European Integration in Anthropological Perspective: Studying the 'Culture' of the EU Civil Service

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Introduction: *The European Commission is typically portrayed as the 'civil service' of the European Union. However, its complex combination of executive, legislative, administrative and judicial powers and competencies make it unique among international bureaucracies. Unlike national civil services the Commission has policy-initiating powers and is centrally involved in EU decision-making at all levels. The Commission often defines itself as the 'heart of the Union', 'engine of integration' and 'custodian of the Treaties'. Created in the 1950s, it is still a young organisation; multilingual, transnational and 'supranational' in character, yet subject to constant change with each new enlargement. Within the EU a key debate hinges on the question of the Commission's uniqueness as a public administration and how to create a distinctly 'European' model of civil service. At the head of the Commission is the 'college' of 25 national-government appointed commissioners, each of whom overseas a particular policy area. The Commission's main headquarters are located in the Belgian capital of Brussels. At the time of fieldwork (1995-97) its staff numbered some 20,000 permanent officials spread over 24 Directorate-Generals ('DGs') and approximately 40 buildings mostly situated in the aptly named 'European Quarter' of the city. My study explored not only the effect of this cosmopolitan ex-patriot community on Belgian society but also the Commission's internal dynamics. Behind my empirical research lay a deeper theoretical question: to what extent do Europe's supranational institutions act as laboratories for creating a new type of European identity and subjectivity?*

‘Playing the Game’: Metaphors of European Integration

In the winter of 1984, shortly after completing my PhD in anthropology, I worked as a researcher (or ‘stagiaire’) for the European Parliament’s Research and Documentation Office in Luxembourg. Like many of my generation, I was interested in the ‘European idea’ and all that it stood for. Conventional wisdom held that the European Community was the living embodiment of the spirit of cooperation and ‘rapprochement’ that would make war in Europe unthinkable. Europe was building the architecture for a new political order that would ‘go beyond’ the nation-state and nationalism. But after three months in the job I had become increasingly puzzled by what that meant, how the workings of this remote outpost of European institutionalism related to those ideals, and what really motivated the staff who worked there. My landlord, a former clerk from the British House of Commons, was the Director General of one of the Parliament’s administrative divisions and paradoxically, as he informed me, an arch Eurosceptic. Driving to work through the Luxembourg snow one morning, he explained the European project: ‘What you have to understand, dear boy, is that the European Community is the outcome of French greed and German guilt.’ France, he explained, had ‘lost an empire and therefore needed somewhere else to send its young men’. The British, he added, were newcomers to the game – which was still run by the French.[1] In the same week I asked my Head of Unit (a middle-ranking Scottish official in his late 50s, and self-professed Euro-idealist) to explain his job to me. His answer was that drafting Community policies was ‘like a game of semantics’. ‘The aim’, he continued warming to his theme, ‘is to craft a resolution in such a way that it becomes acceptable to everyone - or at least enough MEPs to get it through Committee stage and then voted on in Strasbourg.’ Sometimes, he added wistfully, ‘you can

spend months, even years, working on a resolution that is then rejected or dropped at the final hurdle. That's the game; you have to get used to that'.

This was how two full time career officials (*fonctionnaires*) explained to me the 'rules of the game' as they saw it. The use of gaming metaphors might suggest that a 'rational choice', 'game theory' or even 'transactionalist approach' provides the most appropriate lens for analyzing the behavior of EU officials, or that policy-making might be conceptualized as a form of 'deep play' (Geertz 1973a) and competitive bargaining (I recall Britain's Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, famously describing Council of Ministers negotiations as 'like playing three-dimensional chess'). Alternatively, perhaps none of these theoretical lenses are appropriate: the 'game' metaphor might simply be the idiom used by local actors to make sense of their work and the challenges and frustrations it poses. As I learned later, the answer lay somewhere between these interpretations. EU officials did indeed see themselves as 'players' and 'agents', but in several parallel games with different sets of rules and rituals.

Studying the Culture(s) of Government Elites: Beyond Positivism

A central premise of this book is that traditional political science approaches to the study of top officials are inadequate for grasping the complexities and subtleties of everyday life inside government: that while positivist approaches may be useful in defining the normative frameworks and structural parameters within which decision-making and organizational behavior occurs, such detached, outsider/observer perspectives are remote from the actors involved and do little to help us understand the worlds of public officials as *meaningful* domains of social action. Put simply, traditional approaches based on quantitative methods,

behaviourist assumptions, formal surveys or rational-choice models tell us little about the qualitative dimensions of elite cultures, the webs of informal rules and social relations, or the insiders' perspectives that shape the worlds of top officials. Most anthropologists would agree with this argument, or at least the anti-positivist sentiment behind it.[2] Anthropology as a discipline is concerned with worlds of meaning and subjectivity; it is fundamentally humanistic and reflexive in its attempt to understand and deconstruct those realms of human experience and intentionality and the social actions that derive from them. As Malinowski (1965 [1922] p. 517) expressed it long ago, our aim is to understand what the world looks like from the 'native's point of view'; to grasp 'his outlook on things, his *Weltanschauung,* the breath of life and reality which he breathes and by which he lives.' That goal is as pertinent for the study of policy professionals in complex European bureaucracies as it is for villagers in the remote islands of Melanesia. However, where there is less agreement is in the problematic question of *how* we should study these policy elites and their worlds, and what theories or methods provide the most effective tools for analyzing the more intimate spaces of elite life?

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among EU civil servants in Brussels, this chapter explores some of the epistemological and methodological challenges that confront us when we try to study EU officials 'up close and personal'. More specifically, I examine how perspectives gleaned from symbolic anthropology (notably Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner) can help shed light on the character of the European Commission and its so-called 'organizational culture'. While qualitative researchers in political science have increasingly turned to Geertz's work for inspiration (Chabal and Daloz, 2006), I suggest that Turner's approach offers a more useful framework for analyzing elite cultures. My aim, however, is not to engage in introverted disciplinary debates over the relative merits of these two symbolic anthropologists. Rather, I

simply want to highlight the importance of going beyond semiotics and 'thick description' by focusing on performance, ritual process and boundary maintenance behaviour, themes central to Turner's work. Doing fieldwork in Brussels I discovered that elite life among European civil servants is highly ritualistic, performative, and concerned with boundaries (a fact reflected in the many turf wars for prestige and power between the different Directorates). EU officials, it seemed, were daily 'performing' European integration in a literal as well as metaphorical sense.

There is a wider context that should be mentioned here. Ever since the allegations of fraud and corruption that led to the resignation of the Santer Commission on 15 March 1999, the 'culture' of the Commission has become an issue of major importance for both EU scholars and policy-makers (Cini, 2001). A key question often raised is how do we explain the extraordinary levels of cronyism and mismanagement documented by the European Court of Auditors and the Committee of Independent Experts (CIE, 1999; Macmullan, 1999; Shore, 2005)? Even before the scandal of 1999, the Commission's 'organizational culture' had become a subject of considerable theoretical importance (Ludlow, 1992; Edwards and Spence, 1994; Page, 1997). For many integration theorists, the success of the EU's project hinges on its capacity to forge a new kind of European identity among its staff. The 'functional integration' of European officials and politicians within the EU's organizational milieu has long been seen as an essential ingredient for creating a distinctly *European* civil service (Mitrany, 1966). According to Monnet and Schuman, Europe's 'supranational' institutions would act as crucibles for creating a new type of European political subject. From the institution chrysalis of the High Authority would emerge *Homo Europaeus*, or so Monnet believed:[3] a creolized cadre of cosmopolitan of post-national professional Europeans who would do for Europe what the

pioneers of nationalism had done for the nation-state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The role that European institutions play in shaping consciousness and identity continues to be debated, but whether one subscribes to this theory or not, the EU's civil service can clearly be construed as a microcosm (and 'macrocosm') for the wider integration project (Peterson, 1997). The question of the Commission's 'culture' has understandably become a compelling concern for EU analysts and policy professionals. If Europe cannot achieve unity here at the 'heart of Europe', what hope is there of forging such unity beyond Brussels and among Europe's population at large? Do the social relations being forged within the EU's institutions offer glimpses of the possibilities (or limits) of European integration in general?

What is 'Symbolic Anthropology'? Why 'Thick Description' is not enough

Symbolic anthropology refers to a variety of different approaches the central theme of which is that 'culture' can be studied as a relatively autonomous entity, or a system of shared meanings that we attempt to unravel through the decoding and interpretation of key symbols and rituals (Ortner, 1973; Spencer, 1996). A second core assumption is that people's actions are guided by *interpretation* and 'understanding' (in the Max Weber sense of *verstehen*), and that people's beliefs, however incomprehensible, become unintelligible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning. While both Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner are recognized as the pioneers of symbolic anthropology, outside of anthropology Geertz's work enjoys far greater appeal and notoriety. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom; the quality of his writing and flamboyant style and his creative use of literary and philosophical conceits has gained him public recognition in a manner that few anthropologists since Malinowski or Mead have attained. Geertz also introduced a number of novel analytical concepts based on literary theory

and textual analysis, including ‘thick description’, ‘deep play’, the notions of culture as ‘webs of significance’ and ‘culture-as-text’, and what he claims is an ‘interpretive’ and ‘hermeneutic’ perspective achieved through a ‘restless oscillation between minutiae and generalization’, or ‘experience near’ and ‘experience far’ (Geertz, 1983).

Geertz’s approach, which he defines as ‘essentially a semiotic one’, aims at understanding a culture through the study of signs and their meanings. Most action, he argues, is symbolic in nature, or infused with symbolic meaning. For Geertz, a culture is not some kind of superorganic level of reality, nor is it something located ‘in the minds and hearts of men’ or in the invisible rules of language and taxonomies (Geertz 1973, p.11). Rather, it is the sum of all the different codes used to convey meaning within a particular group. These are the ‘webs of significance’ upon which all human experience is ‘suspended’ (Geertz 1973, p.5). The object of a study of meaning is to grasp not simply ‘the native’s point of view’, but rather the ‘interpretations to which people of a particular denomination subject their experience’ (1973, p.15). This is a subtle but important distinction. Geertz’s stance is less an attempt to understand how the world is seen as how it is ‘seen to be seen’. This idea is based on the acknowledgement that anthropological interpretations are inevitably at two or more degrees of separation from that which they interpret; i.e. *our* interpretations of *their* interpretations:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript - foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries (Geertz 1973, p.10).

While interpretive anthropology can provide wonderfully evocative accounts of public events and the symbolic worlds that people inhabit, its dependence on textual metaphors, literary devices and highly subjective interpretations leads to some major shortcoming in its theory of culture and in its representations of 'meaning'. Geertz's ethnographic accounts often blur into narrative fictions (Crapanzano, 1986) and his 'thick descriptions' are curiously 'thin' when it comes to portraying real individuals or representing himself. There is little genuine reflexivity in Geertz ethnography; just enough to establish the authenticity of the author's presence before he disappears from the narrative account. Interpretive anthropology claims to provide a window into the very 'ethos' of a cultural system; that what we observe in public rituals is the externalization of private sensibilities. But *whose* meanings are being portrayed in these interpretive accounts and who is to say that this is how the people themselves see or interpret their world (Schneider, 1987; Scholte, 1986)? How do we satisfy the demands for 'verification' that the insights gained from fieldwork are not simply the fruit of hearsay, subjective bias or fanciful speculation?

This problem of 'verification' was one that I encountered repeatedly during fieldwork when trying to explain my research to EU officials (many of whom had their own convictions about how to conduct social research). As one senior official caustically remarked following my attempts to explain the ethnographic approach; 'so anthropology is really just anecdotal. How can you prove anything when your research method is simply personal experience?' This 'burden of proof' issue becomes even more troublesome when we 'study up' and try to gain access to the private worlds of public officials. To anthropologists it may seem axiomatic that much of the official behavior observed in institutional settings is ritual and symbolic in nature, but to the officials concerned such a proposition may be anything but obvious. The self-image

of Western bureaucracy rests precisely on a classificatory system that pits its own inherent 'rationality' against the disorderly and irrational 'Other' (Herzfeld, 1992). Given that ethnographic narratives have little credibility with our informants, and still less with the more positivistic human sciences, writing persuasive accounts of government elites require that we go 'beyond ethnography'. The challenge is to combine 'thick description' and personal observations with other types of more tangible and verifiable data so that we manage to portray those elite worlds from multiple vantage points.

The Properties and Functions of Symbols: Using Turner's Approach

By comparison with Geertz's textual approach, Turner offers a more sociologically grounded framework for analyzing the symbolic dimensions of public behavior, one that avoids the excesses of literary interpretation. Turner's approach was developed in his work on ritual among the Ndembu of Zambia. His book *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) became one of the founding texts of symbolic anthropology. The book begins by noting the importance of rituals in Ndembu life; these seem to permeate every aspect of daily life in the villages. The challenge for Turner is to work out what these rituals and their symbols mean and what they *do* - which, as he points out, we can only gauge by looking at them in their social context:

> I found that I could not analyze ritual symbols without studying them in a time series in relation to other events, for symbols are essentially involved in social processes. I came to see performances of ritual as distinct phases in the social processes whereby groups became adjusted to internal changes and adapted to their external environment (Turner, 1967, p.20).

These themes of ‘adaptation’, ‘performativity’, and symbols as vehicles for shaping action and moving people between social states are hallmarks of Turner’s approach. Ritual symbols, he argues, perform three functions: they *condense* objects and actions into a single formation; they *unify* disparate meanings, and they also *polarize* meanings – typically between ‘ideological and ‘sensory’ realms (Turner, 1967, p. 28). Al ritual symbols, Turner proposes, are ‘collective representations’ that stimulate emotion and ‘channel desires and feeling’ according to the ‘norms and values that guide and control persons as members of social groups and categories’ (Turner, 1968, pp. 28-29). So how does one recognize those particularly salient symbols that underpin a society? Turner’s answer is that a dominant symbol ‘encapsulates the major properties of the total ritual process’ (Turner 1967, p. 30), and that the structure and properties of these

> can be inferred from three classes of data: (1) external form and observable characteristics; (2) interpretations offered by specialists and laymen; (3) significant contexts, which are largely worked out by the anthropologist (Turner 1967, p. 20).

It is the second step that most differentiates Turner from Geertz. Whereas Geertz moves directly from thick description - via erudite philosophical musings – to general analysis and exegesis, Turner invites us to give serious consideration to the different interpretations of lay and expert observers and to the contexts in which action occurs. His third step goes beyond the first and second and may even contradict them. Like Geertz, he contends that explanation does not lie at the level of the actors’ frame of reference and that the best interpretation of a symbol or cultural practice is not necessarily the one you get from the ‘native’s point of view’. But this

begs a deeper epistemological question: When anthropologists interpret the 'meaning' of a ritual, whose interpretations are these - the anthropologists', their native informants and ritual specialists, or the lay individuals participating in the ritual itself (Sperber, 1975; Spencer, 1996)? Who is to say 'they are wrong: this is the explanation?' Turner's answer, which he demonstrates using the example of puberty rituals, is that Ndembu informants are often unable to recognize the contradictions in their own accounts, and that it takes a professional observer to infer the way symbols connect with the wider social contexts in which they are situated.

To argue that it takes a professional outsider with a more holistic view to discern the 'wood from the trees' in the metaphorical 'forests of symbols' might seem uncontentious when applied to the culture of pre-literate tribal peoples, but can we apply such reasoning to government officials and policy-professionals? What kind of interpretive lens is appropriate for analyzing the 'culture' of a civil service? In what follows, I explore how symbolic anthropology can help us understand the culture of the EU civil service. In many respects the fieldwork process was for me a kind of 'rite of passage' not dissimilar to the ritual process described by Turner. As I hope to show, my own journey into the world of EU officials helped me to understand what 'Europeanization' means in this complex bureaucratic milieu, and how it is that officials become socialized into the norms and practices of the EU's administration.

Studying the 'Tribes of Europe': Reflections on Fieldwork and Method

My initial interest in the EU civil service had little to do with rituals or symbolism. In 1992 I began work on a study the European Community's emerging 'cultural policy'; that cluster of 'cultural actions' and information initiatives funded by the European Parliament that were

aimed at promoting the Community's external image and identity. While carrying out that research, however, I came across the 'People's Europe' campaign and what appeared to be a 'hidden history' of European Community attempts to invent new symbols for Europe, from 'harmonized' passports, postage-stamps and driving licenses to the new EU logo, flag and anthem (Adonnino, 1985; Shore, 1996). Having studied the history of nation-state formation and the work of historians on 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983) I recognized the significance of what was at stake here. What fascinated me was not only what these symbols signified, but the assumptions (or rationality) that had given rise to their invention in the first place. I also wanted to explore how officials justified the need for creating European symbols and their blatant use of PR and marketing techniques, and how they saw themselves within this process of social engineering. From analyzing EU policies aimed at 'Europeanizing' the masses, it seemed logical to examine how EU elites themselves were being Europeanized.[4]

My 'infiltration' of the Commission was not the fruit of skillful networking or friends in high places. Despite two stints as a *stagiaire* (or intern) in the European Parliament, I had no network of contacts inside the Commission, no high-ranking patron, and no official pass giving me *carte-blanche* access to go everywhere and talk to anyone at any level. I had to rely instead on a slower, more hap hazardous entrée. Doing fieldwork in government bureaucracies demanded a very different approach to the kind of ethnographic approach described in the traditional monographs. Intensive participant-observation in a bounded local space (what some anthropologists term 'deep hanging out') is hardly feasible in a bureaucratic environment where security guards will escort any visitor off the premises if they are not wearing a valid official pass, and where staff require letters and follow-up telephone calls before granting you a

brief appointment. Most interviews were conducted ‘off the record’ with informants insisting on ‘journalists’ rules’ (i.e. 'you can print what I tell you as long as the source remains anonymous’). Perhaps the most valuable ‘method’ was simply making the most of the desire of informants to talk and be listened to. As a sympathetic interlocutor eager to learn about the life-worlds of ordinary officials I had little trouble finding interviewees and what was typically framed as ‘can I have half an hour of your time?’ would often end up as a deep conversation stretching far into the evening. I quickly learned that the best time to schedule meetings was late afternoon as officials tended to be more relaxed and garrulous in the post-prandial hours. I also adopted the ‘snowball technique’; if the interview had gone well, I would ask informants who they would recommend I talk to for alternative perspectives on the issues discussed. I conducted over 100 interviews in this way, including with Parliament and Council officials, MEPs, journalists and lobbyists. Most interviews took place in the offices of my informants, but some occurred in the less formal settings, in canteens, cafes, coffee bars, or restaurants.

The absence of official backing had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand it meant that I was not granted free and unlimited access to officials or their meetings, but on the other hand it gave me complete independence and autonomy. This was particularly important. Shortly before I arrived in Brussels to conduct fieldwork, the Commission’s ‘*Cellule de Prospective’* – the ‘think tank’ created by president Jacques Delors and headed by Jerôme Vignon - had employed a team of anthropologists (two French and one British), to investigate ‘the existence or not of specific Commission culture’ and to look at the ‘weight of different languages and national cultural traditions and their impact on working relationships, and how a European identity might emerge in such a context’ (Abélès et al., 1993, p. 1). Whereas members of that team had to overcome staff suspicions that they had been sent to spy on the

organization, I at least had no such baggage. However, identifying myself as an 'anthropologist' brought other problems. Typically, it provoked bemusement or jokes about coming to 'darkest Brussels' to study 'the tribes of Europe'. I eventually gave up my introducing myself as an anthropologist in favor of the more acceptable label of 'social scientist', although that then led several informants to ask me 'what hypothesis' was I testing and where was my questionnaire?

Gaining familiarity with the organization took time. I rented an office in a building occupied by several national research councils in Rue de la Loi, at the heart of the European Quarter of Brussels. One of my colleagues (a professional lobbyist), memorably described the Commission as 'like a giant fish-tank' and herself as 'an outsider with her nose pressed against the glass, wondering what's going on inside'. In my own case, I did manage to get beyond the glass exterior. The snowballing method worked well and I made friends as well as helpful acquaintances. I also joined a number of staff associations (including the Commission squash club), which gave me access to a network that spanned the different divisions – and an excuse to meet officials outside of the workspace.

Inside the Commission

In the Commission's neo-classical nomenclature the major directorates (which by 1996 had grown to some twenty three) were designated by Roman numerals. My research focused mainly on two Directorate-Generals (or 'DGs'); the first (DGX) was responsible for Culture, the second (DGIX) for Administration. DGIX had been recommended to me on the grounds that staff in this large, Francophone and most traditional of directorates 'knew where the bodies

are buried'. Whereas DG X was a popular albeit politically minor unit, DG IX was described as a backwater; the 'graveyard of careers' and a place where 'people were sent and never returned'.

Within the DGs, staff are ranked hierarchically and labeled according to function. 'A' grades are university educated, perform 'conceptual' work and are the highest paid; 'B' grades are technicians and administrators; 'C' grades (by far the largest category and composed overwhelmingly of Belgian and Italian nationals) are secretarial and support staff, and 'D' grades are mainly security guards, van drivers, porters (*'huissiers'*) and tea persons. Among all grades promotions are allegedly based on merit and posts are filled irrespective of nationality. Reference to 'national quotas' was something of a taboo within the Commission. Yet in practice many sensitive senior positions were 'reserved' for particular nationalities (these were described as 'carrying a national flag'; for example, the Director-Generals for Administration and Agriculture were reputedly 'always French'). Member-state governments kept a keen eye on the relative number of 'A' grades, and 'respecting geographical balance' was the accepted euphemism for the de facto national quota system in operation. 'The Commission is a career civil service only up to level 4 of the A grade', I was told. Promotion beyond that requires political allies and strong national support. The practice of placing national appointees into A1 and A2 positions ('*parachutage'* as it was termed) was a complaint I often heard, particularly from union officials. Jacques Delors was allegedly 'notorious for abusing the system, for ensuring that his henchmen commanded all the key posts' and individuals who got in his way were either metaphorically 'killed', or shunted into the '*voi de garage*' ('parking lot').

Three other factors were typically emphasized by staff when explaining the unusual character of the Commission: it's independence from national government, its 'uniqueness' as a form of public administration, and its small size given the complexity and scope of its tasks. 'Our job', I was often told, 'is to uphold the interests of the Community as a whole'. 'Community' in the strict sense meant the European institutions and *acquis communautaire*, but was often used generally to refer to the EU and its citizens as a whole. The idea of standing 'above' the parochialism of national governments and promoting the wider 'European interest', together with the belief that working in the EU somehow 'de-nationalized' individuals were recurring themes in the way officials talked about themselves. All of these ideas were epitomized in the concept of 'supranationalism' and in the normative assumptions that underpinned the Commission's legal status as an independent 'supranational' body.

The Commission's role is to draft proposals for new European laws but it is also the EU's executive arm responsible for implementing decisions of Parliament and the Council, managing the EU's day-to-day business, implementing its policies, running its programmes and spending its funds. This unusual bundling of tasks also contributes to the Commission's sense of 'uniqueness' and its claim to being an administration without precedent or parallel in history. That belief fuelled the strong sense of 'mission' that informed the way many staff saw their role. One of the appeals of being an EU *fonctionnaire*, officials often conceded, was the feeling of 'making history'; of being a 'pioneer' and part of the wider project of European construction ('*la constructione européene'*).[5] Not everyone expressed such idealism, however; for many the attractions of joining the EU civil service had more to do with the high status, job security and extremely generous salaries enjoyed by EU *fonctionnaires*. Nonetheless, as Willis

(1982) observed two decades earlier, most European civil servants were self-selected and shared a strong sense of commitment to the 'European ideal'.

Finally, its small size and cosmopolitan character were two other distinguishing features of the Commission. Despite popular stereotypes about a vast organization run by an army of anonymous bureaucrats, the Commission's day-to-day running is done by a small (and surprisingly accessible) staff of administrators, experts, translators, interpreters and secretaries, numbering some 20,000 ('less than the total number employed by the city council of Barcelona or Cardiff' I was often told). This small size has led to a common 'insider's' view of the Commission as a compact, efficient, dynamic organization; 'a lean machine' composed of 'Europe's brightest and best' (Williamson, 1994, p. 25). 'The most efficient administration in Europe' was how another informant described it. 'What I like about this place', one official enthused;

> is its multicultural character. Our head of unit is German, we have two Spaniards, a Belgian and an Irish secretary, two French, a Greek and a Dane yet no one cares about your nationality. You step in the lift and you hear five languages spoken … yet we all work together. Relations in the office are informal and friendly. This is what Europe means.

Others were less sanguine. Sipping coffee in a Commission staff canteen one day, a veteran secretary of one of the most senior officials in the Commission mused over my research question. She hadn't really thought about whether the Commission reflected European integration on a wider scale. She supposed that the star-fish shaped Berlaymont building, the

Commission's former HQ, was the most visible symbol for the EU. Then she laughed at the irony. For several years now the Berlaymont had stood empty and covered in a white tarpaulin ever since staff had been evacuated after health and safety officials had deemed the building unsafe for human habitation following staff complaints about leaking asbestos. Every night, under cover of darkness, shift-working dressed in safety clothing and protective masks were working overtime to clear the building of its carcinogenic contamination. Not a very good symbol for Europe is it', she beamed; 'the "cancer at the heart of Europe".

European Integration and '*Engrenage*': Performance or Ritual Process?

To summarize all that I learned about the Commission's 'organizational culture' is beyond the scope of this chapter.[6] However, after a few months several key themes emerged. The first was evidence of a strong *esprit de corps* and shared consciousness-of-kind among staff. This was reflected in the frequent use of 'house' metaphors when referring to the Commission (another key symbol and boundary marker), the constant use of 'We' or 'We in the House' when referring to fellow Commission staff, and the EU's shared, semi-private language composed of in-house phrases, bureaucratic acronyms and hybridized francophone neologisms (such as 'going *en missione'* or 'holding a *tour de table'*). Although many officials would often describe their work as routine and bureaucratic ('just like any public administration') the *uniqueness* of the organization and its mission were often stressed. The 'Euro-idealism' of the early generation of European officials may have waned (Ludlow, 1992), but it clearly still evident. I noted an interesting degree of 'spillover' between official EU narratives about the Commission's role in creating a new European order, and the way staff spoke about themselves as agents in that process.

For some staff, working in the Commission was quite literally a ‘daily plebiscite’ and way of ‘performing’ the European idea. Several informants spoke quite passionately about their affection for the ‘House’ and how much they ‘love the Commission’. My research entailed lengthy ethnographic interviews with a number of current and former personnel directors. It was here, listening to them describing the Commission’s personnel policy and administrative culture (often with exasperation) that I made a key discovery and experienced one of those rare ‘aha’ moments of insight and epiphany. Despite the Commission’s claims to be forging a new and distinctly ‘European’ model of civil service, many staff spoke about the chronic lack of anything resembling ‘career management’ and a coherent personnel policy. One senior staff manager, who previously worked for the UK Cabinet Office, put it bluntly: ‘the most striking thing about the Commission’s personnel policy is that it doesn’t have one’. ‘What we have instead’, he continued, ‘are the Staff Statutes’ - which he thought explained why staffing issues tended to be so individualistic and legalistic. As he saw it, his job was to ‘bring the Commission’s personnel policy into the twentieth century’, part of which meant getting it to recognize the concept of ‘personnel management’.

These views were not confined to British officials. A senior French *fonctionnaire* and former Personnel Director with over twenty years experience in the organization confirmed these criticisms. The Commission, he said, had never really developed an ‘Anglo-Saxon type of human resources strategy’ as ‘the high salary was deemed to be enough’. From the outside ‘it looks hierarchical and well structured, but in reality there are no rules. A lot of people can’t bear this. But that is what makes the Commission so great and so interesting.’ The concept of

'human resource management', I was told by another former Personnel Director, was alien to the Commission:

> There is no career management, personnel development or grading and promotion structure here: once you're 'in' it is every man for himself. There is a system of two-yearly staff reports, but these consist of a derisory set of boxes to be ticked. To get ahead in your career you have to be an entrepreneur; play the game, make use of contacts. Unless you have patronage and a network of personal contacts you're not going to get there. So there is a lot of disenchantment among older staff who haven't been promoted.[7]

So how do new staff get inducted into the 'House'? I asked.

> That develops through daily exposure to life in the institution. Working here changes people. You learn to make compromises, to cooperate, to look at problems and their solutions from a European perspective. I've seen it happen all the time. Even the most ardent nationalists become *engrenagé* after six month in the job.

I cannot recall the first time I heard the word '*engrenage*' being used in this context;' but over the next few months I became increasingly aware of its strategic importance, not only as local metaphor for describing how new staff get caught up in the Commission's 'way of doing things' (i.e. socialized into the Brussels *milieu*) , but equally as theory of identity formation among European elites and an explanation of the process by which seconded national experts, politicians and technocrats come to redirect their loyalties towards the EU and its institutions.

In its literal sense '*engrenage'* translates as 'gearing' (in the sense of 'cogs in a wheel'), but as I found, it had become a common idiom among EU staff to describe the transformative process by which national officials (including lobbyists and journalists) come to acquire the mental habits and practices of 'Europeans'.

Warming to my discovery, I pursued this theme in further conversations. For EU officials, it seemed, *engrenage* was clearly a 'dominant symbol' in the sense implied by Turner (1967). It not only embodied the 'European idea' but also described the mechanism that linked individual participants to the wider ritual process of 'European integration' itself;[8] namely, the journey through which individuals become 'enmeshed' or 'entangled' in the EU's 'web of meanings'. One Commission official I interviewed had even written a book about this phenomenon explaining how British Eurosceptic Labour MEPs, once elected to the European Parliament, rapidly became enthusiastic EU supporters. He called his theory 'Cotta's Law' (Westlake, 1994). However, when I asked him whether 'Cotta's Law' also applied to Commission officials like himself he seemed genuinely caught off guard. His reply was that *engrenage* didn't really apply to A-grade officials because they were 'already committed to the cause' and had 'already demonstrated their belief' by joining the Commission.

Initial findings thus confirmed what integration theorists had long predicted; that the EU's institutions are indeed catalysts for promoting cohesion among national officials and for engendering a distinctly European ethos and identity. The idea of *engrenage* is consistent with the 'Monnet Method' of European integration; integration understood as a steady incremental process of 'functional spillover'. Monnet's approach was to initiate an 'action trap' in which

once actors embark on a specific course of action (for example, the harmonization of regulations necessary for creating the Single European Market, or economic and monetary union) they find themselves obliged to take further actions which take them in directions they did not necessarily intend to go.

It is unclear whether the term *engrenage* entered the lexicon of EU officials via Monnet's writings or those of EU academics, but as I later discovered, it has also been used to describe processes of socialization among officials in other EU institutions, including the Council of Ministers.

> There is a shared culture in the Council, in spite of the public and publicized tensions and agonistic positioning. Embedded in informal practices, as well as rooted in formal procedures, this is reinforced by forms of socialization and engrenage … Our study reveals that decision-makers, in spite of their national roots, become locked into the collective process, especially in areas of well-established and recurrent negotiation. This does not mean that the participants have transferred loyalties to the EU system, but it does mean that they acknowledge themselves in certain crucial ways as being part of the collective system of decision-making. (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 1997, pp. 278-79).

My study also found that officials become 'locked' into a collective process, one that entailed both the creation of a shared 'consciousness of kind' *and* a transfer of loyalties. However, I also found that the Commission's emerging supranational political culture, with its informal

methods, personal networks and incoherent management, bore little resemblance to the harmonious ideal-type that had been so keenly anticipated at its inception.

The Commission seen from Other Perspectives: Insider, Lay and Expert Views

At this point I am minded Victor Turner's advice that our analysis should consider contrasting lay and specialist interpretations. The work of other anthropologists and EU analysts might appropriately be classified within the category of 'ritual specialist'. The Commission-appointed team led by Marc Abélès explored numerous aspects of Commission life including language use, the relevance of stereotypes, social relations at work, the impact of hierarchy, attitudes towards management, the relevance of North-South differences, and personnel policy. Their main conclusion was that the Commission had no overarching cohesive culture but was composed, instead, of a diversity of competing cultures constructed on the basis of language, nationality and departmental identities and allegiances that were closely tied to specific policy areas (Abélès et al 1993). Curiously, their report makes little reference to the consequences likely to result from this, or to the history of the organization and its enduring legacies; instead we are presented with an image of the Commission as an heroically disorganized, cosmopolitan entity based on a plethora of compromises that have been shaped by departmental loyalties, key personalities and intra-DG turf-war over prestige and resources. The Abélès study echoes sentiments about the Commission heard frequently in the field: 'the surprising thing about the Commission is not that it works well, but that it should work at all'.

Bramwell's study, although based on research carried out in the 1980s, also depicts an organization cut through by difference, contradictory management regimes and intra-

departmental rivalry. However, beyond the chaos and diversity there exists, Bramwell suggests, many characteristics and practices that stem from the Commission's Francophone heritage. According to Bramwell, the main elements of the Commission's 'political culture' include intense internal competition, powerful national and sub-national enclaves (including Neapolitans, Corsicans, and Welsh), and the prevalence of personal fiefdoms. What unites Commission staff, Bramwell suggests (1987, p. 75) is less supranational cosmopolitanism as a 'defensive solidarity against the outside world' combined with 'an internal paranoia'. 'The hoped-for emergence of a supra-national political culture', Bramwell concludes, 'does not seem to have taken place'.

> The Commission rather presents a picture of irreconcilables, of intra-national strife and of inter-nation clashes. The over-representation of some nationalities and minorities does, however, giver the Commission a certain flavor, a sub-culture. It is that of collaboration. The big, strong countries form yet another occupying power. Resentful, uncharming, sour, but determined to survive, the Alsatians, Corsicans, Walloons, and so on, lie the Cathars of old in the mountains, occupy the interstices of the institution, repelling boarders, invaders. It is their thing. *Cosa nostra*. They play cards by the boiler rooms, surrounded by beer bottles and pot plants. They gaze suspiciously at their British counterparts over the groaning dinner tables, utterly unconvinced by British charm, puzzled by British refusal to plot against them (Bramwell, 1987, pp. 77-78).

Bramwell's observations about the politicization of the service and absence of a coherent human resources policy were echoed in the Committee of Experts report which also drew

explicit links between the dysfunctional aspects of the Commission's administrative culture and the prevalence of mismanagement, fraud and corruption.

Two important fieldwork encounters underlined that connection. The first was in 1996 while interviewing a leader from one of the main staffing unions (*Union Sindicale)*. Our conversation was interrupted by urgent union business involving a dispute between management and staff at the recently created Committee of the Regions (CoR). The entire staff was embroiled in heated industrial action with management and were picketing and boycotting its meetings. But this strike was not over pay: the dispute was against the CoR leadership for allegedly violating EC rules and equal opportunities policies by appointing friends and supporters to highly paid permanent jobs within the organization. A week later I joined a union rally outside the European Parliament as a small crowd of officials (sporting red caps, banners and loud-speakers) handed out leaflets demanding that the Commission abide by its proper recruitment procedures and 'stop using rigged *concours*' and 'titularization exams' to fast-track favoured 'girlfriends and cronies'. I remember conveying my dismay at encountering such flagrant patronage to a former colleague now working in the European Parliament. She agreed they had a point and that such behaviour reflected badly on the EU, particularly in this most recently-created EU institution (established by the Maastricht Treaty precisely to 'bring Europe closer to its citizens'), but she refrained from condemning the CoR management. It was only later that she admitted having been one of the lucky few 'invited' to interview for one of those new 'A-grade' positions there.

I subsequently discovered that these employment practices were not as uncommon as might seem. David Spence is one of a number of EU analysts who occupy that curious space between

'native/insider' and 'expert/outsider'. I met Spence several times during fieldwork and we talked at length about the Commission's peculiarities as a public administration. Yet it was his chapter on Commission staffing and personnel policy that provided the clearest insight into the Commission as a 'cultural system'. Spence argues that there are two Commission administrative systems: a 'formal', legal-rational one, whose rules are set out in the Staff Statutes, and an informal one based on personal networks, covert methods and pragmatic codes of conduct. However, repeated failure to respect the Statutes and the increasing use of political appointees and non-statutory staff has fuelled a growing dependence on the latter. Within the Commission we have thus witnessed 'the emergence of an almost parallel administrative regime with its own salary scales, promotion prospects and procedures' (Spence, 1994, p. 65).

This is a startling admission. As one of Spence's colleagues remarked that Bernard Connolly, the Commission' former expert on EMU, had been sacked for making far less critical or damaging comments.[9] The Commission's combination of a formal system comprising 'rigid bureaucratic structures' and legal rules and a pervasive 'informal' system based around personal networks and 'flexible' working methods was typically described as a legacy of the French tradition (Spence, 1994, p. 64).[10] Indeed, many of the problems of mismanagement identified by Spence – including a 'highly politicized senior management closely linked to the party in power', the powerful *Cabinet* system, and the tendency to 'use information as a constituent element of a bureaucratic and political power base'- originate from the French system of public administration (Spence, 1994, p. 91). As a result, many dysfunctional practices - from cronyism (or '*piston'*), '*parachutage'* and posts reserved for certain nationalities, to 'rigged exams', seconding national experts, fly-by-night titular exams and various other back-door recruitment methods –have become virtually institutionalized (Spence, 1994, p. 92).

Most of these practices came to light in the evidence submitted in the report of the Committee of Independent Experts (CIE, 1999), although they had been identified in the Sprienburg report (1979) published twenty years earlier. One of the worst cases of corruption the Committee of Independent Experts found was in the Commission's Security Office, which reports directly to the President. The report's comments on the shadowy world of corruption and collusion that existed between the Security Office staff and the Belgian police echo Bramwell:

> There was a peculiar complicity within the security system and between the Security Office and other circles in the Commission that created a kind of regulation-free-zone', where existing laws and regulations were regarded as cumbersome barriers to various forms of arbitrary action rather than as rules to be respected. The security system appears to have been undermined by a sub-culture which was characterized by personal relationships, a system of 'give-and-take' and a withdrawal from the overall system of control and surveillance. The question must be asked as to how such a sub-culture could develop, exist and prevail in a section of the European civil service without being detected from within, brought to light only when a newspaper published the allegations' (CIE, 1999, p. 102).

Conclusions: The Commission in Anthropological Perspective

It would be tempting to try and conclude with a sophisticated exegesis that illuminates the 'deep structures' beneath the enigmatic surface phenomena described above. What I have tried to show instead is that understanding a 'cultural system' – or even an 'administrative system' -

requires multiple vantage points and recognition that there are competing lay and specialist perspectives to consider, not to mention competing *anthropological* interpretations. I have loosely applied a Turner*esque* approach in what I hoped would be a corrective to the current fascination with Geertz's seductive interpretive analysis. Unlike Geertz, Turner's work reminds us that the events and processes we observe have no fixed or unambiguous meanings. Indeed, ambiguity (about its character, its legal competencies, and its role in history) are arguably defining features of the European Commission.

What I have tried to show is that empirical studies of political elites based on anthropological fieldwork and symbolic analysis have clear advantages over those more conventional political science approaches based on abstract models and dry institutional comparisons, most of which tend to be shot through with universal assumptions and teleological premises. One of the advantages is simply that fieldwork allows for an element of surprise to shape the research process. Observations and insights arise that were never part of the original research design and could never have been anticipated. When we study people 'up close and personal' we learn to see them as social actors and cultural agents, with 'warts and all'. Participant observation ('being there') also allows researchers to be more responsive to the unexpected – to serendipity - and better equipped to follow events on the ground as they develop, often with little knowledge of where they might lead. In my case, what began as an enquiry into the European Commission's 'administrative norms' and 'organizational culture' and whether these might be promoting integration among policy elites, broadened into an exploration of the 'centrifugal' forces leading to disunity and fragmentation within the EU civil service. I did not set out to study fraud or corruption in the EU, but what I discovered about the Commission's 'personnel policy' undoubtedly helps explain the events that precipitated the downfall of the Santer

Commission. ‘To understand the Commission’, I was told one night by a veteran ‘A-grade’ Belgian official, ‘you should read the history of the middle ages’.

The CIE report asked ‘[h]ow did such a sub-culture develop and exist … without being detected?’ It is certainly curious that, until the scandal broke, virtually none of the many hundreds of policy analysts, journalists or EU scholars had written about the problems of fraud, nepotism and cronyism detailed in the CIE report. How did the internal life of this most public of administrations remain so private? Could it be that such phenomena were invisible to all those pundits and professionals, many of whom owe their reputations – and careers - to their expertise in EU affairs? ‘The journalists here are all part of the system’, several shrewd officials had said. To echo Upton Sinclair, ‘it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it’. Yet part of the explanation for this willing myopia also lies in the systems of classification that European governments use to judge organizational ‘rationality’ and ‘efficiency’. For years, the pragmatic *modus operandi* of the Commission, with its ‘informal practices’ and networking dynamics, was not merely tolerated by member-state governments and officials but actually celebrated (Middlemas 1995). This was the source of the EU’s dynamism and efficiency, or so it was argued. What made Delors, Kohl and Mitterrand such celebrated ‘European statesmen’ was their ability to ‘get things done’ in order to advance the integration project. The scandal of 1999 showed that those who believe the ‘ends justify the means’ should also consider the unforeseen consequences that such calculations entail. While the close ties, fluidity and networking within the EU administration rendered it dynamic and flexible and capable of taking enormous initiatives during the Delors era, those same features also engendered an environment that was

highly conducive to the kind of informal practices and personal politicking that resulted in the Commission's downfall.

I have also tried to make the case for going beyond 'thick description' and why we need narrative accounts that combine ethnography and personal experience with other kinds of persuasive data, including official reports, archival sources, memoirs and other testimonies. Turner's work provides a model for how different kinds of viewpoints (both lay and expert) can be used to triangulate such evidence. This gives a robustness to research findings that is usually absent from interpretive and purely symbolic approaches. It means that when we hear evidence of collusion and corruption that concurs with what local experts and insiders report, our findings cannot so easily be dismissed as subjective, biased or 'merely anecdotal'. Turner also provides a useful model for helping us to identity which symbols are socially significant and why. Rituals, he argues, often function to convert the 'obligatory' into the 'desirable' by aligning ethical and juridical norms with strong emotional stimuli. As he puts it: 'The basic unit of ritual, the dominant symbol, encapsulates the major properties of the total ritual process which bring about this transmutation' (Turner, 1967, p. 30). As I learned through fieldwork, that alignment of norms and emotional stimuli was potently expressed in the term *engrenage*, a concept that embodies all of the core elements of the ideology and practice of European integration. 'Supranationalism' was another dominant symbol whose meanings only became evident from a grounded empirical perspective. I found that the term was full of normative assumptions about the EU's 'mission' to rescue Europe from the dark, irrational forces of nationalism by forging a higher political order based on reason, progress, and all those other desirable Enlightenment ideals that the EU claims to be heir to. Yet while the EU's supranational organizations may function to 'enmesh' individuals within its institutional webs

of meaning, the nature of those webs and the identities they create are not necessarily what the integration theorists envisaged. The '*homme européen*' being forged in the Commission's institutional milieu bore little resemblance to Monnet's supranational ideal-type. The other side of supranationalism appears to be a deterritorialised yet highly politicized elite of entrepreneurial individualists adept in the skills of networking, but also preoccupied with internal status games, rituals and boundary maintenance work. This is also consistent with Turner's observation that dominant symbols have the contradictory function of condensing and unifying actions and meanings, but also polarizing them.

The scandal of 1999 led to calls for a 'root and branch' overhaul of the EU civil service. In the post-scandal era, the new Commissions headed by Romano Prodi and José Manuel Barosso have introduced a swathe of new managerialist reforms with ambitious slogan-like titles such as 'Sound and Efficient Management' and 'A Culture Based on Service'. Whether these reforms will succeed remains to be seen. Among senior officials there is both optimism and skepticism. As one veteran *fonctionnaire* recently described it to me;

> These people arrived from 'Planet Audit' and started to use PowerPoint to tell everyone how things should be. Kinnock tried. There was lot of management-speak about 'performance management', 'audit', 'transparency' and 'targets'. Has it changed the culture of the Commission? Yes, it has made it more bureaucratic. From being too financially lax the Commission has become extremely inflexible. People don't want to spend money now because it's just not worth the bother.

For the Commission and its staff, and contrary to what most anthropological studies have shown, the European Commission clearly has a tangible ‘organizational culture’ that can be directed, managed and improved upon. But that is what Monnet and Schuman and Delors believed too.

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References

[1] On France's domination of the early European Commission see Denham (1996); Grant (1994); Ross (1995).
[2] For recent anthropological studies of elites, see Pina-Cabral and de Lima (2000); Shore and Nugent (2002).
[3] '*Homme européen*' was the phrase used by Jean Monnet (1978).
[4] My anthropological fieldwork in Brussels between 1995 and 1996 was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (project number R000236097). I wish to thank the ESRC for its generous support.
[5] McDonald (1998, p. 7) made similar observations: 'We are still the ones making history!' she was told by one smiling official on the first day of her research in the Commission.
[6] For more detailed accounts see Abélès et al, 1993; Spence, 1994; Shore, 2000.
[7] Fieldwork Interview, 15 February 1995.
[8] Ortner (1973) suggests there are five ways to recognize 'key symbolism': the importance local people attach to it, its influence in arousing local sentiment, its prevalence and representation in different contexts, the cultural elaboration and images that surrounds it, and the rules surrounding it.
[9] This is not quite true. Connolly's book, *The Rotten Heart of Europe*, was a scathing attack on EMU which, he suggested, could bring Europe to the brink of war.
[10] Alongside these French administrative traditions exists a third, German model; 'more legalistic and rigid, formed the basis of the European Audit Office, which followed the design of the "Bundesrechnungshof"' (Spence, 1994, p. 64).