Delusions of Grandeur: New Perspectives on the History of the European Community

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All four of these books are interesting additions to the corpus of historical research into European integration. Parr and Poggiolini’s books are precise, document-based accounts of the trials and tribulations surrounding Britain’s accession to the European Economic Community (EEC); Ludlow’s book, which is based on an imposing quantity of archive research in six countries, is the most important work in English to date on the evolution of the European Community (EC) in the period that elapsed between Charles de Gaulle’s veto of British entry and the Hague summit of December 1969, when the member states’ leaders ‘brought to an end a seven year struggle over its purpose, mode of operation and membership’ (p. 198). Gillingham’s book reads like a 300-page op-ed in the Wall Street Journal, and is largely concerned with current events rather than history, but that does not mean that it has nothing of relevance for historians, as I hope to show at the end of this review.

There is also a common theme here: delusions of grandeur. Parr and Poggiolini’s studies illuminate Britain’s pretensions to international greatness during the Wilson–Heath negotiations with Britain’s European neighbours, although they do it more by quotation than argument, since both authors have a perceptible tendency to

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take Britain’s political leaders and the Rolls Royce minds in the Foreign Office at their own self-satisfied estimations. Ludlow’s book grapples specifically with the ‘challenge’ posed by de Gaulle’s delusions of grandeur for the institutions of the EC and for the other member states. Gillingham’s book suffers from fairly severe delusions of grandeur itself, but also makes the far from trite argument that the crisis in the European Union (EU) today is the result of the ‘vaulting ambition’ of Europe’s leaders since the early 1990s, who, Gillingham argues, by pursuing the dream of a European superstate have ensured that the EU has become an over-regulated, deeply corrupt, anti-US and anti-market monstrosity that actively obstructs its member states from coping with the challenges of globalisation.

Helen Parr’s well-researched monograph on Harold Wilson’s European diplomacy argues, in synthesis, that Wilson’s policy towards Europe evolved in response to changing circumstances, but always with an eye to Britain’s role on the world stage. Taking power in October 1964, Wilson was initially too preoccupied with modernising the party programme to place the EEC at the heart of his concerns and, in any case, gave priority to the Commonwealth in foreign affairs. Wilson was nevertheless open to a policy of technological co-operation with the French government and believed that Britain could contribute much to the Community on this score. As Britain’s economic problems mounted, and as Labour’s National Plan failed to deliver promised economic growth, so Wilson ‘was pushed’ (p. 7) from January 1966 onwards to consider an application to join the EEC, despite the fact that, to quote Parr’s succinct formulation of the problem facing British policymakers, ‘Erhard supported enlargement, but lacked the political will for a breach with the French. Couve and Pompidou suggested that there was no “political veto” but saw British difficulties over the CAP and sterling as impediments to British accession’ (p. 79).

Wilson’s policy was prompted by the foreign office, whose pressure for entry into the EEC was constant. Judging from Parr’s book, the foreign office’s central preoccupation was that Britain’s place in the world would decline if it continued to exclude itself from the EEC. The risk was, in the words of Sir Con O’Neil, ambassador to the EEC in 1964, that Britain’s influence would decline rapidly in the absence of EEC membership, since the United States would reorient its foreign policy towards an increasingly dynamic EEC at the expense of the ‘special relationship’ with Britain. In O’Neil’s view, Britain risked becoming ‘a greater Sweden’ unless it got into the EEC as soon as possible. Britain, officials concluded, needed to switch strategy. Instead of trying, as Macmillan had done, to enter the EEC only if certain conditions were met, Britain should publicly accept the principle of membership and then ‘work to safeguard Britain’s essential interests from inside’ (p. 21). Michael Stewart, Wilson’s foreign secretary until July 1966, pressed consistently for his department’s policy: indeed, he emerges from this narrative as the classic case of minister as departmental spokesman.

Wilson seemingly became convinced of the need to engage with the EEC during the concluding weeks of the ‘empty chair’ crisis in January 1966. Struggling with the Commonwealth’s rejection of British leadership over the Rhodesia crisis, fearful of the implications for the Atlantic alliance of French unilateralism on defence questions and
resirous of outflanking Edward Heath politically, Wilson began to contemplate EEC membership if ‘safeguards for our interests can be negotiated’. Yet the crucial event, by Parr’s account, that spurred Britain’s decision to seek entry was the sterling crisis of July 1966, which thwarted Labour’s expansionist economic policies and ensured, or so it was believed, that there was ‘nowhere else for the government to go but Europe’ (p. 71). Wilson launched the idea of a ‘probe’ of the Community’s member states in October 1966, with the support of George Brown, his new foreign secretary. The decision represented a break with the foreign office’s line, however, since both Wilson and Brown at this stage were confident of their ability to negotiate Britain into the Community on their own terms. Brown, in particular, was contemptuous of the foreign office’s caution and, convinced that his officials were plotting against him, ignored advice he did not want to hear (p. 109).

From January to March 1967 Wilson engaged in his penchant for personal diplomacy and toured the member states’ capitals to sound out their opinions. The chief result of these peregrinations was that Wilson was compelled to realise that the foreign office was right: Britain would have to apply for membership unconditionally, since only this gave any chance of mobilising the diplomatic momentum that might make the general acquiesce. Wilson in April 1967 backed the cabinet into a corner, ably isolating heavyweights like the minister of defence, Denis Healey, who could not see the point of giving de Gaulle a chance to deliver Britain a second slap on the cheek, and the handful of ministers, most notably Fred Peart and Barbara Castle, who were outright opposed to membership. On 2 May 1967 a majority of the cabinet acquiesced with varying degrees of enthusiasm in the decision to make an ‘uncluttered’ application for membership. The stage was set for Wilson’s summer of negotiations, during which he attempted, notoriously refusing to take no for an answer, to convince de Gaulle that ‘British membership was the only way of ensuring that Europe would have the industrial, technological and ultimately political strength to stand up to the superpowers’ (p. 157). Devaluation in November 1967, which cruelly exposed Britain’s economic weakness, presented de Gaulle with a perfect opportunity to bring the charade to an end on 27 November. Parr insists, however, that Wilson’s policy was not a failure, since it succeeded, as Wilson had intended, in ‘placing enlargement at the centre of the Community’s agenda’ and led ultimately ‘to the lifting of the French veto in 1969’ (p. 202).

This last verdict surely underestimates the importance of the rupture caused by de Gaulle’s fall from grace and his substitution by a new president, Georges Pompidou, who was determined to signal that he was charting a new course in French foreign policy. Parr is on surer ground when she adds that ‘Wilson’s achievement was to garner a political consensus in favour of the principle of European membership of the EEC . . . a political consensus that has thus far proved hard to break’ (p. 202). It emerges very clearly from Parr’s book that Britain’s political class decided during Wilson’s first and second premierships that there was no hope of stopping British decline outside the EEC. The whole British strategy, carefully cultivated by the foreign office, was based on the presumption that Britain simply could not allow its role on the world stage to diminish. Parr says in the conclusion that ‘political and
geopolitical motivation’ was more important than rational economic calculation in determining Britain’s shift towards supporting membership (p. 190). Wilson ‘selected the course that would shore up British authority on the international stage’ (p. 193).

The main flaw in Parr’s book, I think, is that it takes the wisdom of this analysis for granted. She mentions in passing the criticisms of entry into the Community advanced at various times by the treasury and by independent-minded ministers such as Douglas Jay, and by ‘little Englanders’ on Labour’s left, but does not really evaluate them as an alternative strategies, even though she does briefly mention that GITA (Going It Alone) was considered as an option; nor does she address the arguments of politicians like Enoch Powell, who were arguing in favour of withdrawal from British international commitments and an anti-inflationary policy of balanced budgets and austerity at home. Did Britain really not have an alternative to membership? Was joining the EEC the only way of ‘stopping the decline’ (a decline that research is showing to have been overstated)?

Making this point is not necessarily to side with the anti-marketeers; rather, it is merely to suggest that it is hard to paint, as Parr certainly does try to do, a portrait of Wilson as an innovative statesman unless you plausibly show that he was right and others wrong about the choices facing the nation. Moreover, even if the strategy was right, the perception of national superiority that underlay Wilson’s policy was hardly statesmanlike. Parr does an excellent job of recounting Wilson and Brown’s personal diplomacy during the ‘probe’ and during the negotiations after May 1967, but her account ultimately does not dispel the perception that Wilson and Brown looked at Europe, in Peter Hennessy’s slightly contrived phrase, through ‘HP spattered’ spectacles (quoted p. 6). Parr cites George Brown, who was admittedly a maverick, ludicrously telling Willy Brandt, ‘Willy, you have to get us in so that we can take the lead in Europe’ (p. 110); while Wilson himself apparently informed the editor of the Guardian, Alastair Hetherington, in April 1967, that the assumption behind his European policy was that ‘if we couldn’t dominate that lot, there wasn’t much to be said for us’ (p. 103). On this point at least he was right.

Dominating de Gaulle would have been hard work for anyone, let alone Harold Wilson. The challenge posed to the European Community by de Gaulle’s ambitions is the subject matter of N. Piers Ludlow’s book, which is a major work that deserves to be widely read by advanced students and scholars of European integration, although the price of both his book and Parr’s suggests that Routledge sees hedge fund executives as potential buyers, too. Ludlow traces the crises of the 1960s in detail, and though this means learning rather more about the trials and tribulations of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) than most normal people might like, the effort is well worth it.

What Ludlow establishes by his painstaking reconstruction of events is that the EC’s ‘crises’ were more like the spats of a young married couple; tense, over-wrought, door-slamming episodes that served the purpose of establishing how much personal space the partners were willing to allow each other and how they were going to make their commitment work. The first part of Ludlow’s narrative culminates in a
brilliant chapter – the adjective is entirely justified – on ‘National Interest and the Rescue of the EEC’ that traces the endgame of the ‘empty chair’ crisis and analyses its significance. Ludlow skilfully shows the ‘underlying prudence’ (p. 115) that the Six showed during the crisis. France’s boycott was partial and its conduct of the January 1966 negotiations was restrained; the Five refrained from reaching legally binding decisions in France’s absence; the Five did not threaten to supplant France with Britain. For both economic and political reasons, Ludlow plausibly argues, the EEC had already become ‘a deeply important political venture which both symbolised how far the continent had distanced itself from past conflict and had vested in it multiple hopes about much more extensive political co-operation and unity in the future’ (p. 117). The EEC also served the useful purpose, in the meantime, of acting as both a useful ‘framework within which Germany’s reviving power could be accommodated’ and as a way of tying down the ‘loose cannon’ that was Gaullist France and binding, or helping to bind, France into the West (p. 117). For all these reasons, nobody wanted to take irrevocable steps.

The point is of considerable importance for the broader historiography of European integration, as Ludlow sees. Many scholars have seen the events of January 1966 as a ‘vital caesura’ in the Community’s history between the ‘vibrant and active Community of the early 1960s and the ‘stagnant, fractious entity’ that the EC is supposed to have become in the 1970s and early 1980s. By reasserting the primacy of the member states, such scholars believe that de Gaulle ‘sapped the vitality’ of the Community (all quotations p. 118). As Ludlow says, this contention is ‘simplistic’. In his view, the crisis served the useful purpose of obliging the member states ‘to assess what sort of European system they wanted and to reject much more explicitly than before what they did not wish to see’ (p. 119). During the ‘empty chair’ crisis the Six turned their backs on both rapid advance to a federation and outright intergovernmentalism. France backed off from insisting that the Commission be reduced to a mere civil service at the command of the member states; the other member states evinced no great enthusiasm for a Commission-dominated Community, which remained a predilection of the supporters of the European movement on the back benches of the Dutch, Belgian, Italian and West German national parliaments. Ludlow comes close, ultimately, to presenting this outcome as a triumph for the Community: proof positive of the strength of the member states’ pragmatic attachment to the process of integration as a crucial part of their own national interest. The argument is convincing, though it runs foul of what might be termed Community mythology.

In Ludlow’s view, the rejection of the second British application to join the EEC was in some ways more damaging than the ‘empty chair’ crisis for relations within the Community. After de Gaulle’s démarche in November 1967, the Belgians, Dutch and Italians saw no reason to co-operate with a France that was so adamantly opposed to enlargement. By early 1969 the EEC had become a ‘frozen community’ characterised by ‘a chronic inability to take bold new decisions’ (p. 154). De Gaulle’s political demise in April 1969 unblocked this situation. Ludlow’s penultimate chapter, ‘The Road to The Hague’, lauds the statesmanship of Europe’s leaders during the second half of
1969 and portrays the December summit of the Six as an event that deserves ‘both the press attention it received at the time and the prominence it has assumed in subsequent accounts of the Community’s development’ (p. 195). Fundamentally, the Hague summit, with its decisions to press on with enlargement, to establish a system of funding the EEC through its ‘own resources’, to contemplate monetary union and to reassert the political goals of European integration ‘marked the moment when the Community overcame . . . the Gaullist challenge’ (p. 196).

But what, in essence, was the Gaullist challenge? Ludlow’s last chapter makes a thoughtful case for believing that de Gaulle was ‘barking not biting’ in his European policy (p. 200), a phrase whose gently ironic double meaning should not be taken too seriously. Ludlow actually thinks that de Gaulle was remarkably shrewd in his dealings with his European partners. The ‘actual danger’ of France ‘destroying or withdrawing’ from Europe was ‘less acute’ than contemporaries realised, but such rhetorical excesses did, for de Gaulle, have the useful tactical benefit of keeping the other member states on edge and ensuring that France played the role of Community agenda-setter. De Gaulle’s challenge was thus ‘never quite the existential issue that it sometimes seemed’ (p. 204). France had merely ‘dispensed with the veneer of European rhetoric that had tended to characterise earlier bargaining amongst the Six’ (p. 205) and set its face against easy assumptions of inevitability in the EEC’s development. Ludlow does not put it this way, but what he is suggesting is that de Gaulle compelled the Community to grow up, to put its honeymoon behind it and adjust to domesticity, although even he was unable to prevent some of the partners from yearning after the spendthrift old buck over the water. The logic of this argument – which Ludlow does not quite spell out – is that de Gaulle was a crucial figure for the development of European integration and not just a parenthesis in the story. This is an interpretation that many scholars will be reluctant even today to acknowledge, but Ludlow is, I think, right. For this reason, but also for his ability to write a genuinely cross-national history that gives just treatment to the role played by the Dutch and the Italians in particular, this book is a substantial achievement that will leave its mark on future broad narratives of European integration.

Ilaria Poggiolini’s Alle origini dell’Europa allargata carries on, chronologically, from where Parr and Ludlow leave off by dealing with the relations between the EEC and the Europhile government headed by Edward Heath that was elected in Britain in June 1970. The amount of useful archive-based scholarship in Italian on the EEC, of which this book is a good example, is by now very substantial and is usually blithely ignored in English-language writing on the subject (in this respect Ludlow is a striking exception). Poggiolini homes in on the diplomatic preparations for the Paris summit on 19–20 October 1972 from the British perspective. She shows very thoroughly that Britain’s leaders regarded the summit as ‘the ideal moment to demonstrate, to the rest of Europe and the wider world, that Great Britain had the will and the diplomatic skills to take the lead in the Community’s relaunch and to press the claims of its values and priorities’ (p. 114–15, my translation).

For anybody used to generalising about British attitudes to European integration on the basis of the heated debates of the 1990s, Poggiolini’s account will come
as a great surprise. She shows how Britain took the lead in urging that the EEC adopt bold new policies in three major areas: economic and monetary union, with special attention being given to the need to develop regional policy; reinforcement of decision-making procedures within the broad framework of intergovernmentalism; and the development of a foreign policy role for the Community by the establishment of a secretariat based in Brussels (p. 93). What Britain was trying to achieve was ‘triangulation’, the substitution of French leadership of the EEC with a troika of Britain, France and West Germany, in which Britain – or so the foreign office presumed – would hold the guiding reins, especially in dealings with the United States (it is a virtue of Poggiolini’s book that Heath’s relations with Nixon are kept in sharp focus at all times). The Ten (or Nine after Norway’s referendum vote on 25 September 1972) would be relaunched on ‘the basis of a programmatic platform that reflected Britain’s priorities’ (p. 123). The summit itself (Poggiolini includes as an appendix Ambassador Christopher Soames’s astonishingly self-satisfied report of the summit) was hailed as a triumph for British diplomacy. France’s ‘moral ascendancy’ was said to have ended and Britain, and Heath personally, were considered to have ‘occupied our rightful place as a force to be reckoned with in the Community’ (pp. 277–8).

Like Parr, Poggiolini tells the story well, but might have reflected a little more on whether Britain’s policy did not constitute evidence of mania di grandezza. As one reads the documents Poggiolini quotes, as one traces the earnest official views of how the Community should evolve in British-approved directions, one almost has to pinch oneself to remember that Britain was not yet a member of the Community. Both the top officials and Heath seem to have believed that the EEC was only now beginning its real existence: the fog in the channel had lifted and Europe was no longer cut off. How realistic this attitude of superiority was, given Britain’s dire economic performance in Heath’s first two years of government, is open to doubt. Poggiolini says in the conclusion that she ‘deliberately separated Britain’s entry diplomacy from the domestic political context’ (p. 206, my translation), but one must, I think, speculate whether one can really do this. After all, as Britain’s diplomats were lifting champagne glasses to celebrate their achievements in Paris, domestic unemployment figures had reached over a million, Rolls Royce (the jewel in Harold Wilson’s technological crown) had gone bust, compulsory wage controls were about to be introduced, Anthony Barber’s egregious March 1972 budget was pouring paraffin on the fires of inflation and the pound was going through the floor (its weakness was a major problem, as Poggiolini shows, during the summit preparations with the French). A nation with problems of this magnitude might have been more circumspect in its plans and should certainly have been less secure of its fitness to lead.

Like Edward Heath, John Gillingham has no doubts about his own right to set the agenda for European integration. His latest screed, Design for a New Europe, while relatively free from the gratuitous jibing that marred his 2003 opus European Integration 1950–2003, outlines a series of proposals for reform of the EU that will warm the cockles of the UK Independence Party and the American Enterprise
Institute, though few others will be convinced. These proposals include establishing a ‘European Agency for the Liquidation of the European Union’ that would have the task of selling off the EU’s physical assets, especially its buildings. This would be necessary since he proposes cutting the EU’s 18,000-strong army of well-paid bureaucrats by approximately 17,500, as ‘skeleton crews’ perform the necessary work of administering competition law and conducting trade negotiations. Even a ‘desleazed’ CAP, of course, must go. The European Parliament, Gillingham suggests, should be reduced in size to 100 members, be purely consultative and be relocated to a town in the heart of Europe that is well served by budget airlines. Gillingham proposes Székesfehérvár, which is apparently near Lake Balaton in Hungary. Its members, conversing in Icelandic, Turkish, Church Slavonic and Latin, and thus reflecting Europe’s rich cultural heritage, will publish documents in English only when they have been vetted for language abuse by a committee of academics from Oxford and Cambridge, two academic institutions which Gillingham curiously believes to be the only European universities in the world’s top hundred (p. 228).

What, apart from the reflection that Cambridge University Press has clearly abandoned any pretence of editing the books that it publishes, can be learned from Gillingham’s musings? He is presumably not entirely serious in making these suggestions, and probably does not truly believe that Jacques Chirac, in 2004, was plotting to construct a ‘modern Sparta, a Euro-garrison state with war-waging as the bond of the Community’ (sic) or a ‘French-led hyper-power able to compete with the United States for world supremacy’ (see pp. 222–3). The final chapters in particular of this book would be rejected as unbalanced right-wing tosh even by Margaret Thatcher. So why bother reviewing it?

We should bother because beneath the clownish straining for effect, Gillingham is making a serious point that has relevance for historians. Gillingham is arguing that the recent history of the EU is one of bureaucratic creep and corruption at the expense of democracy; of over-regulation at the expense of competitiveness; of parochialism in an age of globalisation; of over-ambition in foreign policy. From being an institution that resolved the problems of Europe’s nation-states, the EU has been transformed into one that exacerbates them. Europe needs to wipe the slate clean and redesign its common institutions, on a basis of democracy, not elitism.

As politics, one can disagree or agree with this diagnosis. As history, this broad perspective on the EU has the useful function of leading Gillingham to focus on the wastefulness of CAP spending; on rampant corruption and inefficiency in the administration of the EU’s other programmes; on the burgeoning volume of regulation (101,811 regulations and directives since Britain joined the Community in 1973); on the reluctance of France, Italy and Germany to implement single-market measures and introduce liberalisation to their economies; on the growing mood of public disenchantment with the EU. Gillingham has grasped, unlike many less critical scholars of the EU, that the Dutch rejected the constitution because they find the EU ‘remote, unresponsive and unaccountable’ (p. 53).

Many EU specialists will shrink from acknowledging it, but these are all facts about the recent development of the EU that can be worked into a new, authentically
revisionist, interpretation of European integration that places the failures and distortions of the ‘process’ on a par with its successes. The value of Gillingham’s book, if one looks beneath the weirder passages of his argument, is that he is arguing that scholars of the EU should shift the burden of salience in their narratives from the EU’s institutional progress to the drawbacks of its policies and the increasingly manifest gap between rhetoric and reality in the EU’s achievements. We should, in short, paint the landscape of EU history from a perspective that shows the louring storm clouds, not just the usual sunlit vistas. In principle, Gillingham’s idea is the right one; in practice, this book will likely go unread by all except the converted.