What's the point of the EU? The World War I Centenary and the myth of the EU's 'peace mission'

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Now that the various political and cultural spectacles occasioned by the centenary last month of the outbreak of the First World War have passed, perhaps we can pause to take stock in a more tranquil atmosphere of what they meant; and particularly of what they might tell us about Europe's past and Europe's future. The dominant theme was the role of the EU in ensuring peace between European nations – not of course since 1918, but at least since 1945. For although the First World War was famously supposed to be 'the war to end all wars', the peace that followed it lasted a mere 21 years before the next European conflagration erupted, and – like the First – spread around the globe. (More accurately, it expanded, continued and merged a series of smaller conflicts, including the Italo–Ethiopian Wars, the Sino-Japanese wars and the Spanish Civil War.) There was of course no EU to contribute to the shaky peace between 1918 and 1939; but it has been perhaps the dominant political explanation and justification for the EU that its purpose was to ensure that such wars between European nations would never happen again, and that the peace since 1945 has been due in no small part to its existence. The message was being hammered home even before the centenary events kicked off – and its contemporary significance too: 'We must heed the lessons of 1914. Those who rail against the EU should appreciate that it has brought us peace.' (German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in an article in The Guardian, 27 January 2014.) In fact, this mantra has been heard from all the leading European statespersons of the last 50 years, and August 2014 saw it repeated ad nauseam. But is it true?

It has never felt true to me. This may in part be a generational issue, and in part also one of geography. Most of those from whom we have heard this mantra have been continental Europeans and not from the periphery, where I live; and their politics were fundamentally determined by the experience of the Second World War or of both World Wars. One thinks especially of the 'founding fathers' of the EU. [The EU, I was surprised to discover, has an official list of 'founding fathers' (but no founding mothers, apparently). It includes Robert Schumann, Jean Monnet, Konrad Adenauer, Winston Churchill and seven more - none of them born later than 1908, and all of them apart from Churchill from the six geographically central founding states.] But one thinks also of other leading European figures of more recent years who regularly used similar rhetoric about the purpose of the EU – Francois Mitterand (born 1916), Helmut Kohl (born 1930), Jacques Delors (born 1925): for all these figures too, the Second World War was the defining experience of their lives, as it was for most Europeans who lived through it, and it is therefore no surprise that they would be tempted to take their political bearings from it, and to believe that the avoidance of more wars was the rationale and purpose of the EU. But that generation has passed from power; the advent of figures like Gerhard Schröder (born 1944), Tony Blair (born 1953), Nicolas Sarkozy (born 1955), or José Manuel Barroso (born 1956) meant that an important generational shift occurred from the 1990s onwards, and the most influential politicians in Europe were no longer shaped to anything

like the same degree by the experience of European war. The change in the demography of European leadership (possibly causally related to the dwindling memory of war among the electorate?) has continued and accelerated since, with figures emerging such as David Cameron (born 1966), Angela Merkel (born 1954 – not only that, but raised largely in communist East Germany) and most recently Matteo Renzi (born 1975). At the same time, the expansion of Europe from the original six founding states has also diluted the significance of WW2 for its electorate: it has extended Europe to countries which took no direct part in the conflict (Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Sweden), to countries like the UK which experienced no enemy troops on their soil, and most

importantly to the countries of eastern Europe, which may have suffered as much from the conflict but whose political bearings are taken at least as much from the experience of post-war Soviet domination. So it is all the more surprising that the rhetorical tributes to the role of the EU in preventing European war since 1945 have continued almost unabated and unquestioned. The lack of questioning is even more surprising if one looks beyond the demography of the political leaders to that of their constituencies: after all, anyone with any form of personal, recollectable experience of WW2 would have to have been born by 1940, meaning that today they would be at least 74. Expanding the constituency to include people who grew up in the immediate aftermath of war, it is still difficult to imagine that this includes anyone younger than about 65 – or a grand total of around 17% of the EU population. And the original 6 founding member states today make up considerably less than half of the total population of the EU. So on both historical and geographical dimensions, the experience or cultural memory of the two World Wars is far less significant to today's EU than it has ever been.

What am I trying to argue here?

It is at least plausible that the preservation of peace was the ultimate rationale of the EU for the generation of politicians who constituted its founding fathers and its early leaders. One of the phrases most commonly quoted from the Schumann Declaration, often cited as the founding text of the Union, is that the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community Schumann was proposing would make war between France and Germany 'not only unthinkable but materially impossible' – i.e. that the economic cooperation proposed was merely a means to a greater end, that of peace. However, a closer look at the Declaration reveals that this phrase follows a number of references to the economic case for his proposal, e.g. to the creation of 'a Europe where the standard of living will rise by grouping together production and expanding markets, thus encouraging the lowering of prices'; and that overall the references to a peace project are at a very general rhetorical level and overshadowed by more detailed and conventional economic policy language about markets, prices and production. And this seems to me to be true of much of the founding history of the Union. So I think it is a misreading to believe that the peace project was being pursued via the economic project. Rather, the economic project was its own justification, and what the founding fathers were doing was to take further an existing politico-economic strategy which might indeed contribute to peace but was not driven by that goal. In fact, there are plenty of (principally, but not only, Eurosceptic) commentators who argue that the real purpose of the EU from the outset was to create a

political union, a European super-state, for which the rhetoric of peace was no more than a cover (see e.g. this recent article from the UK magazine The Spectator: http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9130562/how-the-first-world-war-inspired-the-eu/). But you don't have to be a conspiracy theorist to believe that the 'peace mission' was not the real driving motivation behind the creation of the EU.

Whatever the dominant motivation was for the founding of the EU: can it be shown, or at least plausibly argued, that it has played a substantial role in maintaining peace over the last 69 years? One august institution which clearly believes this to be true is the Norwegian Nobel Committee, which in 2012, to widespread surprise and even some derision, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union. In his acceptance speech, Hermann van Rompuy, President of the European Council, spoke in the kind of terms I referred to above, and of which we heard so much again over the last three months:

'….It worked. Peace is now self-evident. War has become inconceivable. Yet 'inconceivable' does not mean 'impossible'. And that is why we are gathered here today. Europe must keep its promise of peace. I believe this is still our Union's ultimate purpose.'

Now, proving a negative is notoriously difficult, and especially in such a complex field. So it would be very difficult to demonstrate convincingly that the EU has played no part at all in maintaining international peace. But two or three things immediately strike one about this argument. The first is that whatever the dominant founding rationale for the union, its practical impact in terms of the pooling of the defence and security capacities of its members (what is now known as 'Common Security and Defence Policy', CSDP) has been tiny, and not remotely comparable with its impact in other areas such as economic, environmental or social policy. Indeed, so paltry and halting have the few steps in this direction been that many argue there is no genuine, meaningful European policy in this area, which remains fundamentally and obstinately intergovernmental. It doesn't even have a separate EU budget. Such cooperation as it has proved possible to achieve has been primarily externally directed, of course, as there have been no armed conflicts between EU member states since the war. That absence of armed conflict within western Europe is therefore certainly not due to the formal institutions of EU defence cooperation, though it remains possible that it is due in part to diplomacy and other forms of political cooperation (and perhaps also to thickening economic and civil society links) in which the EU plays a role. As for cooperation in external 'peace' operations (to which many in the EU remain fundamentally opposed anyway on principle), the EU has been notoriously slow and ineffective as an actor. It is completely overshadowed in every sense by NATO, which is the dominant coordination mechanism for defence and security policy for Europe. Whether any institutions at all can claim any merit in 'preserving the peace' globally depends primarily on one's ideological standpoint and on which school of international relations theory one subscribes to; 'realists' would point to NATO, the Warsaw Pact and/or the USA; others might question whether their role has been positive or negative; 'idealists' might want to argue for the role played by the UN. But nobody would point to the EU. It might in fact be possible for the EU to develop a genuine external 'peace mission', but only on the basis of a radically new approach to security and to international relations, a Green approach. This would be one based on an ecological understanding of global human society. If this sounds impossibly idealistic and remote from the conflicts currently raging around the world, it is nonetheless clear that most contemporary international conflicts have resource competition as a significant causal factor, and in some cases the predominant one. This is already a truism when applied to perhaps the most intractable of current conflicts, that which includes and has some of its roots in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but now extends across much of the Middle East. Sir David King, the UK government's former chief scientific adviser, warned in 2009 that the Iraq war was likely to prove only the first of a series of 'resource wars' that would dominate the new century; and some, such as Michael T. Klare ('Resource Wars', etc.) have developed this view into a full-scale dystopia. What's more, if the EU were to adopt such an approach and focus in its international relations, this might well prove a more substantial contribution to genuine international security in the 21st century than current security policy, based as it is on clearly outdated and inadequate conceptions of military capability and alliances and the questionable arts of international diplomacy between nation-states.

[It is possible in fact to view all historical wars as to some degree and in some respects a product of competition over resources; and although this will not tell us the whole truth in all cases, it could form an important part of a wider theory of international relations which starts from an ecological approach to human history. It seems to me that such an analytical approach is badly needed, and that the prevailing theories of international relations have failed to respond adequately to the radical challenge presented by ecological politics. The outlines of such an approach at least are

already visible, and began to be sketched out some time ago – in Karl Polanyi's 'The Great Transformation', or in Clive Ponting's 'A Green History of the World', and then more firmly in the work of Jared Diamond, especially 'Guns, Germs and Steel'. But a thorough theorisation of such an analytical approach still seems to be lacking. Yet without it, how can we understand and hope to deal with such urgent and seemingly intractable problems as current global labour migration or the formulation of effective climate change policy? How can the EU begin to visualize its proper role? This is obviously a much bigger task than could be taken on here, and one for specialists in the theory of international relations. But it is encouraging to see that some at least have recognised this gap and started to think about it: see https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/ammerdowninvitation/security-for-future-in-search-of-new-vision]

Returning now to my central argument, I should perhaps make the point again here that the idea encapsulated in talk of the EU's 'peace mission' is that the EU was created primarily to ensure peace between the traditional adversaries within – not outside – Western Europe: Schumann singled out France and Germany in the speech referred to above. Does anybody, however, seriously believe that war between these two, or between any Western European countries, was a genuine threat in the years following the end of WW2, or indeed at any time since then? If we look at the map of Europe in 1945, it is clear that the potential fault lines that might have led to armed conflict were not within Western Europe, but between Western Europe and Eastern Europe and the USSR. In the immediate post-war years, there was not only real tension at the border between the former western and eastern Allies (think of the Vienna of 'The Third Man'), and a series of greater and lesser skirmishes, but some uncertainty about where the final border would run – Austria, Finland, much of the Balkan peninsula, and above all Germany were all contested zones for a time. But once the Iron Curtain had fully descended, with at least temporary finality, peace within Western Europe and between the West and the East was guaranteed not by the EU but by the Cold War balance of power. It was within that equilibrium that the economic and political experiment of the EU was able to develop. In this context, West Germany's membership of the EU is particularly interesting. Did the (economic) partition of Germany between the EU and Comecon serve to preserve the peace, or perhaps to threaten it? Was it a bigger factor in preserving the peace than Germany's partition between NATO and the Warsaw Pact? I'm not going to attempt to go into these huge questions in this short piece, intended primarily to provoke debate and re-thinking, but merely to question the rhetoric around the role of the EU in post-war European history. My point here is to argue that to attribute a large part of the merit for the post-war peace specifically to the EU would surely be wrong, just as it would be wrong to see that objective – peace within Western Europe – as the dominant motivating factor in the creation of the EU. To believe that the EU has safeguarded peace between Western European nations since the end of WW2 is, in fact, to confuse cause and effect. The EU is more the product of post-war peace than its source. The peace in Europe was a result of economic, human and material exhaustion and of wider geopolitical developments and institutions in the wake of WW2, including the OECD, the UN and NATO, and to some extent also – the extent of the Cold War balance of power – the Warsaw Pact. The claim that the 'peace mission' represents both the founding purpose of the EU and its greatest achievement therefore seems to me highly questionable, on both counts. And even if one disagrees with that view, it seems to me beyond question that to persist with the argument that peace remains the raison d'être of the EU today is a serious political (as opposed to historiographical) error. It does not and will not inspire the vast majority of the EU electorate today, who are too young to have been shaped by the war and who are not politically driven themselves by a similar fear of war – or at any event certainly not of war between Western European nations. In

fact, to constantly rehearse the rhetoric about its peace mission is probably a good way to distance them from the EU – it is the rhetoric of a generation past, and of a different country.

So if the EU was not created principally in reaction to war, and if its primary purpose is not to prevent war, what then – if any – is the link to 1914, and what can we point to as the raison d'être for the EU now?

A possible link to 1914 is suggested at the start of this article, where I referred to the short gap between the two World Wars and to the international conflicts that in fact broke out or continued during that apparent gap. As the time distance from those events increases, the view – initially considered to be outside the historical mainstream – that it is more accurate to consider the two World Wars as part of one extended conflict is gaining wider acceptance. Indeed, historians now have several terms to describe this perspective on the 20th century wars: the 'Long War', the 'Second Thirty Years' War', and the 'European Civil War' among them. There is considerable disagreement over the starting and closing dates for these historiographical constructs as well as over the rationale for using them. And contrary to what might be assumed, this perspective is not entirely dependent on our distance from those events, but was put forward by some already immediately after the end of WW2 (notably by Winston Churchill in his own history of the war), and by at least one important (economic) historian even before the end of the war – by Karl Polanyi in 'The Great Transformation', published in 1944. What these various constructs have in common is that they see the long 20th century war as the extended death-throes of a particular historical period. For Philip Bobbitt ('The Shield of Achilles'), it is the nation-state that is passing (his periodicity extends the war to the dissolution of the USSR). For Polanyi, it is the end of an exceptional period of peace and economic growth based – paradoxically - on the artificial and doomed 'selfregulating market' of 19th century capitalism. It is possible to combine these two theories, in outline if not in detail, to provide a perspective on the 20th century that may offer us a role for the EU in the 21st. In this god's-eye view of the last 200 years, we can see the two World Wars as the extended collapse of a period of capitalism we might call colonialist capitalism, in which capitalism's dynamism and productive power was yoked to the growing centralising capacities of the nation-state in order to accelerate the subjugation by the Western powers of the rest of the world - to the benefit, in traditional geopolitical terms, of the colonialist powers riding the tiger of spreading capitalism; and at the same time of course to the benefit of the capitalist classes within those countries. As Polanyi argued, it was the mutually beneficial nature of these arrangements to all the powerful countries and classes that explains the comparative peacefulness (bar the odd skirmish, usually restricted to peripheral areas of colonial competition) of the 100 years preceding WW1: the real 'peace dividend', with wealth as the dividend of peace. And it was the inexorable disappearance of new markets to open up and of new resource baskets to plunder that created the tensions that exploded in 1914. The last great new territory, Africa, had been formally 'carved up' at the Congress of Berlin in 1885; there was nowhere left to grab in order to satisfy the parallel and symbiotic lusts for colonialist expansion and capitalist growth. The crisis was prolonged, and deferred through the economic depression of the inter-war period, but WW2 was its perverted climax. Polanyi was correct to foresee that the end of WW2 was part of a radical change, but he perhaps overestimated the depth and speed of the change. He had failed to foresee the growth of a new variant, in which capitalist organization transcended the nation-state to usher in a new period of globalization based on the multi-national company. Up to and including WW2, capitalism was still largely organized through nationally-based companies in the symbiosis that Polanyi had recognised and which meant that politics was still largely in control of capital (one need only think of the importance of national corporate champions up to 1939, and the continued importance for Nazi Germany during the war of

huge but still nationally-based and private concerns like Krupp). Since the end of the war, it has shifted inexorably away from a national basis to a free-floating transnational basis no

longer steered by nation-states. The tiger is clearly no longer under the control of its rider, if it ever was. In fact, not only can nation-states no longer control international capital, they are increasingly controlled by it. The international race to the bottom in labour and environmental standards and the cut-throat competition to attract inward investment are two illustrations of this phenomenon. But these are races that no-one can win, as the global industrial machine devours the finite resources it depends on and the growing global population can no longer fulfil at one and the same time the twin roles of cheap labour and new market for goods. In desperation, the machine of capitalism has been extending its reach not outwards to new territories (there are none, apart from unpopulated and/or non-sovereign areas such as the Arctic and the oceans, which may represent resource baskets but don't provide new markets), but inwards: now it sucks profits out of previously non-market areas of our lives, 'privatising' and 'marketising' our social institutions such as education, transport infrastructure and social welfare. This is a creeping de-democratization of our institutions that is reaching critical levels:

Institutional insulation of the capitalist market economy from democratic interference has far advanced in recent decades. Trade unions are on the decline everywhere and were rooted out in many countries, above all the United States. Economic policy has widely been turned over to independent, i.e., democratically unaccountable central banks concerned above all with the health and goodwill of financial markets. In Europe, national economic policies, including wage-setting and budget-making, are increasingly governed by supranational agencies like the European Commission and the European Central Bank that are beyond the reach of popular democracy. Effectively this de-democratizes European capitalism without, of course, depoliticizing it. Still, doubts are widespread if democracy can in the long run deliver the neoliberal "structural reforms" deemed necessary for capitalism to recover. Like ordinary citizens, although for different reasons, elites are losing faith in democratic government, doubting its capacity to rebuild societies in line with requirements for rapid decisions and unlimited adaptability of social structures and ways of life as allegedly imposed by "globalization". Indeed mainstream public policy's new utopia is a "marketconforming democracy", one devoid of market-correcting powers, tolerant of oligarchic redistribution, and supportive of creeping expropriation of citizens' means of political production. (Wolfgang Streeck, Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies; from 'Has Capitalism Seen its Day?', Anglo-German Foundation lecture given at the British Academy, January 2014)

From a Green perspective, the broad lines of development needed are clear: we need to devolve ordinary economic decision-making downwards as far and as fast as possible so that people can see and take responsibility for the immediate ecological costs of their economic activity; and we need to shift democratically-legitimated political power upwards to the lowest level at which meaningful action can be taken. On both dimensions, the current trends are in entirely the wrong direction, only exacerbating and accelerating our structural problems.

As a result, the tensions within the international system are rising again, just as in 1914. This time, the fundamental conflict is not between nation-states in alliance with capital interests competing for new territories; it is between the citizens and international capital interests, with the nation-states caught in between. We have to see this conflict for what it is, and to use the most powerful political institutions and resources we have to protect ourselves. Nation-states are no longer strong enough, and in many cases have been coopted by global capital. So this is where the EU could find its urgent contemporary role: as the protector of citizens' political, environmental and economic rights against

the erosion of public institutions by capital interests. To do so would also accord with a proper interpretation of the EU's history to date. As a number of commentators have pointed out, it is precisely in the increasingly necessary transnational protection of citizen's rights, especially environmental rights, that the EU has been at its most effective, and where it enjoys the greatest popular legitimacy (see for example Ian Christie's 1999 paper for Green Alliance on 'Sustaining Europe', or the more recent Green House Report on 'Greening the EU' by Alex Warleigh-Lack).

In this spirit, the most critical current battle-ground is probably the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which threatens a further serious erosion of national and regional sovereignty by corporate interests in the name of free trade (for more on the dangers of the TTIP, see the European Green Party's position paper here: http://europeangreens.eu/brussels2014/content/position-paper-ttip).

Can the EU, instead of being a signatory to a treaty that would fatally undermine its own powers, grasp the bigger historical picture and the opportunity to find a new historic role in protecting its citizens rather than further enslaving them to a doomed and increasingly indefensible system? Only perhaps if it can abandon the unconvincing myth that its principal rationale and role is to prevent war between nation-states. Is it too much to hope that the anniversary of 1914 might lead to a revaluation of the EU's history, and a deeper analysis of the epochal, systemic tremors we can all sense?