

Building bridges between the academy and the worlds of practice in European Studies

**Acceptance speech by Prof. Dame Helen Wallace (London School of Economics and Political Science)
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First and foremost, many, many thanks to the THESEUS Programme for paying me such a huge compliment with the award of this THESEUS Award. I am deeply flattered by your decision. It is an honour for me to accept it – and I do so with gratitude and humility. Many thanks to you, Professor Grosser, for the generous remarks in your graceful laudatio.

If you permit me, there is a pleasant irony for me as a British person to be honoured by a Franco-German consortium. Not for the first time it is great for me to be able to benefit from a Franco-German initiative and I say this as someone who has in previous times been involved in research and debate on all three sides of the British-French-German triangle. As you all know, it is not an equilateral triangle. But that is a discussion that will be continued on another occasion.

Perhaps I can also comment on the conjunction that you have made between THESEUS and Helen. I have no idea how many of you here are up-to-speed on the relationship between THESEUS and Helen. You need to know that I started out as a student of ancient European studies – I was a classicist. Well, THESEUS was quite an adventurer. He was a bit of a thug. And he was a serial abductor of young women. You will all know that he killed the Minotaur and then abducted Ariadne, his protectress, only to abandon her on Naxos and marry her younger sister, Phaedra, who came to a bad end.

What you may not all know is that in later life the middle-aged THESEUS and his chum Pirothous set out on another kidnapping mission and he abducted the rather young Helen from Sparta. It was a bad move because THESEUS was then trapped in Hades and when liberated found that he had lost control of Athens and had also lost Helen. She had been rescued by her brothers, Castor and Pollux, who had been tipped off by another Athenian called Academus. The same Academus was subsequently buried in a garden on the outskirts of Athens. History records that it was in that garden that Plato and Socrates used to meet and educate young men – and that is why Plato's school came to be called the Academy. So there you have the origin of the word 'academic'! And all because of my famous namesake!

Let me now turn to my theme for these few remarks – the links between the academy and the worlds of practice in our field of European studies and the kinds of bridges that some of us have tried to build. I shall comment autobiographically by reflecting on the different kinds of links that I have witnessed since I switched from ancient European studies to contemporary European studies. And maybe I am echoing the experience of my generation of European integration specialists, including several good friends and colleagues who are in Budapest today.

Monitoring a political experiment

I jumped from the ancient world to the contemporary European world in 1967. The European Community was then a rather young political initiative. European integration was

a new field of study across the social sciences and of course for lawyers. I guess I belong to the second generation, attempting to follow in the footsteps of the pioneers – those big names of the founding parents of the field. We were driven by our curiosity about what was going on around us to try to document an unfolding story, which seemed very novel. It is hardly surprising that so much of the early literature treated the European Community as *sui generis*, since it was indeed an experiment.

Over time – and as practice became embedded – we did our best to document what we observed. We did it with the tools that we had to hand – in political science they were a good deal more rudimentary than they are today. And we did it with whatever evidence we had to hand – in those days we had only very erratic access to inside primary sources – and we all cultivated our links with practitioners in the hope that they would give us copies of documents. We collected what documents we could – no photocopiers in those days, no internet, no transparency provisions. So we were detectives, constantly searching for primary documents and inside stories. And we were sometimes useful detectives. One of the first things that I published was a survey of the ways in which the first six member governments of the European Community (EC) coordinated their national policies on EC business, just at the time that the British Government was preparing for its accession and people were keen to have tips from the experience of the six. So many of us found ourselves quite close to the practitioners both in our own countries and inside the EC institutions. And indeed there was always an issue about whether we were engaged in analysis or being drawn into advocacy.

Did we make a contribution? Well, yes, I think we did. We helped to establish awareness that there was an emerging cohort of academic specialists with relevant expertise, and we produced an early literature that contains both information about and insights into European integration. That literature is now amplified by some excellent research by historians able to go back to those early years, with access to primary archival sources, and to produce valuable and nuanced historical studies. Here, I salute the work of Alan Milward, who appointed me to my first academic post, and who sadly died a few weeks ago. And I encourage the younger scholars here to remember that this early literature repays some attention.

Motivating successor generations

I think we did a pretty good job on this score. Our subject turned out to be dynamic and to attract student interest. European studies turned out to be a flourishing field for both undergraduate and postgraduate study. Many of us had the opportunity to teach successive generations of students in a pluri-national setting – pluri-national student cohorts and pluri-national teams of professors. Some of those students went on to academic careers – rather more of them went into the world of practice – inside the EC institutions, inside national institutions, and across the range of European-focused professions and organisations. It was our good fortune to benefit from a period in which European universities became much more international. Here, British universities were the pace-setters. We have been helped by the emergence of English – or ‘globish’ – as a widely shared second language and as the increasingly predominant working language within the EU. This enabled those of us who wrote in English to reach wide audiences. I am personally delighted to have been involved

for over 30 years in developing text books and research books for a very transnational readership – both academics and practitioners.

Some of our students have gone on to shine in the academic community – I could reel off quite a long list of now distinguished former students who are doing fine research on European integration. Some of them found their way from across the Atlantic and were part of the resurgence of European studies in the United States. Others took up careers in the world of practice: a President of the European Commission, many members of the European Parliament, a Finnish Foreign Minister, and – wonder of wonders – a British Deputy Prime Minister.

Laying foundations for a systematic analysis of European integration

The way in which the subject is studied these days has changed enormously since I started out. Much of that is for the good. Greater rigour means tighter arguments and an insistence on better data. This evolution has enabled the study of European integration to become main-streamed in most social science disciplines, benefiting from other areas of those disciplines, and contributing to them. We are moving away from the notion of European integration as a unique and *sui generis* experiment. So the field of study has flourished and European scholars have got better at holding their own *vis-à-vis* their American counterparts. This does, however, have other consequences. A good deal of the recent academic scholarship on European integration has become rather inaccessible to practitioners, in that it speaks to methodological and epistemological debates in the academy and has much less to contribute to the worlds of practice.

So we gain on one front and lose on another one. My sense of what has happened in Britain – and here I cannot speak for other European countries – is that the distance has grown between the academy and the world of practice – and that the gap has been increasingly filled by think tanks – and many of those think tanks are in the business of opinionated advocacy rather than analysis-based insights. But European integration is not at all the only field in which we can observe this phenomenon. There is a tension between what is valued these days in academic scholarship and what is in demand in the worlds of practice.

Building bridges between the academy and the worlds of practice

In the UK we, as academics, are under continuous and increasing pressure to show evidence of our “impact” outside the academic arena and to show that our “research” (or at least some of it) yields “benefits” for society. Our access to research funding and to “esteem” is being linked to our ability to make a difference to the wider societal debates and policies in our fields of expertise. This is a tough environment. On the one hand, we clearly do not want to slip into loose and opinionated “advocacy” and to turn our back on reasoned and evidenced “analysis”. On the other hand, many of us are nervous about answering the “so what” questions. I have several responses to this challenge:

Only some of us want to tangle with the worlds of practice, and some of us are more comfortable than others in the “so what” environment. And certainly not all of us want to slip from analysis into advocacy.

On the other hand, at least some of us – me included – came into this field of study because we cared about the substance and did not want to be innocent and irresponsible bystanders. But then we have quite a task to persuade the practitioners that we might understand some things a bit better than they do precisely because we are not trapped into the day-to-day and precisely because we can take a view on trends over time and insights from previous versions of contemporary dilemmas.

So we have to tread carefully the line between analysis and advocacy. Those of us willing to engage with the practitioners and the “so what” questions need to be sure of our ground, which means that our research needs to be of the highest quality but which also means that we need to be able to explain our findings in messages that are amenable to translation into practical and practicable insights – it isn’t easy!

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