main impressions derived from this experience. Admittedly, these observations will apply more closely to a pedagogy having generalist aims than fostering disciplinary expertise.

The challenges of the enterprise are mainly two. The first shares with the teaching of any new subject, regardless of discipline and topic, the necessity to generate rather quickly a knowledge and understanding of basic frameworks, information, and concepts without which discussion of large issues, significant relationships, and broader interpretations is limited at best. For the study of the European Union, this means a basic literacy of the terminology, the conceptual handles, the historical landmarks, and the institutional frameworks of European integration. The historical elements require, additionally, conveying an acquaintance with historical actors, events, and contexts entirely or largely unfamiliar to most students. Transmitting this kind of elementary factual knowledge is a challenge in all history teaching, and teachers of history must learn the art of doing so with an eye to both the essential (that is, the art of avoiding cumbersome detail and overwrought explanation) and the nuanced (that is, judicious insertion of detail and refinement of explanation to curve an account that might initially come across as linear).

There is a second type of challenge in teaching European integration history that distinguishes this teaching from that of most other historical topics. This is keeping the subject interesting, engaging students’ attention and interest while communicating a basic knowledge of the subject area. The challenge is augmented by the hard-to-deny fact that, apart from certain dramatic events in EC/EU history that lend themselves to arresting narrative, many of the important

features of the EC/EU story are either inherently uninteresting to relate or require laborious and tedious preliminary background. Interest in such topics rises, it is true, as one becomes more EC/EU literate, and as the capacity for conceptualization and analysis become progressively possible. At that point ideas and arguments can “trump” the potentially deadening effect of institutional facts and policy details. But this requires a rather high order of learning discipline and deferred satisfaction that are not readily encountered among young (and many not so young) learners today. The challenge here concerns less the choice of content, for the latter is to a large extent given by the subject, than finding a way to involve the student in the generation of that content. This calls for a participatory type of learning that ideally models, to whatever degree is practical, the experience of encountering issues within the EU itself.

Literacy and Knowledge: Constructing the EU Historically

The task of building a foundation of knowledge of EU fundamentals breaks down into three main steps in EU literacy: landmark treaties, major policy initiatives, and EU institutions. In a course having a primarily historical orientation, these objects are the main constituents of the developing story of European integration since the end of World War II. To the extent possible, the essential contours and provisions of each object, and the complexity surrounding each one’s origins, architecture, and interpretation, are made part of that story, or are at least elaborated parallel to the telling of the historical account in which the object was a main consideration. This means including a certain density of presentation and explanation of high priority topics, beyond that required by the basic historical narrative, with the aim of providing a more concentrated policy focus later in the course. Integrated with such exposition of specific topics are certain self-contained historical narratives that have interest apart from this latter goal. Such narratives introduce key actors and events, include discussion of relevant context for explanation of particular actions and occurrences, and, in some instances, exhibit drama.

The framework that I have employed for undertaking this task is largely chronological. The following topics are treated in order: origins of European integration (1945-1952), origins and creation of the European Common Market from the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to the European Economic Community (EEC) (1952-1958), the early Common Market and the de Gaulle era (1958-1969), the period of Eurosclerosis (early 1970s – mid 1980s), the Single European Act (early Delors presidency to around



1988), origins and the creation of the European Union (1988-1993), and the evolution of the European Union since 1993. Within this chronological framework each of the landmark treaties is presented as the particular outcome of an historical process of issues, actors, and events, and also with attention to the major provisions of each treaty. The treaties are the familiar ones: the Treaty of Paris establishing the ECSC (1951), the Treaties of Rome creating the EEC and Euratom (1957), the Single European Act (1986), the Treaty on European Union (TEU) creating the European Union (1992), and the text that began in the Convention on the Future of Europe and ended as the Lisbon Treaty (2007). The policy initiatives that lend themselves to most extended discussion in this overview are the customs union and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the internal market, the single currency as the key robust provision of the Treaty on European Union, and enlargement as both part of a long-term process of building European community since the early 1970s and as a major transformative initiative following the Treaty on European Union. (Another possibility, which I have not used but which seems promising to draw students in, would be any of the several transatlantic trade dispute cases from the 1963 chicken war to GMOs, steel, and so on). Two initiatives associated with failures of integration are included in this account: the European Defense Community of the early 1950s, and the European Constitution defeated in two national referendums in 2005. One landmark achievement affecting subsequent progress towards an internal market is given attention as a major initiative, even though this was not a policy action in the same sense as the others. This is the ruling of the European Court of Justice on the Cassis de Dijon case (1979), establishing the principle of mutual recognition.

Introducing the institutional dimension of integration presents special opportunities as well as challenges in approaching integration as an historical process. The main opportunity lies in introducing institutions as tentative—experimental and contested—enterprises in each historical phase of the developing architecture of integration. Historically rendered, these are presented as subject to question and to repeated revision in the course of the Community/Union's moving towards ever more differentiated and "higher" levels of integration. This approach to institutions avoids a tendency to regard these as in some sense relatively fixed and full blown instruments of policy making and policy implementation. The historical approach thus readily communicates to students both the centrality and the malleability of the institutions of European integration. The challenge resides in articulating the complexity and ambiguity of the institutional picture,

which brings the teacher back to the difficulty of introducing any new historical topic, only here magnified; namely, how much institutional detail and explanation to provide at any given point in the historical account. The institutional dimension also offers the occasion, and in some instances the necessity, to engage larger theoretical issues with regard to European integration, such as federalism and supra-nationality. In one sense the task is simplified by associating certain major institutional creations and revisions with particular landmark treaties. For example, both the treaty creating the ECSC (Paris) and the treaty creating the European Common Market (Rome) lend themselves readily to overall presentations of the institutional framework of European integration, including the respective powers and membership of each institution and salient principles associated with the institutional framework adopted for each Community, such as the supranational bias of the ECSC. Another kind of opportunity is provided by discussion of certain landmark developments, such as the Cassis de Dijon decision as an occasion for elaborating on the role of the European Court of Justice as furthering integration through case law. Initiatives such as Community "summitry" in the early 1970s and the first direct elections of a European Parliament in 1979 serve respectively to introduce an additional institution of long-term importance, the European Council, and to elaborate on the challenge of fostering popular sovereignty in the Community and, eventually, in the Union. Both of these latter occurrences fit into a narrative dominated by the theme of "Eurosclerosis," as examples of efforts to transcend institutional immobilism and as exceptions to an otherwise prevalent Euro-pessimism.

An historical approach offers certain occasions where an engaging and multi-layered account of issues and events facilitates the introduction and analysis of institutional and policy topics. In these instances a kind of "high drama" associated with particular moments of transition or crisis sweetens the otherwise mundane task of cultivating EU literacy. I have found three such occasions especially fruitful for such purpose. One is the account of the origins of European integration in the immediate postwar years, culminating in the Schuman Declaration and the creation of the ECSC. The second concerns the "empty chair" crisis of the mid-1960s. The third addresses the renewal of integration commencing around the mid-1980s with the resolution of the budget crisis and the agreement to form an internal market by means of a case-by-case approach focusing on elimination of non-tariff barriers. The drama of renewal accelerates with the negotiation, the signing, and the turbulent ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s. Each of these



provides material for a richly contextualized narrative with key roles for imposing personalities, along with the opportunity to introduce or elaborate on major institutions or policies of broad significance for European Union affairs.

The origins narrative provides especially fertile ground for contextualizing and assimilating three different yet convergent strands of postwar European history: an economic and business history of reconstruction, a classic foreign policy history centered on the perennial “German question” sharpened by the French national interest, and an international history of Cold War origins and imperatives, in which American and German interests come together in the creation of a politically democratic and economically liberal West German federal state. The personalities involved in this drama are of the most engaging and even colorful kind: the French spirits manufacturer and war purchasing agent Jean Monnet, the ascetic and devout Lorrainer Robert Schuman, and the conservative Rhinelander Konrad Adenauer. The climax of the drama is nothing less than the initial modeling of a unique approach to building European community; namely, to quote one of the actors (Monnet 1978, p. 316), “the building of a new Europe through the concrete achievement of a supranational regime within a limited but controlling area of economic effort.”

The story of the “empty chair” crisis brings to center stage two other strong personalities whose clash of temperament and European vision generates a drama of near Shakespearean dimensions. Commission President Walter Hallstein and French President Charles de Gaulle articulate the deep, unresolved, and subsequently re-emerging, contest between the aspiration towards a supranational Europe, led by the Commission, and the reality of a member-state-dominated “Europe of the Fatherlands,” represented by the unanimously-governed Council of Ministers. While involving these fundamental issues of European governance, the clash brings to the fore key policy matters—the budget, CAP, the customs union—and highlights the significance of one the Community’s best proven formulas for success—prior agreement on and adherence to timelines. Vigorous personalities—Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl—also take center stage in the rapid march from European Community to European Union, circa 1984 to 1993, but here in a drama, to pursue the analogy, of a “comedy” of “ever closer union” rather than the immobiliste “tragedy” of 1966. Each personality represents a critical phase or turning point in their respective national political histories, but positioned differently along the ideological spectrum. With the deft urging of a fourth personality, the “European” Jacques

Delors, and a pro-liberal international economic environment, these nonetheless find common cause in a bold new vision for a united Europe, despite their otherwise incompatible ideological vintages. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the re-unification of Germany heighten the drama, which concludes with the most ambitious sovereignty-abdicating agreement to date, the decision to adopt a single European currency and to subscribe to common macroeconomic policies to make that currency work. In these narratives there is no need to embellish or even to simplify policy details or issues of fundamental principle to maintain student interest. The scenarios are sufficiently engaging and intellectually absorbing to make the acquisition of EU literacy a delightful task.

Engaging the Individual Student: Learning by Doing

The appeal of intrinsically interesting narrative with arresting drama and flashy personality can only go so far as a way of “widening” and “deepening” students’ familiarity with EU issues and processes. The challenge of engaging student interest can be addressed more systematically. Ironically it is the abundance of EU documentary sources, the reading of most of which is a dreary prospect, which facilitates this undertaking. The approach I adopted for the “European Union History” course combines the historian’s fascination with “the sources” (meaning primary sources) with the policy-maker’s focus on concrete problems and practical solutions. I do this in two ways. Beginning at about the mid-point of the course, I divide the remainder into three weekly modules. These are devoted respectively to economic policy, social policy, and external relations. Each module has two components. One consists of my presentation of core topics in each policy area—big-picture bullet points, in effect. These include major theories as well as specific policies addressing core issues in the policy area. The approach is thematic and analytical rather than historical. The second component consists of student presentations of their individual research on particular policy topics in the relevant area, and interaction with other students in a small group forum to share the results of their research and to identify convergent themes. The research is undertaken as part of the independent project work for the course, and has certain mandated requirements in terms of use of original EC or EU sources. Students generate their own topics and undertake the research in a variety of source collections, such as the Bulletin of the European Union, the General Report on the Activities of the European Union, and specialized publications such as Eurobarometer. Priority is placed on research in these original sources,



with a very limited topical focus, rather than on investigating and analyzing policy issues through secondary sources. Each student thus becomes knowledgeable about that precise topic in her or his group, referencing the same materials as those generated and consulted by EU policy-makers themselves. The result, I have found, is a level of student engagement far beyond that generated by “book learning” alone. Especially impressive have been instances of creative searching and locating unanticipated documentation, and the enthusiastic contribution to student discussion that ensues.

Undertaking this kind of research requires a prior introduction to the sources themselves and, especially, to methods of using these for the kind of tasks students are asked to perform. Ideally this would involve a parallel workshop, or special sessions, taking place in the first half of the course centered on the actual processes by which EU documents are generated and published. The outcome of such a workshop would be a familiarity with the structure of the main sources and communicating certain tips and tools for searching these sources. Especially important is an understanding of EU legislation and of the respective roles of the three institutions primarily involved in law-making in the European Union: the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union (the Council of Ministers). Through what is essentially a hands-on process that will culminate in an individual case study, students learn by doing the complex functioning of these three core institutions.

The individual student’s research task is aided in the course by a specially-designed course website that serves simultaneously as an elaborate syllabus, as an introduction to and overview of sources, and especially as a user-friendly window with links to online documentation, reference, and external websites that students can use in their independent research. In addition to ready access to EU documents in the Bulletin and General Report, for example, the website home page provides “Quick Links” to the EUROPA website, to the official website of the European Commission, to the A to Z Index of European Union Websites provided through the website of the European Commission Delegation to the United States, and to the University of Pittsburgh library’s EU reference and subject guides. Part of the class time in the initial weeks of the course is devoted to a “tour” of these sites, especially the very elaborate EUROPA website.

Instruction in EU documents and their corresponding legislative antecedents, and the building of a website custom-designed for the purposes of this course, benefited from a unique collaboration between

me and two units of the university library. These were the Government Documents department, the head of which had expertise in European Union materials, and the university’s Center for Educational Technologies, which built the website. Through Government Documents, students had access to a wealth of source materials, both historical and contemporary, and with the guidance of its head, special instruction in accessing these materials. He walked students through the law-making process in the EU, so that, in searching for documents on specific topics, students understood how these had been generated and thus were able to locate and make use of relevant subject indexes and search engines. The construction of the website involved extensive dialogue between me, librarians, site designers and technicians, in which the priorities of content were balanced with both aesthetic and “user-friendly” considerations. In the years following the initial construction, our Center for Educational Technologies built additional features into the website. These included “factoids” of interest in the history of European integration, as well as a variety of interactive features for instructional, reference, and research purposes. Among the latter were maps; comparative graphs of indices such as exports, government expenditures, immigration, per capita GDP and the like; EU institutions; and regions and regional policy. The most ambitious interactive feature built into the website is an EU timeline. The timeline enables students to access, for each year since 1945, prominent EU events (such as the Schuman Plan or the Empty Chair crisis), world events, and EU personalities, and for each such item, a brief overview, visual images or video clips, links to online sites for accessing additional information or documents, a brief subject bibliography, and cross references to related timeline items.

Course Textbooks and Other Teaching Resources

In addition to the content accessed through the website, the course uses as its main text Desmond Dinan (2005). This has the advantage of extensive treatment of each EU institution and of each major policy area, in addition to providing a comprehensive historical overview. The text is ideally suited to the course’s joint historical/narrative and thematic approach, and to the priority given to the aim of developing institutional and policy “literacy” among students. In addition, a rich collection of documents pertaining to the formative years of European integration (Wells 2007), that includes a concise narrative of events of this period, is being used in this year’s course. The course has also made use of various free publications of the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, on topics such as environmental policy, language issues,



public opinion surveys, and regional policy. Especially valuable has been Klaus-Dieter Borchardt (2000) on Community law institutions and procedures, currently available online through EUROPA.

The course has served, finally, as a forum for guest lectures and videoconferences with distinguished EU officials, facilitated through our university's affiliation with the European Union Center at the University of Washington. On one occasion, the course was enriched by a two-week visiting professorship of a distinguished European scholar of integration, Staffan Zetterholm, Jean Monnet Professor in European Political Integration at Aalborg University. Each year "European Union History" has thus welcomed a variety of enrichment opportunities providing personal contacts and horizons of expertise on contemporary European Union affairs that contribute handsomely to the student learning experience.

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