



Introduction:

Locating Europe. Narrating Ideas of Europe

*Political lives fascinate many people. Political biography as an area of research is however both cherished and contested. While most political biographical research is framed by the national, and written for a national audience, new challenges arise when the historian is dealing with historical figures who act outside the national framework. Europe, as a battleground for ideas and political projects in the 20th Century, is a good example of this. The five original articles in this volume of *Kontur* are grouped under the title "Locating Europe. Narrating Ideas of Europe" as they aim to show new ways in which political biographical research can be presented.*

By Ann-Christina L. Knudsen and Karen Gram-Skjoldager

Browsing through the shelves of the humanities or politics sections of any sizable bookstore in Europe or North America, it soon becomes apparent that biographies of political figures and thinkers enjoy wide popularity. Academics compete in this market with journalists and other writers, blurring the boundaries between professions, as well as between fact and fiction. This became obvious for instance with the scandal surrounding the American historian Stephen Ambrose, who had written voluminous biographies of several presidents of the United States, and whose books were so popular that he managed to get publishers' advances of more than \$ 1 million per book (Kilpatrick, 2009). When it was discovered that Ambrose had been plagiarising texts written by other authors without authorisation or quotation, his critics - many of them academics who had never reached the lucrative sales figures that Ambrose had - soon jumped at the opportunity to discredit Ambrose's work not only for plagiarism, but also for the lack of (cross-) disciplinary ambition.

The Ambrose scandal thus also highlighted another debate among historians and others involved in political biographical research, namely, to put it bluntly, what the point of the exercise is, and whether it has any relevance in an innovative academic environment. Political biographies orchestrate the lives of prominent men and women, usually in an attempt to show how the public persona came to be. The reader will find heroes, anti-heroes, villains, friends and foes, plots, failures and successes. Political biographies thus often employ a narrative structure and dramaturgy that resemble the romantic novel. Scholars who depart in a structuralist reading of history and society in particular have had little time or respect for biographies (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986). They argue that it compromises systematic theoretical considerations in its eagerness to establish a chronological order and familiarity in the story. Further, structural approaches in an absolute form -

whether of a social history or linguistic turn cultural history variety - rejects the significance of the individual as historical agent (Fabricius Møller 2009; Nasaw 2009). The social world is more complex, and does not necessarily conform to the linear, progressive narrative that the traditional biography tries to establish.

In this light, it was interesting to note that the *American Historical Review* - a top-ranking journal that has been strongly influenced by (post-)structuralist scholars - in June 2009 ran a theme on biographical historical research. Here, David Nasaw, the special issue editor, made a strong case for the continued relevance of the biographical genre. One of his arguments pertained to the popular appeal of biography as a genre capable of "...rendering the past more human, more vivid, more intimate, more accessible, more connected to ourselves".¹ But he also claimed that writing history from the vantage point of the individual could serve as a way of confronting - rather than escaping from - the theoretical complexities of contemporary history. The strength of biographical studies, so Nasaw argued, lies in their interest in - and capability of - envisioning the worlds of their subjects as they perceived these and made them meaningful. This, he claims, does not grant the historical individual autonomy to signify and act in the world at random. While viewing the world from the perspectives of the historical actors they are dealing with, historians must also look beyond the focus of these actors and explore the meanings and possibilities they did not recognise and pursue (Nasaw, 2009:575).

In this volume of *Kontur*, we share the interests in the biography as a genre for historical and interdisciplinary research laid out by the *American Historical Journal*, but also want to go a step further in investigating the biographical genre. This endeavour began as a discussion among the editors several years ago about the role in

¹ Schlesinger, A. quoted in Nasaw, 2009: 575.



biographical research of transnational behaviour and international political ideas (also Knudsen, 2009; Gram-Skjoldager, 2010). Political figures are typically understood in the framework of the national, and political biographies are consequently often written for a national audience. To make the story intelligible to this audience, the author tends to weave the person's life into a dominant national narrative. Foreign elements of the historical individual's life are often marginalised or 'orientalised', and the national essentialised.

The study of political figures and their ideas of Europe in the twentieth century, and the dissemination of this research to an international audience (typically in English), is in many ways a good playground for exploring what historical research can do to overcome some of the typical problems of the biographical genre. Above all, historians have to apply a methodological and theoretical consciousness that goes beyond the progressive narrative of the classical national political biography. This is what the articles in this volume of *Kontur* in different ways aim to do.

Locating Europe

While scholars of several disciplines have been interested in the idea of Europe (e.g. Pagden, 2002), the contributors in this volume of *Kontur* work specifically with aspects of "locating" and "narrating" ideas of Europe in relation to biographical research. It is not the purpose here to try to define what "Europe" is, or to make a representative selection of biographies of people involved in the political process. Instead the articles demonstrate different disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches and they all in various ways speak to at least one debate among historians of European integration – a branch of history that traditionally has been interested in the establishment of European level political institutions in the post World War II period such as the European Union, and which for long has worked in dialogue especially with political scientists and political commentators.

That debate, in short, was begun when in 1992, a leading historian of European integration, Alan S. Milward, began a chapter called "The lives and teachings of the European saints" in his well-known book *The European Rescue of the Nation-State* in the following way:

"The historiography of European integration is dominated by legends of great men. Most histories emphasize the role of a small band of leading statesmen with a shared vision. For the Community's supporters they have become saints, men who hold fast to their faith in European unity and through the righteousness of their beliefs and the singlemindedness of their actions overcame the doubting faithlessness of the world around them. Monnet, Schuman and Spaak are honoured

above others in the calendar, although Adenauer and de Gasperi stand in almost equal rank. Their photographic icons decorate the walls of the Berlaymont building, while cheap coloured reproductions of the arch-saint Monnet adorn the desks of their faithful servants on earth." (Milward, 1992:281)

This parade of a standard set of political characters, according to Milward, was symptomatic for the framing of much of historical research, and all that was wrong with it: Jean Monnet was the high-ranking French civil servant and later president of the "supranational" High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community, and Robert Schuman, Paul-Henri Spaak, Konrad Adenauer, and Alcide de Gasperi were respectively French, Belgian, West German and Italian statesmen in the post-1945 period when the countries they governed decided to engage themselves in the process of building European political institutions. The Berlaymont building in Brussels is where the European Commission of the European Union has its headquarters, and has become a symbol to many of European "supranational" power and technocracy.

While the details of these people may be obscure to some readers of *Kontur*, one probably does not have to be an expert on European integration history to appreciate the cynical tone in which Milward's chapter began. He lashed out against the first generation of European integration historians, led by Walter Lipgens, who previously had argued that these men, and many others behind them, had all been informed in one way or other by a European federalist ideology when they began to speak in favour of the creation of the European Community (Lipgens, 1977). Their conviction, that a perpetual peace could be achieved in Europe, so Lipgens argued, had come as war and political extremism had swept the continent, and some of them had been imprisoned for their political beliefs. Milward did not believe that war had necessarily made *homo europeus* a better breed. Instead, Milward argued for an economic account of why the six European member states had decided to give up sovereignty after the Second World War, stressing how they believed it would bring tangible, economic benefits to their national constituencies. With Milward's assault, biographical accounts of European integration history, as well as the role of political ideas of Europe, fell out of fashion in mainstream European integration history research for a while.

A systematic interest in political agents was brought in again by historian Wolfram Kaiser who studied the role of transnational political networks in European integration history. He called for bringing "transnationally connected people and ideas back into the history of European integration" (Kaiser, 2007:11), and linked this



research project more systematically to political science concepts of networks. Other scholars inspired by sociological research followed suit (Cohen and Vauchez, 2007). The purpose of this edition of *Kontur* is to try to pick up some of these debates, and to start a conversation between scholars interested in biographical research and the study of Europe.

Narrating Ideas of Europe

The common denominator between the articles in this volume is their focus on European political individuals and their ideas of Europe, as well as on how they portrayed themselves and have been portrayed by historians and political observers. While biographies are often focused on one person, the biographical genre can easily be conceived much broader including the symbolic and mythological status that individuals can gain, as the articles in various ways show. Most of the contributions were presented by Ph.D. or Post-doctoral researchers at the international conference *Locating Europe. Ideas and Individuals in Contemporary History* that took place at Aarhus University in June 2008, and have since been thoroughly revised.

The first article of this issue by Christoffer Kølvrå (Aarhus University) on *Political Paternity and the Construction of Europe*, revisits the “Founding Fathers” as those who were originally the subject of Milward’s discontent with European integration history. Drawing on theories of social psychology by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Kølvrå demonstrates how the lives of this particular group of European politicians and bureaucrats have gained a mythological status. He also discusses what the function of the political rhetoric of the “Founding Fathers” has been in the establishment of a European “community”.

Sara Lamberti Moneta (University of Trento), in her contribution on *Hans-Dietrich Genscher: West Germany’s “slippery man”*, similarly draws inspiration from psycho-biographical approaches, as she explores the involvement of Genscher in European affairs in the 1970s by penetrating the shield surrounding his private sphere. An important theme raised by Lamberti Moneta in this context is the capability – and consequences – of European political actors’ attempts to maintain an interpretative monopoly over their own life stories.

That theme is continued by Laurent Warlouzet (University of Arras) on *Charles de Gaulle’s Idea of Europe. The Lasting Legacy*. However, Warlouzet approaches this question from a different point of departure and demonstrates how the charismatic and manipulative former French president played a crucial role in creating his own myth, and how this myth was first replicated and

consolidated in the national political context before making its way into international political and scholarly discourse. Warlouzet’s article thus also stresses the importance of considering how key European political figures are represented in historiography and political writings not only inside his own country, but also outside of it. Like Lamberti Moneta, Warlouzet also addresses the question of the monopoly of primary sources such as the fact that de Gaulle’s son maintains tight control with the documents produced by his father.

The last two articles of this issue, the contributions by Richard Brander (University of Helsinki) and Isabel Maria Freitas Valente (University of Coimbra), offer insights into two of the “outsiders” to the process of European integration. These figures would probably never have been placed in the hagiography alluded to by Milward because their countries were not formally members of the European Community at the time these figures were active. Based on multi-sited archival research, the articles scrutinise the life histories and ideological developments of the former Finnish Foreign Minister, Hjalmar Procopé, and the high-ranking Portuguese diplomat José Calvet de Magalhães. They each in their way show us how political figures on the margins of “Europe” were influenced by the ideas forwarded by early promoters of European unity such as Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and how these ideas came to frame and shape their professional careers. By taking a biographical approach they present us with valuable insights into some of the intellectual micro-dynamics of the European integration process and the writing of biographical accounts beyond the national framework.

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