

Miscommunicating across Borders: Ethnographic Reflections on EU Techniques of 'Better Communication' from Brussels

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Abstract: Whether stemming from rising inequality, economic stagnation or technological disruption, global processes of transformation are changing European societies. With distrust in EU institutions at an all-time low, a perceived absence of a European demos or polity is attributed in part to the nonexistence of a European public square, a forum for direct communication between EU institutions and EU citizens. So-called 'hearts and minds strategies', such as Citizens' Dialogues and the European Citizens' Initiative, aim to go beyond the rhetorics of convergence criteria, stability mechanisms and bailout packages that dominate weekly news cycles. In contrast with liberalist discourses of idealisation and universalisation, a reactionary populism fetishises a return to an age when fiscal and migration policy were the sole province of national capitals. This paper critically analyses discourses surrounding 'dialogue' and 'better communication' inside the European Commission in Brussels, drawn from extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out within its office spaces. Through participant-observation and in-person, semi-structured interviewing with civil servants, it explores the ways in which they seek to fill the dialogical spaces currently occupied by populist voices in order to reaffirm the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational, imagined community of Europeans who identify with and belong to it. Its findings suggest that the achievement of 'better communication' with citizens by the European Commission is made all the more intractable by its struggle to define an institutional European identity that is inclusive, coherent, persuasive and distinct.

Keywords: European Commission, Dialogue, Bureaucracy, European identity, Crisis

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Introduction: Being Political in Times of Crisis

The European Commission is among the largest, oldest and most central fixtures of the European Union (EU)'s institutional architecture. As the executive power it proposes new laws, policies and initiatives in areas within its jurisdiction. It oversees the implementation of decisions by the Parliament and Council, monitors budget spending and safeguards the integrity of the treaties. In a more limited capacity, it acts as the EU's public face, representing the collective 'European interest' of its members in foreign policy matters. Just before being elected President of the Commission in July 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker stated his intentions for an EU executive that would be 'more political' than those before it. 'The Commission,' he said, 'is not a technical committee made up of civil servants who implement the instructions of another institution. The Commission is political. And I want it to be more political. Indeed, it will be highly political. Its make-up must reflect the plurality of the majority of ideas which take shape' (European Commission 2014b).

The political return in the Commission occurred at a time of adversity for the EU and high distrust in its actors and institutions, when global dynamics and processes of transformation are changing European societies fundamentally. Whether stemming from rising inequality, economic stagnation, or technological disruption, a reactionary populism oriented towards nostalgia appeals to working class voters who feel left behind by globalisation and alienated from mainstream institutions. In contrast with liberalist discourses of idealisation and universalisation, far-right parties fetishise a return to a time when fiscal and migration policy were the sole province of national capitals. With distrust in EU institutions at an all-time low, a perceived absence of a European demos or polity is attributed in part to the nonexistence of a European public square, a forum for direct communication between EU institutions and EU citizens.

This paper critically analyses discourses surrounding 'dialogue' and 'better communication' inside the European Commission in Brussels, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in and around the European Commission over 18 months. It explores the ways in which the institution seeks to fill the dialogical spaces currently occupied by populist voices in order to reaffirm the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational, imagined community of Europeans who identify with and belong to it. Specifically, it focuses on initiatives such as 'Imagining Europe: A New Narrative' that aim to reproduce social and cultural forms of Europeanness and disseminate them among EU citizens from above. Its findings are based predominantly on data collected from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews carried out inside Commission buildings. A total of 56 interviews were conducted in 16 policy and external Directorates-General (DGs). Interviewing methods were complemented by discourse analysis of official texts, speeches and press briefings. Its

findings suggest that the achievement of 'better communication' with citizens by the European Commission is made all the more intractable by its struggle to define an institutional European identity that is inclusive, coherent, persuasive, and distinct.

Context: The Discourse of Crisis

My arrival in Brussels roughly coincides with the commencement of the Juncker Commission's 2014 term in office at a time of adversity for the EU and high distrust in EU institutions. Since the 2008 international financial crisis and ensuing eurozone debt crisis, economies have been strained as unemployment rises, living standards decline, housing bubbles burst, and structural weaknesses in labour markets reveal themselves. The incoming President Jean-Claude Juncker began his mandate by announcing that his was a 'last-chance Commission' beginning its term at a 'make-or-break moment' for a European Union preoccupied with multiple and overlapping crises. Upon settling in, I gathered the impression that something was wrong. In theatres, seminar buildings and cultural centres, events were organised to discuss the future of the European project. They were given portentous titles like 'Europe on the Brink' and 'A Turning Point for Europe?' and 'A Europe in Crisis: What's Next?'. A sense of low-humming dread was palpable, and a pallid cloud laden with uncertainty loomed steadily overhead.

Annabel¹ spoke of her work in the cabinet of Frans Timmermans as 'a very sort of niche part of the structure, but pretty nevralgic at the same time.' The second adjective, *nevralgic*, is a neologism that was unfamiliar to me. It derives from the French word *névralgique* [neuralgic], often used in the phrase *point névralgique* meaning 'nerve centre'. Her use of this term evokes the way the Commission is centrally located, at the core of things, as well as being a site of anguished intensity. 'It is at the same time pretty messed up as well. You've probably picked that up in some of your discussions.' A second definition is listed in the dictionary as, 'In extended use: painful, distressing; (esp. in Politics) particularly sensitive or crucial; capable of causing a sudden, extreme, or far-reaching reaction; (also) characterised by such a reaction' (Oxford 2009). She continued:

Particularly, there's a general sense of anguish around. It was already there when I joined in 2011 with the financial crisis because we had all these waves of crises since 2005. The first blow was with the French and Dutch referendums on the Constitution – that feeling of, 'how do we connect with people?' It's the question of the legitimacy of the project, the whole vocabulary around project-building, all these construction metaphors, et cetera. You don't talk about 'the France project' or the 'UK project'; you talk about 'France' and 'Germany'. Europe is still not an entity; it's a sense of direction. It's something that you

1 Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of informants.

work towards, that we're constantly building but we're not entirely sure what it consists of.

The years 2015 and 2016 were *anni horribiles* for the European Union. There was the Greek financial crisis, the refugee or migration crisis and terror attacks in Paris, Berlin, London and Barcelona, as well as in the European Quarter in Brussels. There was also the Panama Papers affair, the 'Luxleaks' scandal and decisive resistance to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. Far-right parties promoting nationalism and nativism gained unprecedented support in Hungary, Poland, Finland, Denmark, Sweden and France, while left-wing Euroskeptic parties did well in Greece, Spain and Portugal. As voices critical of the EU advocating measures deeper than institutional reform gained mainstream acceptance, arguments for 'more Europe' and 'ever closer union' began sounding fanciful, old-fashioned and elitist to many of those listening.

The period reached its nadir with the Brexit vote in Britain, signifying a moment at which this tidal wave of disillusionment reached new heights inside the EU-28. The decision of a slight but decisive majority of eligible UK voters to end their country's membership of the European Union marked a new milestone in a history of lost plebiscites on 'the EU issue'. The British are the first national electorate to formally end their membership by referendum.² As the EU's influence wanes on the global stage, it stands to lose around 15% of its economic weight, one of two nuclear-armed military powers and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. At least as much as economic realities, the phenomenon concerns what it means to embrace, reject or passively disregard belonging to the EU. The phenomenon controverts a basic principle of the European idea – that 'the movement toward closer supranational integration is irreversible' (Haas 1968, 449), and once the project is put in motion, the arc of history will bend inevitably and unidirectionally toward greater social and political unification among countries and persons in Europe. The affair proves it is possible for Europe to shrink over its lifetime as well as enlarge.

To examine the discursive construction of dialogue and communication within the Commission, this research employs a discourse-ethnographic approach (Unger et al. 2014; Wodak et al. 2012; Krzyżanowski 2011). Building on linguistic anthropology, the anthropology of organisations and critical discourse studies, the method supplements fieldwork-based ethnography in institutional spaces with discourse-oriented analyses. Conceiving discourses as forms of social practice and workplace settings as complex sites for their production and reception, it confronts the immediate micro-analytical level (what occurs within institutional spaces) with events unfolding

2 Since the days of the European Communities, Greenland, Algeria and the island of Saint Barthélemy in the West Indies have withdrawn from the project.

on the macro-contextual level that impact the day-to-day work-lives and practices of EU civil servants (Wodak 2013). Grounding the micro-analytic within the macro-contextual establishes a 'contextual micro-macro mediation', revealing different multilevel language ideologies' (Krzyżanowski 2011, 286). The internal dynamics at play between organisations and those who run them are mutually constitutive: social actors shape through discourse-practices the institutional spaces they navigate and are shaped by them in turn (Heller 2001). In line with Marc Abélès's (2000) insistence that anthropologists study European institutions at the level of the language and models their informants employ, analysing discursive practices provides a means of understanding the influence of particular institutional logics on performances of Europeanness.

Europe Between the Political and the Technocratic

The induction of the 2014 College of Commissioners heralds a return to politics and the political within the EU civil service. President Juncker stated that he was 'not an anonymous bureaucrat or a putschist who would have forced the doors of the Berlaymont' (Maurice 2018). Rather, he was, by virtue of the Spitzenkandidat procedure, a political leader with a 'triple legitimacy', having won one mandate from voters, another from the Council, and a third from the Parliament. The 'Spitzenkandidaten' ['lead candidate'] procedure awards the presidency to the nominee of the parliamentary group who wins the most seats. Making the formation of each new College an indirect function of the outcome of the vote will, it is hoped, strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the incoming Commission's mandate. It will also give candidates the possibility to connect and communicate better with members of the public. Thus, Juncker's College positioned itself as the first to take office with the formal endorsement of the citizens via their political parties in Parliament and the first to be quasi-democratically elected.

In common usage, politics often refers to 'party politics', the realm of campaigns, elections and events depicted in news media as distinct from the profane realm of day-to-day life. By this metric, one would have thought that an institution such as the EU Commission was political already. By a 'more political Commission', the President refers more specifically to his Cabinet and the College of Commissioners, who steer the Commission's engine room from above. In the daily institutional life of the Commission's halls and corridors, however, the duality identified by McDonald (2012) of the political and the administrative remains salient in the ways in which civil servants conceptualise their roles. Both terms are used, though technocratic and bureaucratic more often take the place of administrative to connote the esoteric, highly specialised areas of expertise on which officials focus for long periods. 'We have this hybrid function', explained Arnaud, a top civil servant in charge of humanitarian aid. 'Work is quite technical. It's very technocratic, but it's highly political at the same

time.' Officials understand the two poles as existing somewhat in opposition to one another. One meaning that 'technicality' takes on here connotes the limited and highly specialised areas of expertise into which permanent officials are trained and on which they remain focused for long periods. By contrast, the political dimension of the civil service is what is shared in common, a collective endeavour that effects something greater than the sum of its administrative parts.

When expounding on what a more political Commission looks like, officials cite one of the President's other mantras: 'I want to be serious about being big on big things and small on small things.' The trend of slimming down its legislative output by submitting fewer and fewer proposals each year started with former President Barroso and his vision of 'better regulation', viewed by many as a measure taken to appease the UK. In the previous Commission, when the single market was being set up and citizens were less pessimistic about the global economy and political institutions more generally, there was simply more being done. In 2015, 55 EU laws were adopted by the European Parliament, compared with 64 in 2010. In being big on the big things and small on the small things, the Commission commits itself to achieving results on a limited range of issues that are of the greatest import and retreating from certain fields where it is perceived to be ineffective or unfit for purpose.

The 'big things', as far as the College is concerned, are laid out in 'the Ten Priorities', a list of guidelines for areas of action on which to focus. In matters of industry, the Commission's 'small things' are regulations considered to be superfluous. A Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and 'Doing Less More Efficiently' is established to identify policy areas that might be abdicated to national administrations, 'ensuring that as much work as possible is left in the hands of Member States' (European Commission 2017). Timmermans, who is its chairman, provides some needed context: 'People all around the EU are telling us they want change. They want Europe to focus more where it can help solve the big problems: jobs, growth and fairness in our societies. Citizens want Europe to improve their lives, not meddle with them. Businesses want Europe to enhance their competitiveness, not burden them with red tape' (European Commission 2014b). 'Better regulation' is thus an extension of the 'fundamental principles' of subsidiarity and proportionality enshrined in Article 5 of the Lisbon Treaty, which ensure that actions taken at the European level are restricted to no more than what is necessary to enforce what is laid down in the treaties; it is a check on the power of the EU executive. What can be done at the member state level should be done at the member state level, and the Commission that governs best is the Commission that governs least. To be political is also to be in fewer places, where it matters, rather than everywhere at once.

Towards 'Better Communication'

Habermas and the Emancipative Potential of Supranational Dialogue

In theorising dialogue and discourse ethics in the EU context, one could do worse than engage with the work of German philosopher, public intellectual and social theorist Jürgen Habermas. In the pioneering work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, he outlines a systematic theory of discourse and deliberation based on a conceptual distinction between 'systems' and 'lifeworld' (Habermas 1984). The former denotes the economic and bureaucratic structures of modern states that are oriented towards the completion of functional tasks for society as whole. By contrast, the lifeworld embraces culture, society and personality – structural domains that are mediated through dialogic action and based on the necessity of achieving a consensus of mutual understanding on matters under consideration between participants. Based on the three claims to universal validity of the 'ideal speech situation', wherein what is said is propositionally true, normatively correct, and spoken with sincere intention, each should be able to justify their argument through rational reflection. Herein lies the 'universal pragmatics' of language and social behaviour.

Participants engaging in a dialogue, whether they be individuals, communities, or institutions of governance, are thus presupposed to be rational actors. Communicative rationality is a process 'oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus—and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims' (Habermas 1984, 17). The links drawn between discourse and rationality, as well as those between discourse and democracy (1992) provide a basis for Habermas's disciples and critics to analyse the idea of dialogue within an EU context. For Habermas, the EU represents a prototype for the achievement of democracy on a supranational scale. In his article 'Toward A Cosmopolitan Europe', he argues that 'discussions have to be synchronised within national public spheres that are networked across Europe – that is, conducted at the same time and on the same topics – so that a European civil society with interest groups, non-governmental organisations and citizens' initiatives can emerge' (Habermas 2003, 98). Social change aiming for human emancipation through the creation of a 'democratically constituted world society' is achieved by dialogue as a process of 'legitimation' (Habermas 2008). Dialogue between EU 'social partners' is said to be 'fundamental to the European social model; a means of both initiating and directing social reform, and of securing good governance' (Dukes et al. 2012, 20).

Ultimately, dialogue is a social practice that is seen as a vehicle for European integration: 'The long-term goal must be the steady overcoming of social division and stratification within a global society, but without damaging cultural distinctiveness' (Habermas 2003, 99). The EU's motto of 'united in diversity' encapsulates this vision

of integrating disparate social communities without erasing those qualities which render them mutually distinctive. Through the establishment of free and inclusive dialogic relations at the European level, citizens of an increasingly globalised world begin to gradually adopt the perspectives and understandings of their respective interlocutors. These multifarious perspectives coalesce to form a collectivised 'we-perspective' that becomes a standard against which heretofore foreign norms can be measured (Habermas 1995, 117). If they prove fit for purpose, they might become the basis of newly shared social practices. The integration project of 'ever closer union' among Europeans is thus a social, cultural, and cognitive process in addition to an economic and territorial one.

A Democratic Deficit

Enumerating the Commission's roles on the EU stage, informants often include one that is not in the treaties: the way it acts as a scapegoat. It is the primary target of 'Brussels-blaming', the whipping boy on whom the causes of crises that member states face may be pinned. In their communications with members of the public, national-level presidents and ministers have a habit of speaking highly of the institutions when in Brussels and speaking lowly of them once they return home. 'There's a lot of blame-shifting. National governments will use the European Commission maybe as a scapegoat for certain initiatives' (Marie-Christine). 'Brussels' has become a metonym for an oppressive political system which nations were tricked into joining and which tolerates little dissent. The 'democratic deficit' is a particularly strong criticism that signifies an overreach of power by EU institutions and a lack of participation and representation of citizens in the European project. 'A lot of Europeans don't think that European institutions are democratically legitimate institutions. It's a difficult situation. It's hard to try and show leadership because people might be questioning your authority.'

As the 'unelected technocrats' bemoaned from national capitals, officials readily acknowledge that no member of the College is directly elected by voters: 'The European Parliament is directly elected, and the Council has sort of indirectly elected members, so you have a strong democratic basis. I know that Commissioners are not elected politicians. They don't have to go back to the voters every four or five years' (Arnaud). The system may be not be perfectly democratic, but what is lost in terms of democratic legitimacy is gained in the form of accountability:

It's a good thing because when the policy is launched, they can keep busy on the agenda. Again, I'm profoundly democrat, but sometimes you need to have an institution or a body which reminds the newly elected government, 'Hey, you committed to achieving that.' For me, that is really the unique institutional feature of this architecture. And by the way, if you do a bit of comparative

politics and look at other regional entities, all of them failed because they did not have this inbuilt structure.

For Arnaud, the unelected nature and unaccountability of the Commission is not a bug but a feature of the system, a marker of its excellence as an executive. Keeping Commissioners in place for the long term allows them enough time to bring projects to completion, unhindered by political pressures arising from below. It also enables them to hold national administrations to the commitments they once made. Maintaining this state of affairs is what allows them to get on with their work without having to change jobs prematurely or devote their time to ensuring their re-election in the future.

Elfriede chairs 'Social Dialogues', where she engages different 'social partners': employers and unions of hairdressers, deep-sea fisherman, and representatives of 41 other sectors, soliciting their perspectives on the challenges in the economic and employment spheres. If the Commission cannot engage citizens directly, it does so indirectly via the various lobbying and interest groups around them:

As a slight compensation for the democratic deficit, we will talk to anybody. Anybody who comes to us to talk about education, culture or anything like that, they're fully entitled to talk to us. People elect themselves, appoint themselves to fill the gap, and that's part of what you see around Brussels in all the plethora of lobbyists and interest groups, which is second only to Washington in those terms. They are welcomed at the doors of the officials simply because, in the absence of clear democratic mediation of political signals, we will take anybody's ideas. We will dialogue with anybody. [Arnaud]

That he cites the lobbying culture in Brussels as an antidote to the deficit is interesting given how the industry in general is widely viewed as a barrier to democracy, symptomatic of an oligarchical, pay-to-play politics that works in the interests of the wealthy and the few.

It may well be a barrier, but it's also a sort of substitute for it. I think it's both things. It's not just Google and Microsoft who have lobbying offices here; it's Friends of the Earth (FOEI), the European Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA-Europe), everything. All of human life is in this town.

Not all officials are as sanguine as Arnaud about the 'instinct to repoliticise the College and the institution and give himself and other Commissioners political visibility'. 'Quite frankly, it was a PR move', says Jörg. 'By now, it's all about PR. I'm afraid of this marketing slogan. There is a place for politics, but law enforcement should not be politicised.' As an institutional rebranding exercise, it is a talking point that is trotted out in press releases each week, providing a 'media hook' with which politicians at

the national level can engage their constituents. For Jörg, these techniques of public relations are effectual in achieving institutional visibility but do not go far enough. As solutions to the deficit, they are more cosmetic than invasive, more symbolic than real, amounting to a minor tweak to a profound flaw and therefore little more than empty gestures. They do not make the institutions *democratic* and *political*; they merely succeed in making them *more democratic* and *more political* than they were before.

Absence of demos

Collective identifications with and belongings to a shared community of citizens, such that 'in the minds of each lives the image of their communion', is a critical source of legitimacy for democratic institutions of governance (Anderson 2006). Social identities are generated from multifarious sites and subjectivities, but they are championed and disseminated foremost from institutional power centres in capital cities. Self-consciously engineered to engender supranational identities, the EU executive is an institutional locus for the production of European identity and belonging. The Commission exists as 'a site of identification for a continentally dispersed supranational community' (Bellier 2000).

Identity was a predetermined ethnographic category for this study, though in the field the topic was very much in the air. Looking back over 2015, the New York Times pronounced it 'the year we obsessed over identity' (Morris 2015), while the website Dictionary.com (2015) awarded the term its Word of the Year. When President Juncker announced that his would be a 'last-chance Commission', he would go on to clarify that it was its last chance 'to regain public trust'. 'Our European Union is,' he said, 'at least in part, in an existential crisis'. The official diagnosis of the crisis paid lip service to matters of identity: 'I am convinced that the European way of life is something worth preserving. I have the impression that many [Europeans] seem to have forgotten what being European means' (Juncker 2016, 6). Vice President Timmermans went some distance further: 'We have fallen into the trap of identity politics. If the driving force of the European construction is national, cultural or ethnic identity, then it will not survive' (Lefranc 2016). These sentiments are ones to which Commission officials largely subscribe – namely, that European social identity as a mode of self-recognition and belonging is integral to the health, vitality and longevity of the European project.

Underlying the democratic deficit is a perception that the EU is undemocratic in the way that it is a democracy that lacks a coherent and identifiable European demos or populace. 'People need to take ownership of the European Union. It's the European citizens that are Europe. We need to make people understand that it's not that the European Union is in Brussels for some institution, it's them' (Isla). 'There's usually no problem in getting people to feel European if they're somewhere in another continent, that's fine. But feeling European, feeling a supranational identity when they are at

home, that's more difficult' (Olivia). Embracing the idea of Europe as a mode of self-recognition and belonging can prove to be a challenging prospect within national and local contexts where lingering attachments to nations and nationness endure. 'People probably feel that the most important aspect of their identity is their national identity. It's definitely the case. You're concerned about people in your home and in your own country more than others. So, it's national interest; it's "your country, your people"' (Marie-Christine). Sixty years after Europe began its inexorable march towards 'ever closer union', a shared, pan-European demos remains conspicuously absent.

The nonexistence of a European demos is attributed in part to the nonexistence of a European public square, an open forum where dialogue among different members of an imagined community can take place above and across national borders. Media outlets covering the day-to-day developments in Brussels reach limited audiences, while national media foreground domestic issues and debates.

As long as the first pages of the newspaper, and as long as the first minutes of the TV news will still massively be dedicated to domestic issues, you can say there is no such thing as a European demos. That's what it boils down to. That's to say, a space where genuine European issues are discussed, taking into account the European dimension of it, for what it is. [Arnaud]

When the European dimension is accounted for, reports in national broadsheets confine themselves to dry, technical analyses of legislative proposals or reiterate 'another boring press release'. As a result, 'miscommunications, misunderstandings' ensue, and 'to the extent that [citizens] engage with politics, they engage with it at a national level.' Indeed, voter participation in European elections, currently at an all-time low of 43%, has decreased consistently after reaching its peak in 1979. The crises on which the College fixates remain meaningless to most members of the public. 'If it were a real problem in the minds of ordinary Europeans, surely there'd be some grassroots campaign. There is no groundswell opinion. It's not something people talk about.' The conditions under which national institutions dominate debates on the 'EU issue' preclude the establishment of direct channels of communication between EU institutions and EU citizens, a silence that perpetuates these conditions in turn. There is no supranational, Eurocentric news broadcast available for widespread consumption.

There is likewise a temporal issue with the European Semester cycle. 'The European timeline is totally at odds with the communication timeline', Eloise says. Those in the DG for Communication get in at 06:00h every morning to prepare the briefing in time for the noonday press conference. If a proposal for a new policy has been adopted, this will get a mention. By the time the policy is fully implemented and 'made real', most citizens will have forgotten all about the announcement, if they had

ever heard about it in the first place.

On the news this morning, I heard a journalist say, 'Yes, the Commission adopted a regulation' and, 'the Commission condemned this and that company.' No, it cannot do that. This is the wrong word. We adopt a proposal, the proposal gets negotiated, then it gets adopted, then it gets transposed and then it becomes real for people. Before it actually does something to the people, you may have five years, six years. So, nobody communicates because it's impossible.

The European Semester cycle clashes with more internal day-to-day rhythms that obstruct the institution's ability to represent itself and its actions to the outside world. 'There's this mismatch between the work we're producing and people seeing the need for this work to be done. We come up with something and we haven't really explained to people what the problem was in the first place' (Maja). As a result, citizens remain oblivious to the concrete achievements or 'added value' of the Commission's work. 'If they don't see it as necessarily adding value, it's more difficult for this idea to sink in' (Olivia).

The absence of a European demos centres around an emotive and moral question rather than one that the logics of economic self-interest would demand. To address the felt 'lack of connection' with citizens, officials feel it is incumbent on them to communicate 'the EU vision'. Such a vision transcends the economic concerns of the concrete, reaching something nearer the spiritual. 'The economic union? But it's more than just that,' Marie-Christine assures me. In formulating their orientations to the EU, 'people will use economic reasoning – people often use economic arguments, actually. But it's a shame that you have to use economic ones.' Arguments which invoke 'not the Europe of institutions and rules, but the Europe of the peoples at a human level' are 'actually incredibly important in my eyes, but don't work so well because people don't feel them.' It is loyalty that is at the heart of the appeal of Europe's new populism: 'What populists promise their voters is not competence but intimacy' (Krastev 2017, 91). As Delors lamented, 'You don't fall in love with a common market; you need something else' (Laffan 1996, 95). The Commission's efforts to produce a demos from above are inadequate because they are 'artificial'. 'You can't try and make someone feel emotional about something they don't feel [themselves]' (Marie-Christine). Lacking in the salience and tangibility that nationalisms traditionally enjoy, identifications with Europe as a sociopolitical entity tend to come across, even to those who hold them most passionately, as comparatively more rhetorical and abstract in character. Invocations of a distinct, continental, pan-European demos are relatively shallow, inflated and superficial things: more cerebral than bodily, more thought than felt, more imagined than real and irrelevant to the concerns of citizens.

The Invisibility Crisis

The institutions that organise societies make considerable efforts to define their identities in ways that reimagine the bonds of belonging that hold themselves together and the boundaries that distinguish themselves from other institutions. By formulating and formalising in basic terms a coherent identity that is distinctive and delimited, social organisations reproduce narratives explicating the reason for their initial coming into being and the purpose of their continued existence in the present. The EU is a 'soft, ideational power' that uses its visibility to exhibit and promote its ideas and initiatives. 'Soft power' has been understood as the power to get what you want through methods of attraction and persuasion, as opposed to those of fiscal or military coercion (Nye Jr 2008). The Commission's political dimension emphasises public diplomacy through soft power projects such as allocating resources for international aid and 'strategic communication' projects. These social and symbolic 'technologies of legitimation' (Biegon 2017; Calligaro 2015) seek to establish what Geertz (2015), in a religious context, described as 'powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations', ones imbued 'with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic'. The concurrent and interrelated crises of democracy, legitimacy and visibility in the European Union intersect at the inability of institutional Europe to define a coherent and viable identity for itself.

There have been several attempts by the European Commission to carve out a supranational identity that is delimited yet inclusive of all citizens within its dominion (European Community 1973). *A Soul for Europe* (2006), the *Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe* (2004), and *A New Narrative for Europe* (2013) were attempts led by the previous Commission 'to define this philosophical basis for looking at Europe in a new way' and 'articulate what Europe stands for today and tomorrow' through 'the encounter between European policy makers and artists' (Battista et al. 2014). These projects aimed to 'discover or to reveal a soul for Europe' (Feargal). Soul-searching was carried out during workshops where 'cultural authorities' convened to construct narratives that 'revive a European spirit through art and science' (Battista et al. 2014). The campaign gathered much publicity that included 'many nice moments on podiums'. However, its ability to 'bring Europe closer to its citizens' was overshadowed by louder criticisms coming from other areas of the creative industry concerning negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership:

It came a cropper really when the whole culture world hated the proposals for the TTIP [Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership]. There were particular French filmmakers who felt that this was going to collapse the ability of a country like France to subsidise its film industry and were absolutely vehement in denouncing that. Barroso was left not quite standing on a stage all his own as all the intellectuals deserted him. (Feargal)

Within the scope of the New Narrative actions, the Commission organises events at BOZAR, the modern art gallery in Brussels. One of these productions, organised in the context of the Dutch Presidency, was entitled 'Imagine Europe: In Search of New Narratives'. Artists, scientists and other members of the intelligentsia were tasked with performing a re-examination of the EU story, bearing in mind the complications of the present circumstances, in a timely and imaginative fashion. Between the presentations and panel discussions, audiences were invited to explore an exhibit titled 'Images for Europe', a series of 12 large statements printed on 12 large posters. For one entry, architects Max Cohen de Lara and David Mulder van der Vegt write how 'the Justus Lipsius building embodies the problem of an invisible Europe. A Europe seen as governing technocratically behind closed doors, only emerging to soothe yet another crisis' (European Commission 2014a). As an EU institutional space, the building symbolises a 'power that nobody knows'.

Central to the political turn is a concern with institutional visibility. The Commission is not simply 'more political', it is 'more visibly political' (Arnaud). A visibly political commission is one which presents and represents itself more effectively to public audiences. Officials are supportive of initiatives that seek to increase the visibility of the EU through 'being there' and fostering direct, personal engagement to become 'closer to the realities on the ground'. Working on behalf of 500 million people rather than any single local constituency at any one time has meant that Commissioners have traditionally had only infrequent contact with European citizens. Initiatives promoting 'better communication' call on the institutions to 're-engag[e] with the general public'. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), which facilitates the involvement of civil society in EU decision-making, has been a formative strategy of legitimation for EU institutions. Until the late 1990s, the Commission set the agenda during interactions with such organisations. The innovation of the ECI is that such actors are now permitted to set the agenda during these dialogues themselves. A report, titled 'Reaching out to EU Citizens – Seizing the Opportunity', calls on institutions to adapt to the digital transition by diversifying their presence across a wider array of forums (Van den Brande 2017). On Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms, official communications inundate followers with posts and tweets 'with more graphics, images and numbers on them' (Jörg). Each member of the College maintains his or her own personal account, which they use to promote their portfolios, congratulate the winners of elections, send thoughts and prayers to victims and share group photos taken at the end of meetings.

As Europe is conceived as an amorphous entity, an unfinished project perpetually coming into being, European identities tend to be more abstract in character than are identifications with nations and regions rooted in blood and soil. 'I do think there's such a thing as European identity. But it's a weaker identity than your national identity

because it's more abstract. It doesn't have the strength of a structure like the nation state' (Bram). This is the case even in the mind of the most 'convinced European' and is especially so in that of the generic EU citizen, for whom the idea of Europe appears 'far away' and 'less obvious'. The phrase 'convinced European' betrays such an abstractness, suggesting that European identity is a set of rhetorics that requires an effort of persuasion (Carrithers 2005). 'It's difficult to jump to something that is immaterial—as the European Union is. If you have to jump to the European level, it becomes quite abstract and much more complex. So it's not evident to the normal citizen' (Diego). Becoming European 'normally' requires a bit of a 'jump', a conscientious effort. The identity lacks concrete reference points for anchoring itself to—a language, a history, visual symbols, a sovereign government and a territory with discrete borders: 'If you want to build identity, you have to build identity around something' (Stefan).

The problem of how to better engage citizens with the European project is made all the more intractable in light of its elite-driven and top-down origins. Its success has been 'something we owe in large measure to the boldness and breadth of vision of a handful of men' (Monnet 1978, 525). Since the beginning, it has proceeded by 'permissive consensus': decisions are made by the stroke of the pens of these 'Wise Men' and citizens are notified about them afterwards. In October of 2016, I was sitting in the audience of a crowded theatre when I heard Vice President Timmermans speak of a need to 'recreate a feeling of European citizenship' on the continent. He felt, however, that

this is not something the Commission should do... Many modern European states were created by precisely this kind of top-down campaign – think of the unification of Italy or Germany in the nineteenth century, or the resurrection of Poland after World War I. And yet, the Eurosceptics there still think of their national governments to be more democratic.

Officials in the permanent administration share his reticence about being the mediator of a European sense of belonging: 'I don't think it's something that can be top-down. People either develop it in their own mind or they don't' (Olivia). A European demos must originate organically, so to speak, from the bottom up, when 'people all over Europe see the value added that the EU can provide in the very concrete things. If one doesn't have that, then the more spiritual thing will not fly either' (Morgan).

Perhaps Europe is so close in proximity to citizens that it appears out of focus and banal:

People see Europe as probably a good thing after all, and they forget about this – which means that at the end of the day, they don't care about Europe. I think there is a European demos, but most people don't even realise it. Maybe

we take things for granted and can't see the positive aspects of everything that's been done in Europe. (Marie-Christine).

Such an assertion raises the question of whether or not it is possible to identify and belong to a community without ever noticing it. Any community in which this is possible must be barely visible indeed. Because it is beautiful, the reality of the EU's invisibility as expressed here contains an element of tragedy: 'A near borderless Europe at peace constitutes the great achievement of the second half of the twentieth century. That you can go from Germany to Poland across a frontier near effaced and scarcely imagine the millions slaughtered seven decades ago is testament to the accomplishment. The European Union is the dullest miracle on earth' (Cohen 2015). Beauty that goes unseen is beauty that is wasted and without value.

Conclusion

The repoliticisation of the EU executive under Juncker, with its discourse of 'more democracy, transparency and efficiency', constitutes part of a set of efforts by the European Commission to refashion its image in the face of a crisis of legitimacy within EU institutions, one which is itself linked to weak levels of identification with them among citizens. Such exercises in institutional rebranding aim to redress the balance in the political-technocratic dialectic in order to counteract an image of the EU civil service as one staffed by unelected technocrats. 'The biggest criticism everyone has of the EU is that it's about processes, that it's about some faceless bureaucracy. You have to confront that stuff, not run away until something like Brexit blows up in your face' (Jörg). Instead, Commission officials are politicians who operate in a way that delivers concrete results that have relevance to the lives of EU citizens. The self-politicisation is as such a kind of self-humanisation: to be political in this context is to be more humanlike and less technocratic. Contrary to an 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson 1990), the EU civil service is composed of 'political people'. In its retreat from the minutiae of everyday life and its commitment to taking stronger and more engaged positions on 'the big things', the political turn reaffirms the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational, imagined community of Europeans who feel they benefit from and belong to it.

This paper has explored some of the challenges faced by the EU as an emerging institution of governance and evaluated the strengths and limitations of the potential for dialogue in this context. Notwithstanding its capacity to create real social change (Habermas 2003), dialogue alone cannot be relied upon as a mechanism to overcome the democratic deficit and the practical steps toward a way forward remain unclear. Indeed, an important distinction must be maintained between communication – as a tool with which institutions of governance communicate with stakeholders – and dialogue as conceived by Habermas: a non-coercive process that allows for

negotiation and aims for the growth of mutual understanding between partners. Commission officials seek to fill the dialogical spaces currently occupied by populist voices in order to reaffirm the legitimacy underpinning the existence of the EU and of a supranational community of Europeans who identify with and belong to it. In doing so, it highlights the importance of taking seriously what European civil servants think and say about themselves in their attempts to connect with citizens where it matters. Its findings suggest that the problem of engaging and achieving 'better communication' with citizens is exacerbated by the Commission's image as a soulless and faceless bureaucracy that trespasses on the minutiae of domestic affairs. Officials feel that such an image profoundly restricts the institution's capacity to define itself in a way that that is inclusive, coherent, compelling and distinct. As a result, the EU asserts its identity only in terms that are broad enough to encompass all the varieties of social and linguistic life into a single supranational rubric. The resulting identity stretches itself too thin and falls apart in its efforts to elide difference and combine unlike with unlike. The absence of EU identity thus inhibits the establishment of platforms for transnational dialogue between institutions and citizens, and the absence of such direct channels of communication, in turn, obviates the formulation of a dialogical EU identity.

In a shrinking, interconnected world of mass migration and democratised information and communications technologies, dialogue spills over national borders. Social anthropological approaches are well-suited to tackling issues surrounding communication and persuasion that are too steeped in the entanglements of lived social realities to be solved by facile technical solutions. Applications of the micro-social methodology and specialism of anthropology to EU institutions speaks to the relationships human beings have with the institutions that organise our societies. It likewise concerns the modes of belonging that connect individuals to the communities of which they are members and the boundaries constructed to separate the foreign and familiar from the near and dear.

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