

European interview

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# «Engaging in politics is a source of risk for the Commission. But it has become inevitable».

Interview with Frédéric Mérand (PhD), scientific director of CÉRIUM and professor of political science at the University of Montreal. Author of "[The Political Commissioner - A European Ethnography](#)"

**The European Union is a unique system, neither an international organisation nor a federal state. How did a Canadian sociologist become interested in the inner workings of the European Commission?**

I did my thesis in the US on the European Union at a time, at the turn century, when there was a great deal of excitement about Europe, when many people saw it as the beginning of a federation or a superstate. Most of the leading political scientists writing about the Union were based in American universities. One of them, George Ross, had written a few years earlier what has become a classic, "[Jacques Delors and European integration](#)", based on a one-year ethnographic exploration in Delors' cabinet. It was something that I wanted to repeat and my request was welcomed by Commissioner Pierre Moscovici. From 2015 to 2019, twice a year and for two to three weeks each time, I worked in his team for the duration of the tenure to observe and understand the difference between the initial ambitions and the final results.

**The aim of your book is to «explore the political rationale that govern the Union and through the Commission to understand how issues become political». Should the Commission be political?**

Initially, I wanted to see how public policies are developed within a supranational institution. But it so happened that I was there at the beginning of the Commission chaired by Jean-Claude Juncker, when everyone, to my great astonishment, was talking

about a 'political Commission', without necessarily giving it the same meaning. Ultimately, the book is about this experience of a political Commission and, more broadly, about what I call 'political work', because I followed a Commissioner who, unlike many of his colleagues, was not at all embarrassed to say that he was doing politics and that he was a politician. I wanted to see how this institution, which was not programmed to do so, which in principle oscillates between its duty of independence, of guardian of the treaties and of defence of the general interest, and which moreover many Member States see as their Secretariat, could do politics in the most traditional sense of the word, namely take sides and make choices according to values and ideology.

**So, at the end of the day, was the 'Juncker Commission' political?**

Yes, definitely! In 2006, there was a debate between two leading academics, Simon Hix and Stefano Bartolini, on whether the European Union should be politicised. The first answered in the affirmative because, he recalled, the European Union creates winners and losers and must assume this. The second judged that this was dangerous and that it was better to favour Swiss-style consensual formulas. Jean-Claude Juncker took Simon Hix's side, stating: «*we are a political Commission, so we will behave like a government*». Cautious in nature, he never wanted to assume the partisan side, but for the rest he led a political Commission, which made choices and proposed projects that carried certain values. In the

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case of Greece, this meant that political leaders, not civil servants, would take charge of the dossier, assume the consequences and, if necessary, take decisions that deviated a little, or even a lot, from the commitments made in the framework of the programme decided by the Eurogroup. Regarding the Stability and Growth Pact, Jean-Claude Juncker and Pierre Moscovici were very free, refusing to impose automatic sanctions on States that did not respect the rules. On taxation, it is essentially a progressive agenda that was pursued. Traditionally, the Commission is seen as the one that takes the most federalist view and looks to increase its powers. But in this case, it was not a question of being for or against Europe, but of a debate on classical ideas, on equality, freedom and the environment. The Commission represents a compromise between the left and the right, between strong partisan opinions expressed in the College of Commissioners and the Parliament. So, yes, this is politics, but not in the French, but rather more the German style.

#### **But isn't the Commission actually departing from its role by doing this?**

Engaging in politics is a source of risk, of danger even, for the Commission. But it has become unavoidable, mainly because of the European Parliament, which is elected by direct universal suffrage, and which until 2019 was structured around a left/right axis and enjoys the status of co-legislator. This Parliament has no equivalent in any international organisation. In view of this, there are two possible responses. Some would like to turn back the clock, on the grounds that the European treaties are a kind of superior normative structure, dominating politics; this is a very «post-1945 Germany» view in which the Basic Law is, in some respects, more important than the government. Others, many in France, believe that the Commission should be a technocratic instrument at the service of the Member States and that the real decision-makers are the heads of State and government. The Commission risks undermining its own credibility if it takes sides between countries that are not all of the same political colour. But I think it has no choice. And if the idea is that only the heads of State and

Government have political responsibility because they are elected by their people, then we should scrap the European elections!

#### **Commission President Ursula von der Leyen wants «a geopolitical» Commission, focused on the goal of shaping a role for Europe in the world». Does this ambition signal the end or the continuation of the Political Commission through other means?**

Ursula von der Leyen declared from the outset that she wanted a 'geopolitical Commission', probably because she had a different view of the world from her predecessor. It also reflected an objective situation; when she arrived in Brussels, a small majority in the European Parliament endorsed her and the two major parties, the EPP and S&D, were no longer sufficient to constitute a majority on their own. In this context, it is tempting to say that the world faces challenges, that there are issues such as climate change, Russia or China, which call for a top-down approach through geopolitics. But the pandemic has turned this agenda on its head. What the Commission has been doing since March 2020, namely massive economic redistribution plans, plans to organise the production and distribution of vaccines, is not geopolitics, it is politics, in the strictest sense of the word.

#### **What might be expected once the health crisis is over?**

Jean-Claude Juncker and Pierre Moscovici certainly had the political will. Whether Ursula von der Leyen has any, I do not know. It is not impossible that, in a year or two when the situation has stabilised, her Commission will resemble that led by Barroso, one that is a little calmer, established on a folding seat, where it will wait to see what the States want to do, without taking a position. But again, the general trend is that the Commission has to get involved in politics. And during the pandemic, the Commission played a real role, took a real place, whereas in crisis situations, the Council is generally tempted to take control of operations. The Commission is emerging from this situation rather stronger, and it will now

have to deal with many problems, which is a way of saying that it will have to engage in politics.

**Jean-Claude Juncker was a Spitzenkandidat, unlike Ursula von der Leyen, who was chosen by the European Council alone. Is the 'lead candidate' system a good or bad thing?**

This is clearly a democratic step forward and I do not understand the criticism levelled at it. Firstly, it is said that it gives priority to the EPP, which has often come out ahead. But there is nothing wrong with that: in proportional systems, the winning party is generally responsible for forming a coalition, even if it means handing over the reins if it does not succeed. Other more fundamental criticism suggests that the European Parliament is poorly elected; the idea that a 50% turnout is too low to justify a system of representation is strange. However, this criticism works because Member States did not like the fact that Jean-Claude Juncker claimed democratic legitimacy during his mandate. But I think that Europeans should eventually return to the Spitzenkandidat system. I am aware that the European Union is neither a federation nor a State. But it seems to me, if you are a democrat, that you have to accept that the Parliament should have a greater say than the heads of State and government, even if a compromise has to be found between the two.

**The European institutions are often criticised for not being democratic enough. Do you share this view?**

I am much less critical of this than most Europeans. The European institutions are, in formal terms, extraordinarily democratic, if you judge by criteria such as transparency, accountability or the power of the Parliament over the executive! The problem is that voters are not interested in them, so there is a gap between them and what happens in Brussels. It is obvious that Europe will not succeed, as a federalist illusion would have it, in creating a European political space equal to the national political sphere in which everyone knows the leaders and where the political theatre is institutionalised. But if the idea is to have 27

states and 24 languages living side by side in a more democratic system than the one we know in any other international organisation, the current system does not work so badly. There is room for improvement, but these things take time. However, we must be careful not to raise false hopes, not to engage in false democratisation, in which weakened institutions would be laid bare, in which the Commission would be directly elected by the States, where issues in which the European Union has no competence would be politicised. Democratisation should not be achieved at the cost of a form of political impotence.

**So, can we talk about a «European political space»?**

The question is an open one. This political space is greater than we think. Take the left/right divide, for example. It is true that being on the left, or the right, does not mean the same thing in Poland or in Spain, but it is still easier for a Pole and a Spaniard to understand this than it is for a Spaniard and a Peruvian, an American or, even more so, a Chinese or an Indian. In Europe's long history, there have been major differences, but today there are democratic systems that are quite similar if we compare them to the rest of the planet, with a vocabulary, with political imaginations that are not so different from each other.

**What do you think about the dynamics of European policy-making?**

This is what one of my counterparts called «sausage making»! Without any sycophancy, I was impressed and surprised by the extreme competence of the people I met in the Commission. I expected to meet people who were both more ambitious and more cynical. However, whether in the Directorates-General or in the cabinets, they are interested in the substance of the issues, have values, professional ethics and ideals. As for the way things work, there is a tendency to think that the ideas come from the administration and that the Commissioner is there to promote them. But I have observed a fairly strong desire on the part of the President, the Commissioners, and their cabinets, to drive the political direction themselves.

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This is the logic behind the ten priorities set out by Jean-Claude Juncker on his arrival, a way of saying «we choose the programme and the administration will follow». The result is a balance between the two.

**The recovery plan, with its joint loan, seems to mark the success of what you call the «solidarity of ideas». But does it herald lasting change?**

It would of course be going too far to say that Jean-Claude Juncker and Pierre Moscovici were soothsayers and had seen things coming. On the reform of the euro zone, between 2015 and 2019, it was even a total failure, they had to backtrack a lot from their initial ambitions, even the most reasonable ones. But behind this failure, there was a huge amount of intellectual and political work that made things a bit easier, if only conceptually, when the time came to implement the common debt and the recovery plan. When you face a crisis, you look for options that already exist. Today, the question of renewing this debt, of raising a form of European tax, has emerged, whereas before this had been completely ruled out in decision-making circles. This development is truly astonishing!

**But the CDU and its candidate for the Chancellery, Armin Laschet, insist in their electoral programme on the unique character of this common debt...**

I find it hard to imagine that a government headed by a far-right leader would be able to convince the one that might be headed by Armin Laschet to issue new public debts for a European solidarity plan; since this scenario is not impossible, it cannot be said that things are irreversible. So, I am not saying that the pandemic has created a paradigm shift or a ratchet effect that makes it impossible to turn back. But, on the one hand, a precedent has now been set, it has been shown that it is possible to go into debt together and that this does not lead to disaster; on the other hand, this debt will have to be managed for many years and there will therefore be long discussions.

**Political Europe has long been synonymous with more Europe, but as crises unfold, it could also**

**mean less Europe. At the time of the Conference on the future of Europe, what dynamics can we expect?**

Europe has long been thought of as a progressive project, synonymous with political and economic liberalisation, even if the Americans -wrongly - see it as a protectionist bloc, and it is very difficult to admit that there is another conservative and Christian conception of Europe. However, we are seeing a conversion of conservatives and even reactionaries to the European idea, but their Europe is fundamentally different from the one promoted by Angela Merkel for example. It is a Europe of borders, a Europe of traditions, in which the nations play an important role. This is not a discourse that is hostile to the European Union as an organisation, but to some of the policies it pursues. What is emerging is a Union in which the contestation of Europe is weaker than one might have thought, but in which two alternative views of the European project will clash. This means that the European political debate, its centre of gravity, is likely to become much more conservative as you integrate positions that were previously considered unacceptable or anti-European.

**What is the vision of Europe across the Atlantic?**

As for the general climate, there is both sympathy for Europe as a continent and a great lack of understanding of the European Union. And behind all this, there is this idea that Europe represents the past, that it cannot do anything good, except perhaps on climate change. In terms of political leaders, I would say there is a big left/right divide. The Conservatives in Canada and the Republicans in the United States are suspicious of Europe but like some of its Member States, whereas Joe Biden or Justin Trudeau are, like their parties, in favour of the European Union, which is generally their ally on the major issues they defend. There is a great affinity among the latter, but this is counterbalanced by their desire to devote more resources to Asia. Finally, there has been a change among young people who are concerned about the post-colonial question. When I talk to my students about European or EU countries, negative images quite spontaneously come

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to mind, for example France in sub-Saharan Africa or others. Then, when we go into detail, they discover that the European Union has established cooperation mechanisms to fight against climate change that are much more ambitious and work better than ours, or when we talk to them about internal migration and Schengen, they realise that in Europe the possibility of moving around is much greater than in North America.

They then discover that Europe is an interesting laboratory for democracy and cohabitation between peoples, for the ability to tackle global issues, but the first reaction is to see it as «an imperialist continent in decline».

*Interview realised by Isabelle Marchais*

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