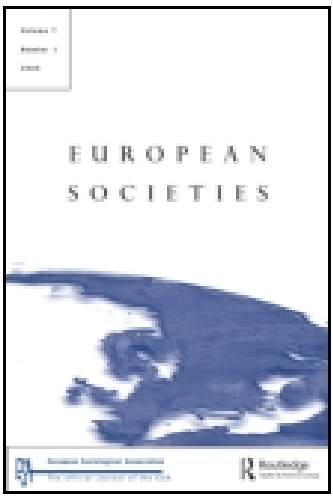

European Societies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reus20

PUTTING CULTURE IN ITS PLACE

Maryon McDonald [a]
[a] Division of Social Anthropology , University of Cambridge , Cambridge , UK
Published online: 20 Sep 2012.

European Societies
14(4) 2012: 540–561

ISSN
1461-6696 print
1469-8307 online

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

PUTTING CULTURE IN ITS PLACE

Anthropological reflections on the European Commission

Maryon McDonald
Division of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT: The European Union has been constructed through common ontologies of a world composed and divided on spatial scales. This paper elaborates on this point and examines anthropologically some of the key notions that have been called on to construct the EU, notably that of 'culture'. It is suggested that we might profitably take 'culture' out of our own analytical tool-kits and treat it instead as an interesting but problematic invention. Drawing on the author's own fieldwork inside European institutions, the paper explores relevant aspects of life inside the Commission and what it is to be 'European'. The paper sets out some of the negative and positive ways in which 'culture' is lived or understood in the Commission, and it outlines some of the problems of 'culture' as an analytical tool, from its earlier history to the stereotypes it still encourages, and in so doing points to aspects of the practical imagination and difficulties of the EU project more generally. We see that Europe may respect cultures but only by cherishing the notionally culture-free.
Key words: EU; European Commission; culture; stereotypes; corruption; cosmopolitanism; management

Introduction

This paper sets out to encourage a change in the status of 'culture' in the social and political sciences. Reflections on 'European culture' and daily working life in the European Commission would suggest that such a change might be useful. The following paragraphs are not a full analysis of 'culture' in Europe or of the workings of the European Commission.[1]

1. There are many helpful accounts available of the workings of the Commission, including Page (1997); Cini (1996); Stevens and Stevens (2001); Hooghe (2001); Rhinard (2010).

 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2012.724578

What I try to do instead is to use the setting of the EU – and particularly of the European Commission that has played such a large part in its framing – to hold 'culture' up for inspection. At the same time, I argue that we can thereby gain a better understanding of some important experiential realities involved in the construction of the EU. I draw on material from full-time anthropological fieldwork that I have carried out inside the European Commission, initially in 1992–94 and then 1998–99, along with return visits since.[2]

Some problems mentioned in this paper were noted in the first anthropological study of the Commission (Abélès *et al.* 1993) and picked up or alluded to in the reports of the Committee of Independent Experts during the 1999 'corruption' scandals (see Cini 2007). The reforms of 1997–2004, partly in preparation for the 2004 enlargement, highlighted what were seen as organisational weaknesses in the Commission, some of them related to perceived cultural differences. Based on a neo-Herderian culture – a dominant understanding of culture in Europe – the Commission could seem to be quite obviously a world of different cultures. There are, after all, officials from at least 27 nations ('member states') working there. In internal conversations, national cultural differences between officials are mentioned – or they are summarised as differences between the North and South of Europe, which occasionally resonate with a West/East distinction following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. It has long been common to hear, however, that the dominant difference inside the Commission is, and remains, that of a British/French or Anglo-Saxon/Latin distinction – or simply between 'Anglo-Saxons' and 'the rest'. Any one of these categories can appear to contract and stretch elastically according to context. Outside the Commission, common stereotypes of North and South, such as that of northern rectitude and southern laxity, have come alive more recently in the Eurozone crisis – but we will see in this paper that, in various forms, stereotypes have long had a life inside the Commission, too.

In some form then, cultural difference is felt to exist internally in the Commission – whether this is expressed as national cultural difference or other recensions of it. When I had recently embarked on my first round of fieldwork inside the European Commission, I gave some early feedback about this in an internal meeting. Those present were not, for the most part, Commission officials from *les services* (or the Departments) but

2. Some of this material was written up in internal, unpublished reports – including Abélès *et al.* (1993); and McDonald (1998). I am grateful to participants in a seminar in 2003 at the European University Institute (Florence) for their comments on my attempts to re-think the language of analysis.

officials from *cabinets*[3] level – close advisers, in this instance, of the Commission President. They expressed surprise at what seemed to be the multi-cultural world of the Commission services. The surprise came from the fact that the Commission had been proclaimed since its inception as the 'laboratory' for the creation of a 'new kind of man', *homo europaeus* (Haas 1958; Lindberg 1963; Monnet 1978; Spence 1994).

Much has been written since Monnet that has contributed further to a vision of new political actors being created at the EU level, suggesting that the European Commission would 'socialise' a European elite, their loyalty 'transferred' from the nation to 'Europe' – and whether this was part of the functional 'spill-over' of integration or not, national would be replaced by 'supranational' allegiances the longer officials were immersed in European institutions.[4] From the initial anthropological report, the institution could seem to be very much heir instead to the dispositions of national cultures. However, as I hope to suggest in this paper, the picture is rather more complex.

'Cultural difference' is how many differences and tensions inside the Commission have been framed, and it was sometimes blamed internally for generating or increasing a sense of 'unpredictability' and a perceived 'lack of trust'. Those working in both the European Parliament and Commission have long felt themselves torn in different directions (Abélès *et al*. 1993; Lord 1998). Along with different party, national or confessional allegiances, there has also seemed to be a sense of mis-match and confusion in ways of doing things. All this experiential unpredictability has often been termed '*le flou*' (Fr.) inside the Commission walls (McDonald 2000). Reforms of the Commission have sought, in part, to get rid of this *flou* as a space in which corruption might flourish but, in many ways, this inherent aspect of the Commission has facilitated the dealings of

3. For some of the evolving differences between the services or Departments on the one hand, and the Commissioners and their cabinets on the other, see the works cited in note 1 above and Peterson (2008).
4. There is a large literature suggesting that these are important questions (e.g., Diez and Wiener 2004) and giving various hypotheses of how the transformation to 'European' loyalties might happen, or seeking to measure for reliable 'socialization' or 'Europeanization' models: for some of this, see Beyers (2005); Checkel (2003, 2005); Christiansen (1997); George (1985); Hooghe (1999, 2005); Kelley (2004); Michel and Robert (eds.) 2010; Niemann (1997); O'Neill (1996); Pierson (1996); Trondal (2004). My own paper here starts from a different analytical framework and my methodology has been predominantly that of full-time anthropological fieldwork inside the Commission, rather than relying on interviews (e.g., Shore 2000) or questionnaires (e.g., Checkel 2003, 2005) from outside.

EEC, then EC, then EU politics. Staff have had flexibility as policy entrepreneurs and member states have been able quietly to exert influence.

One mis-match encouraging a sense of confusion in the Commission for some concerned officials has been that everything can appear oddly personal. There has been tension between those who have expected the impartiality of an administrative system and those who had generally been in the Commission longer and for whom the personal and political were inevitably important. Information is not easily shared and I was told that people were waiting to take your dossier from you, with no clear lines of demarcation and no-one to appeal to. 'Nothing is clear.' Those who complained most loudly were, in their own and others' perceptions, from the 'North' of Europe (especially the British and Danes initially, who were also the first to try to talk of 'management' in the Commission). Differences between pre-1973 and post-1973 ways of doing things have often been pinned on regional and national cultural differences. Many examples were included in the first anthropological study of life inside the Commission (Abélès *et al*. 1993) and there are more examples one could continue to give, driving the multicultural machine through the last and next enlargements.

However, there are at least two points here, the first analytical and the second ethnographic, that should act as metaphorical brakes. First, the matter of cultural difference needs to shift analytically into a different language, something we will see in a moment; and second, the ethnographic reality is that a world of different cultures internally is something that Commission officials might want publicly to claim to exist in priority in other EU institutions – notably the Parliament and Council – with which the Commission, as the 'motor' and 'conscience' of a single Europe (Nugent 1997), has to deal.

Culture

The notion of 'culture' has an interesting history. It has been invented and re-invented through modernity largely as all that materiality, reason and the forces of the Enlightenment are not (Chapman 1978; Kuper 1999). Perhaps the most enduring understanding of 'culture' has been that of a neo-Herderian '*Kultur*', which has found life in nationalisms and ethnic identities alike. Within this framework, a package developed in which every 'people' was supposed to have a 'culture' that found its best expression in 'their own language'. We will return to this in a moment. For our immediate purposes here, there are two ethnographic points to note about dominant ideas of 'culture' in Europe.

(i) Culture, society, market: an ontological topography

The internal organisation of the European Commission has been congruent with a 'domainorama' widespread in Europe and beyond. The world is constituted, experienced and acted on through domains that form an ontological topography, including 'the market' – growing to 'the economy' (Mitchell 1998) – and society and culture. In Europe, these inventions have been metaphorically and epistemologically stacked in layers: it is as if the market is the underlying 'real' that makes society possible, the social then palliates its effects, and culture occupies an elevating and elevated space in the clouds (McDonald 2006, 2012). These domains are also part of the political technologies of government, the domains that make the world visible and knowable and through which 'policy' is constructed. They are embodied in a division of labour.

In the construction of the EU, there has been a congruence of perceived epistemological and political priorities. The EEC was launched as the 'common market', with the Common Agricultural Policy its first market and the Internal Market of 1992 its second and definitive; only then did Social Policy really take shape – still an Annexe in the Maastricht Treaty of European Union but integrated in Treaties from 1997. Culture policy in the meantime has shifted from its lofty 'People's Europe' ambitions to become largely an adjunct to the economy and its necessary competitiveness. When I first started work in Brussels, there was little doubt that the market had priority. Officials in the Internal Market Department (then known as 'DG III' – later known as 'Markt') knew their importance.

This Market Department felt itself to be in some sense the 'real' Europe. 'We *are* Europe. What *is* Europe if not a market?' The boundaries of legislative over-enthusiasm in internal meetings were drawn by reference to the 'mad market' in another Department down the road – the Common Agricultural Policy. That was the world of price fixing and subsidies. The 'real' market was clearly the 'free market' and not the world of the 'peasants' but of men in suits, mostly economists and lawyers, with a serious handle on reality. Other Departments with little or no legislative competence, or dealing with the Social or the Cultural, had to battle for their credibility, with relative staff gender distributions between them and market/cultural or market/social distinctions each confirming the other. Until recently, it was not a career move in the Commission to go to either Social Policy or 'Culture'.

Towards the end of my first period of fieldwork (1992–94), we learnt in the Internal Market Department that '*le Président*' (the President of the Commission) was blaming the Market for unemployment. He wanted '*le social*'. Different visions of the EU often involve disagreements about

relations between the market and the social anyway but, after all the hard work of the Internal Market deadline, this was not good news here. The social and the cultural have their place, and should not get in the way of the Market. The defence of cultural difference 'disguised as Article 36' (or 'as Article 30') had long been felt to be in danger of sneaking in externally to prevent market functioning. When I returned for my next period of fieldwork (1998–99), both the Commission and the Internal Market Department within it were already looking for a new image, and self-conscious efforts were made. When I reported that I had this time encountered some officials elsewhere in the Commission who did not know what the 'Markt' Department did now, this was claimed by Internal Market officials as 'quite an accomplishment'.

(ii) Cultural diversity

The Commission has been compared unfavourably in recent decades with the dominant models of accountability through which the nation-state has survived. Prior to more recent worries about 'corruption' and cries for reform, followed by serious economic crises in the EU, there had been two principal periods during which questions of the Commission's legitimacy had been raised. First of all, concerns were voiced in the late 1960s – a period when the original, self-evident legitimacy of the Community, defined against a past of war, was losing relevance to a new generation. The old certainties of modernity, many of which had had informed the EEC project, were put in question, alternative living and relativism appealed, and cultural diversity was invented as something to celebrate. The second period of worries came about with the launch of the Internal Market, with more directives in a shorter time than ever before. The Berlin Wall fell, and many old certainties fell afresh with it, and the Maastricht Treaty was negotiated in a context in which, with the Internal Market, Brussels 'interference' already appeared as established fact. Going beyond nationalism had seemed morally right in the years after the Second World War, but now this was widely perceived externally as a moral and political threat (McDonald 1997).

Throughout all this, the cipher of 'the people', re-invented since the 1960s (that historiographical time of 'grass-roots' or 'bottom-up' contestation), loomed large – and the 'top-down' planning technologies inherited by the Commission from the EU's French 'founding fathers' were put in question. The Commission's 'People's Europe' programme of the 1980s – attempting to bring young people, against the prevailing current, back into the 'European' fold – did little to help (McDonald 1996, 1999; Shore 2000). It appeared to assume, on a nation-state model,

that 'Europe' had one 'culture', a common 'European culture' (constructed in simple continuity from Graeco-Roman origins) to which national cultures might ideally give way, through a recognition of their commonality, on the path to modernity and progress. The historiography of this common culture – for which funding was available – was doubly historicist, in deliberate exhortation. No dreamt-of European unity, in one 'people' and one 'culture', was forthcoming. Some of the key elements – including a single language – were, in any case, missing. By the 1990s, the programme was already looked back on by many Commission officials with quiet ridicule. Europe's 'people' had, in any case, been defined in the plural. Its 'culture' has similarly become 'cultures'. At the same time, the legitimacy troubles had already spurred a worried Commission to start contemplating an internal reform process (Cini 2007).

Intervening in and encouraging some of the scorn and bewilderment that has greeted the People's Europe project has been an interesting historical elision of the French '*civilisation*' with 'culture'. In the early days of the EEC and right on until at least the 1960s, there had been visions in the High Authority or Commission, echoed in the Assembly or European Parliament, of educational projects that would encourage 'European Consciousness' – the European schools (in Brussels especially) and the European University Institute (in Florence) being early examples. The '*conscience collective*' that was supposedly to be produced is suggestive; this was an analytical term that French scholars had invented (Durkheim foremost amongst them) in the early decades of the twentieth century in order to avoid using the German '*Kultur*', the language of the invaders and enemy. In EEC discussions about such projects in the 1950s and 1960s, however, the French *conscience collective* and German *Kultur* sometimes translate each other and both evoke explicit '*forces spirituelles*'. At the same time, *une conscience européene* was used alongside talk of *la civilisation européenne* and then sometimes replaced it, before itself being partially replaced by *la culture* as this last term (sweeping up the arts, *le patrimoine* and a *conscience collective*) gained usage in Fifth Republic France. In the EEC debates of the early Assembly or Parliament, talk of the '*civilisation européenne*' had made use of French Enlightenment notions of *la civilisation* which signified the scientific, material rationality and progress that France had then tried hard, through internal revolution and external expansionism, to make universal. In many ways, the German *Kultur* – definitely not universal but national, and not material but spiritual – which eventually became *la culture* in French, had been forged historically in opposition to this *civilisation* (Kuper 1999). In these EEC/EC discussions, however, participants carried on much of the time in mutual exhortation as if

they were just talking about the same thing.[5] This aspect of EC/EU compromise through elision and (mis)translation meant that a French *civilisation* born to be of common, material and universal benefit increasingly became an ideal, particular 'culture' that would be made universal in Europe if it was not already. *La Civilisation* of modernity and progress, however, was the very world against which the post-1960s 'culture', underlined by a new celebration of its plurality, took its shape. Populism notwithstanding, the 1980s 'People's Europe' project not only came too late but carried a complex muddle that inhibited success.

The EU has therefore shifted over its first half century from upholding an apparently singular 'European civilisation' (turned into 'European culture') towards a manifest tension of singular and plural in the 1990s – in the Maastricht Treaty, for example, wherein Europe's 'cultures' were to be respected whilst 'bringing the common culture to the fore' (Commission 1992: 13) – and then on to the Lisbon Treaty, in which cultural diversity seems well-established but in a new unity-in-diversity compromise through open coordination and qualified majority voting.[6] At the same time, the relationship between the European Commission and member states has ideally shifted from top-down aspirations to 'dialogue with the citizens' and 'partnership'. Internally, these changes may have brought changes in the disposition of the Market men amongst others – but they have also brought problems. External events and 'crises' along with progressive enlargements of the EU, with the influx of new officials from new member states into the Commission, have compounded a sense internally of 'rolling uncertainty'.

Beyond culture

'Culture' has spread and is part of a moral discourse in which different cultures have to be respected. 'Culture' has become part of people's self-perception in Europe. There are problems with it analytically, however, which mean that whilst we must accept that it is part of the world of people we study in Europe, it has no place in our own analytical tool-kits. 'Culture' sometimes implies just beliefs or ideas still – behaviours 'from the neck up' (Csordas 1999: 150). It is also easily reified – as if 'cultures'

5. See 'Debates of the European Parliament' (special supplement of the *Official Journal of the European Communities*) of the 1950s and 1960s, especially September 1952, January 1965, and 1968–69.
6. See, for example, the website of Culture Action Europe: www.cultureactioneurope.org; in language shared with the Commission, this lobbying group aims to encourage 'Intercultural dialogue' in order to promote a common sense of European citizenship. On cultural policy, see also Littoz-Monnet (2007).

meet or bump into one other – or it is understood as some kind of generative template. It is long since time for a new analytical language, therefore, in order to understand some key aspects of the world inside the Commission.

One such contender has been 'embodiment' theory (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1962; Bourdieu 1977; Csordas 1999). Officials 'embody' dispositions in their home countries and then in the Commission. However, this has its own problems (Vilaça 2009), and 'the body' is often left as a black box. It might be more helpful to talk of the bodies that officials have acquired and continue to acquire (Latour 2004). Whilst still appearing to use the language of 'embodiment' occasionally, we will then have moved into a more radically corporeal terrain that rejects not only old dichotomies of mind/body or culture/biology but also the anteriority of a subject on the one hand, and of another given such as 'the world' or 'environment' on the other. This analytical approach gives a different starting point for analysis – not culture but a material ontology of bodies inhering in all the circumstances of an environing world. There is no space to develop the details in this paper but it seems important to make the theoretical framework explicit.[7] The key question for our purposes here is: if we take this approach, where does 'culture' come in? It re-enters not as an analytical term for the anthropologist but as part of the ethnography – as part of the theory that the people studied may have of themselves and their world. The anthropological analysis then runs roughly as follows: in Europe generally, as people do what they call growing up, their bodies develop relationally – they learn to be affected and are constituted relationally with and through other persons and objects and all environing circumstances; part of this complex often involves an experiential sense of commonality effected through various practices of emulation and alignment – notably through education systems, the rule of law and the media, organised largely on national lines; one shorthand for what becomes constructed and experienced contextually as an apparent commonality – for those who thus live it and corporeally align – has been 'culture'. Ethnographically then, culture is part of the apperception of those living in Europe – but it is no longer the anthropologist's analytical tool, no longer our analytical task to say this or that is culture; instead, we render it

7. In anthropology, attempts to (i) *dispense with 'culture' analytically* are not new although sometimes controversial (e.g., Carrithers *et al*. 2010) but various attempts to (ii) *centre the corporeal* – from Csordas (ed.) (1994) and Toren (1999) to Ingold (2011), for example – have become common. Combining aspects of (i) and (ii), the approach I take can also encompass 'local biologies' and 'epigenetics', and the term 'circumstances' here would include everything, human and non-human: McDonald (2012). The 'beyond culture' sub-heading is taken from Fox and King (eds) (2002).

strange in order to understand how the people we study might use, understand and live 'culture' – and the consequences.

When officials arrive at the Commission, they have generally acquired bodies within national contexts in which neo-Herderian ideas of culture have gained experiential reality. Newly arrived officials 'know' one language expressed in another; they hear 'accents', learn to place them, and tacitly expect a whole complex of differences to go with this. They do not always know quite what those differences might be and how far they might go. They also know that differences are to be respected. Just where the boundaries of acceptability might lie is not always clear, and sometimes it seemed during my fieldwork as if the only person they might openly complain to about the difficulties involved was the anthropologist. Positive statements about the 'cultural richness' of life inside the Commission might be freely voiced to an outsider but there were also complaints and tears behind closed doors internally, accompanied by manifest worry, anger, stress and illness.[8]

So when they come to the Commission, most recruits have already acquired bodies – encompassing particular neuronal connectivities, sensoria, proprieties or dispositions and very much more – which got them through the entrance examinations. When they pass these exams, many expect to be allotted a job in the Commission. When they learn that, in order to get a job, they should first 'lobby' those persons working in the Departments where they would like to work, a mis-match of expectations can make this institution seem 'corrupt'. Personal relations seem to enter the world of an impartiality that is ideally devoid of the personal. Those who are not shocked already 'know' that that is how the world works and that it would be naive to imagine otherwise. They have already acquired different bodies, have learnt to be affected by different circumstances.

This sense of mis-match continues after entry into the institution. This is where what we loosely call 'stereotypes' may come in. Two brief points might clarify analytically what happens. Firstly, when persons constituted in different circumstances meet – as they do in an institution such as the Commission – then there is often an apprehension of incongruence. Dispositions do not match, do not 'fit', giving a sense of disorder; there is commonly both an apperception of, and empirical confirmation of, disorder in the other. Such apprehensions are often made sense of in national terms, whether national difference is perceived or guessed through clothing or gesture, for example, or heard in language – it is there, at an apprehension of a national boundary, that difference is most commonly noticed and in those terms that it is readily understood. The Commission is not a world in which different national cultures simply bang into each other. Rather, nations or

8. What were classed as 'psycho-social' illnesses amounted to almost 40% of officially recognized 'invalidity' claims in the Commission.

nationalities provide the conceptual boundaries by which, in the ways we have learnt to be affected in Europe, difference is most easily constructed and recognised, and then the whole do-it-yourself kit of national difference – with 'culture' part of that kit – comes into play.

So often, when the British come to the Commission, and especially those with a British civil service background, it has felt like 'anarchy'. British officials have often condemned the general 'disorganisation' of the Commission. In such a view, reform of the Commission was essential. The British and others knew, of course, about the 'hierarchy' in the Commission. They spent some time trying to change or subvert it. For them, the hierarchy was not structure and their behaviour encouraged the view that they were 'difficult' and themselves 'anarchical'. In this mutual perception of anarchy, each could feel empirically true – and, at every stage, alignments of reactions are encouraged that can feel again like a 'culture', as if one culture viewing another.

Emerging from such tensions, officials might on many occasions have to present a united 'European' face to the outside world. This is not always easy if a few minutes previously, back in your office, you had been quietly muttering '*raz le bol*' about that Danish colleague with sandals and no respect for 'structure'; or if, as the Dane in question, you were fed up with the Commission's 'typically French' bureaucracy, demeaning hierarchy, *signataires* and 'six-page memos about nothing' (McDonald 1996). Significant shifts in corporeal personhood and authority were required when Commission reforms sought to dispense with the pervasive *signataires* – bundles of documents that, bound in red tape, regularly determined and traced the topography of hierarchies – and to encourage instead managerial 'individuals' of responsibility and visibility who, in many areas, could now sign for themselves. Whilst many young French officials saw this as a great benefit, they could also choose on occasion to frame the change as an onslaught on 'French culture'.

A 'European' Commission

Stereotypes and issues of nationality and 'cultural difference' emerged and re-merged in various ways during the attempts that were made, with concentrated efforts during 1997–2004, to reform the Commission.[9]

9. The reforms known as 'SEM' and 'MAP 2000' under Santer were largely incorporated into the similar – if more loudly proclaimed – reforms that came after him under Prodi and Barroso. See McDonald (1998, 2000); Cini (2007); Ellinas and Suleiman (2008); Peterson (2008). These reforms, publicly described as 'radical', began in 1997, gained a perceived urgency with the 1999 scandals, and were notionally completed during the 1999–2004 Commission, prior to the 2004 EU enlargement.

The reforms' combination of neo-Weberian bureaucracy and New Public Management suggested to many officials that the Commission was either being turned from a European institution into 'Coca-Cola' – or being converted from an intellectual policy leader, running with dossiers in a known and efficient network, into a lumbering 'bureaucratic' organisation concerned with some mundane non-politicality called 'management', and with the once nimble officials becoming increasingly overloaded (McDonald 2000; Levy 2006).

The Commission's internal reform rhetoric included, at every stage, aims to 'modernise' and 'Europeanise'. 'European' is an empty banner, filled according to context, and we will see in this section some of its varying and occasionally conflicting content. The reforms sought 'transparency, efficiency and accountability' through, for example, associated ideals of merit and mobility in the Commission services. This world of mobile 'human resources', whilst consonant with important ideals of impartiality and efficiency alike, nevertheless threatened relations in the Commission through which the work was actually done.

During the period of intense activity in the Commission in the late 1980s and early 1990s, patronage networks had been encouraged 'from the President's *cabinet* down' as a major way of getting the unprecedented workload done. Trust and predictability were gained for those able to maintain their position within such networks, and reciprocation assured. A sense of the centrality of the 'personal' in the functioning of the Commission has been greatly encouraged by enduring reciprocations of patronage. This has not been confined to any one nationality or region, and patronage links have not necessarily run on national lines in the Commission, but there have long been in Europe those who would claim rational transactions for themselves – and view the requisite 'others' (the 'South' posing as one of these) as left behind in a web of patron–client relations. By the time of the Commission reforms and the 1999 resignations, it was officials from Nordic member states who were giving empirical flesh to this, in whispered internal comments that the Commission was 'childish, male-dominated, very southern and very French'. However, for longer-serving officials, efficiency was inevitably lost if the rational planning of resources meant that long-established relations of articulation and obligation, internally and externally, were disrupted.

In 2000, I visited the Commission at the invitation of a Commissioner to discuss some of the problems of reforming the Commission. When I entered his office, he claimed to be 'apoplectic' about problems he had faced that morning alone. Firstly, a colleague who was formerly a member of Delors' cabinet had publicly rubbished the 'Anglo-Saxon' reforms in a major newspaper. Secondly, a long-serving official of a staff Union had

just suggested to the Commissioner that he might get the Union to support the reforms if help – promotion – could be given to a deserving friend of his. The official in question had mistakenly taken his own acquired automaticity of negotiation into the unexpected glare of new 'transparency' ideals – and an 'accountability' that was radically shifting. Existing accountabilities could find no easy expression in these new public goods.

The reforms tried to give 'European' moral shape to a disavowal inside the Commission of national networks, favouritism or patronage (often summarised as 'nepotism' internally). National identity has been encouraged in the Commission by some features of EU decision-making and the modes of recruitment and promotion and by a perceived necessity to obtain the support of one's own national representatives in Brussels in order to secure one's position or policy (Cini 1996; McDonald 1997; Hooghe 2001). 'National flags' on specific Departments, where 'national interests' and national influence in senior appointments are seen to collude, have now been formally removed and had long been the stuff of quiet internal jokes – notably about the '*Gauloises*-smoking' Agriculture Department, for example. Early on in my fieldwork, one official had complained that: 'One certain way to failure here is to be European'. At the same time, being 'European' was prized and the reforms gave it new meaning. A younger, self-consciously cosmopolitan intake of officials supported the calls for reform. National help in jobs and promotion – internally or through Permanent Representations, for example – has not disappeared, however. The most recent EU enlargements have brought new external monitoring by member states to make sure their own nationals are proportionately and appropriately present. National bias is condemned but 'geographical balance' (Article 27 of the *Staff Regulations*) becomes a legitimate and 'European' aim.

National officials on secondment were seen for decades as potential 'Trojan Horses' threatening an explicitly 'supranational' ethos (Wessels 1998) – but in the new context combining cultural respect, partnership and dialogue, the Commission has talked publicly of the aim of a mutual understanding of each other's ways of operating that the system of secondment (ideally mutual but usually one-way) could and should generate (Trondal 2003). Certainly, *engrenage* within a multi-national and multilingual milieu in Brussels – with its various EU and UN institutions and the crowd of representatives, experts, journalists and lobbyists on which a moral economy of bar drinks, restaurant meals, and cocktail and dinner parties depends – encourages a world in which participants learn to be affected in ways that, some will claim, feels 'European', with the national seeming 'parochial'. These same people, including both seconded and permanent Commission officials, usually distinct from the Belgian

townsfolk of Brussels, generally live in areas nevertheless where their own nationality congregates (Abélès *et al.* 1993; Herzfeld 1997).

The Commission has ideally gone beyond any nationalist language-and-culture model internally, using a sociolanguage[10] labelled as French or English for internal communication – although a shift from the first to the second at the time of the reforms nevertheless heightened tension and complaint.[11] Speaking French was deemed to be the more ideologically 'European' when I first arrived, with British officials even speaking French to each other in the corridors. Officials have been required to be proficient in at least one other language on joining the Commission and are funded to learn more. New bodies and dispositions are acquired as new languages, new gestures and other new skills are learnt, technologies acquired, clothing styles changed, facial muscles altered, arms and hands modified, different foods eaten and eaten in new ways, new 'reflexes' boasted, and more. Some of this is self-conscious, trying to 'compromise'. Just as negotiations with member states can require elements of 'give and take', so the lives of officials can sometimes suggest a self-conscious management of cultural difference through its dissipation and explicit 'reduction' (Abélès *et al.* 1993; Abélès and Bellier 1996).

Increasingly, the changing relationship between the Commission and member states has underlined that, as one senior official stressed, 'we are not in a zero sum game'. Inside the Commission, a use of national links and of what are deemed to be 'national sensitivities' is sometimes openly advocated – and can become positively 'European'. Internal 'brainstorming' sessions on a topic where regulation might be required, for example, then turn the 'geographical balance' stipulated in appointments into units in which difference can be deliberately elicited. During my later fieldwork, one Internal Market discussion opened with the question 'what is jam?' – and, in the course of the meeting, the juxtaposition of 'Eurojam' and the newer 'mutual recognition' framework was turned into an explicit exemplification of an older but still essential unity and a newer 'respect for cultural diversity'.[12] 'Culture' has become a potentially useful object of knowledge in the sounding out of 'sensitivities'. The persuasion or

10. On 'sociolanguage', see McDonald (1989); my use of this term is intended, in part, to avoid the implications of bounded, distinct languages or a necessary consciousness of and respect for such boundaries in normal, everyday speech.
11. On language issues in the Commission, see Abélès *et al.* (1993); Bellier (1994); McDonald (1998, 2000); and on differences between the European Parliament and the Commission, McDonald (1996).
12. The explicit enrolment of 'cultural diversity' into the Internal Market through an elision of 'mutual recognition' with respect for cultural difference has also been made in writing by a former Internal Market Director: Mattera (2005). On the 'mutual recognition' approach, which speeded up the Internal Market, see Schioppa (2005).

cajoling of member states, and an encouragement to compromise, is an important part of Commission work. Younger officials have occasionally balked at being told to visit their 'own' Permanent Representations for such purposes however, particularly when a 'hands off' ethos is likely to result – and one young official had to be sharply reminded by his boss that he willingly 'wrapped himself in the national flag' at a football match and so could now 'do the same again'. In the newer EU methods of co-ordination or network governance,[13] 'sensitivity' to 'national cultures', the more skilfully to persuade or desist, has been increasingly prized. At the same time, Barroso's urgent public appeals in 2011 for ever closer Union to solve the economic crisis, suggesting a firmer hand from the Commission, were apparently a direct 'message from the markets'.[14]

Being 'European' can elide with a discipline or asceticism more familiar in other fields. The epistemic virtue of scientific objectivity, the meritocratic ethic of civil service examinations, the managerialist measurement of performance, or the universalistic ideals of cosmopolitanism: these can all seem to be part of European modernity and in various ways figure both in relations with member states and as ambitions in the Commission's internal reforms. Nation-states in Europe have tended historically to encourage a perceived separation of 'levels' on a spatial scale between the national and the cosmopolitan, or the national and the European (Kwon 2008). Being 'European' can feel higher and broader in this moral topography, as if occupying a moral high ground, and this can seem to receive empirical confirmation in seating for those Committees that are run by the Commission. Officials tend to occupy a quasi 'high table' which, even if not physically elevated, spans the room and faces the member states arranged alphabetically before them.

Europe's administration has to construct an '*intérêt européen*' through an '*esprit européen*', often a form of impartiality that can evoke 'objectivity' both metaphorically and in practice. Ideally acultural technologies, such as a numerical scoring of merit advocated internally for staff assessment in the Commission, can seem to be a bedrock of trustworthiness, drained of any bias and the '*flou*' of the multilingual, multicultural arena. These technologies of objectivity occlude the relations involved (Porter 1995). Ideals such as a 'free market' and the figure of an impartial bureaucrat can partake of similar notions, often appearing to be 'impersonal' and 'acultural' – even as they require constant monitoring, regulation, complaint, compromise and modification in practice. The Commission's active construction and monitoring of the Market is 'as if' done by

13. On the different 'policy modes' involved here, see Wallace *et al.* (2010: ch. 4).
14. See, for example, http://www.euronews.net/2011/09/28/barroso-urges-economic-union-in-face-of-euro-crisis/ (accessed 30th September 2011).

high-minded, European officials acting without obligation or favour towards any member state or its associates. In practice, this has required the use of national links and networks, patronage and cajoling, package deals and compromise, and 'cultural respect' along with some tough talking and action, internally and externally. Those who have been in the Commission for a long time have acquired bodies that can find such processes 'automatic'.

There was always concern, amongst both reformers and critics, that decision-making could not be 'transparent', that connections could not always be visible, and that the reforms might instantiate some of the very 'corruption' they were supposed to remove. When simple aspects of the reforms were first explained to one Department, a senior official – a Director – was horrified. 'But I can't do that!' he insisted when informed that he would now be the sole signatory on forms allowing holidays for the staff under him (rather than requiring a second signature from 'DG IX', the old Personnel Department). He feared he might be required to sign for holidays that should not be given. He eventually relented. There was no choice. 'We have to assume our Directors are honest', he was told. What hope was there for the rest if they were not? In the meantime, the Director was apparently searching for an implacable domain of impartiality but for which he could give to anyone, the patron of their indebtedness (cf. Herzfeld 1992). What will there be to stop me helping you when the extra signature of the Personnel Department that I can blame for preventing me has gone?

This Director was Italian by nationality. It would be easy to fall into old stereotypes here – which some newer officials did, in whispered comments about 'Italian culture' and 'the South' afterwards. However, this official had been born in Italy but lived and was educated elsewhere and later joined the Commission and worked under Delors, when the institution was like a task force. Like everyone else at that time, no matter what their origins, he had bodily to acquire quite fast – through all the mutual articulations of daily working life in the Commission – the importance of personal connection to get things done and of an external domain of impartiality to put the brakes on – to appeal to or to blame – in order to counter 'madness' and 'corruption', as he put it. He was now angry, his voice raised and hands clenched; he felt mocked, held in suspicion, his years of achievement discounted. He had always been 'European', he insisted. Others quietly sympathised: they wished the reformers had bothered to acquaint themselves with the decades of hard, successful work that had gone before. Any reference to 'Italian culture' is part of the ethnography here, not the language of our analysis – and we should be wary of using the language of multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Some might wish that I had simply described the cultural richness of the Commission or of Europe more generally. The point I have tried to make, however, is that if we take 'culture' out of our analytical tool-kits, we can allow it to be of ethnographic interest instead – seeing how the people studied understand or use 'culture'. We have seen that 'culture' has both negative and positive lives in the functioning of the Commission – and it does so in many EU policies that I have not had space to mention, from animal welfare to colouring in marmalade. We have also been able to grasp aspects of what it can mean to be 'European'. And rather than finding 'culture' everywhere, as we might if we used it in an older social science mode, we can more easily allow ethnographically, too, for the hard-won areas of the notionally culture-free.[15]

Scientific Committees, composed of external experts, can pose as important culture-free and politically neutral arbiters in dispute in the EU. In a 'situated cosmopolitanism' (Englund 2004), the Commission similarly poses as a relatively disinterested space, 'supranational' and 'European', in the Committees it runs; Commission officials know that 'without us, there would be no decisions in there'. Inside the Commission in turn, the Markt Department – in tense alliance with 'Competition' colleagues – poses as the guardian of an ideal in which no-one owes anything to anyone and all can engage in transactions within a model of perfect competition (Graeber 2011). 'We *are* Europe' resonates. Other Departments' policies are watched for 'distortions' and anything that obstinately smacks of cultural or national protection and prevents trade can be referred to the hurdle of scientific fact. Internally in the Commission, ciphers such as 'DG IX' [Personnel Department] and the much-cited *Staff Regulations* have similarly posed as domains of a detached, implacable rationality to which appeal might be made in dispute or through which unwelcome advice could be channelled. Changes to either or both of these in the reform of the Commission were highly contentious from the start – and brought officials out on strike.

Officials may discuss sectoral or Departmental commonalities in the Commission and may similarly talk – often cynically and especially to outsiders – of a 'Commission culture' (with 'culture' here seen to be derived from management theory). Such claims do not always speak of

15. Cf. on this point Candea (2011), where we see that examining the 'political' ethnographically also brings into focus areas (e.g., *écoles laïques* in France) deemed free of politics. In my analysis here, there has been no space to discuss the separation of the administrative and the political that the Commission reforms have sought to effect.

experiential alignment internally but, in the language of reformers, have spoken of perceived behaviours that should change.[16] In the European Parliament, where I was cheerfully told that Europe was a 'culture of cultures', officials more readily talk openly of internal cultural diversity. The Parliament is more easily the *vox populi* and displays a language-and-culture diversity model, with an expensive entourage of travelling interpreters. The practice of unity-in-diversity falling to the Commission is not easy, demanding compromises, discipline and impartiality, internally and externally. Whilst it might be tempting to impose a blanket language of culture on internal alignments, and of cultural difference on internal tensions, and whether or not we feel the EU a worthy enterprise – it would be doing an injustice to those involved to ignore the bodily efforts and contextual proprieties of both attachment and obligation, on the one hand, as well as forms of detachment and impartiality on the other, that enable Commission officials literally to incorporate complex relationalities and effect compromise to 'construct Europe' every working day.

References

Abélès, M., Bellier, I. and McDonald, M. (1993) *Approche Anthropologique de la Commission Europeénne*, Brussels: European Commission.

Abélès, M. and Bellier, I. (1996) 'La Commission Européenne: Du compromis culturel à la culture politique du compromis', *Revue Française de Science Politique* 46(3): 431–55.

Bellier, I. (1994) 'Une culture de la Commission Européenne? De la rencontre des cultures et du multilingualisme des fonctionnaires', *Politique publiques en Europe Politique publiques en Europe*, Y. Mény, P. Muller and J. C. Quermonne, Paris: L'Harmattan.

Bellier, I. (1994, 2000) 'A Europeanized elite? An anthropology of European Commission officials', *Yearbook of European Studies* 14: 135–56.

Beyers, J. (2005) 'Multiple embeddedness and socialization in Europe: The case of council officials', *International Organization* 59(4): 899–936.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Candea, M. (2011) '"Our division of the universe": Making a space for the non-political in the anthropology of politics', *Current Anthropology* 52(3): 309–34.

Carrithers, M., Candea, M., Sykes, K., Holbraad, M. and Venkatesan, S. (2010) 'Ontology is just another word for culture: Motion tabled at the

16. For a discussion of this sometimes vague use of non-Herderian organisational 'culture' in relation to the Commission, see Cini (2001).

2008 meeting of the group for debates in anthropological theory', *Critique of Anthropology* 30(2): 152–200.
Chapman, M. (1978) *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*, London: Croom Helm.
Checkel, J. T. (2003) '"Going native" in Europe? Theorizing social interaction in European institutions', *Comparative Political Studies* 36(1/2): 209–231.
Checkel, J. T. (2005) 'International institutions and socialization in Europe: Introduction and framework', *International Organization* 59(4): 801–26.
Christiansen, T. (1997) 'Tensions of European governance: Politicized bureaucracy and multiple accountability in the European Commission', *Journal of European Public Policy* 4(1): 73–90.
Cini, M. (1996) *The European Commission. Leadership, Organisation and Culture in the EU Administration*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Cini, M. (2001) 'Reforming the European Commission: An organisational culture perspective', *Queen's papers on Europeanisation* no. 11/2001.
Cini, M. (2007) *From Integration to Integrity: Administrative Ethics and Reform in the European Commission*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Commission of the EC (1992) *Treaty on European Union signed at Maastricht on 7 February*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications.
Csordas, T. (ed.) (1994) *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Csordas, T. (1999) 'Embodiment and phenomenology', in G. Weiss and H. Haber (eds), *Perspectives on Embodiment*, New York: Routledge.
Diez, T. and Wiener, A. (2004) 'Introducing the mosaic of integration theory', in A. Wiener and T. Diez (eds), *European Integration Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Englund, H. (2004) 'Cosmopolitanism and the devil in Malawi', *Ethnos* 69(3): 293–316.
Ellinas, A. and Suleiman, E. (2008) 'Reforming the Commission: Between modernization and bureaucratization', *Journal of European Public Policy* 15(5): 708–25.
Fox, R. and King, B. (eds) (2002) *Anthropology Beyond Culture*, London and New York: Berg.
Graeber, D. (2011) *Debt. The First 5000 Years*, New York: Melville House Publishing.
Haas, E. (1958) *The uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economical Forces, 1950–1957*, London: Stevens.
Herzfeld, M. (1992) *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy*, Oxford: Berg.

Herzfeld, M. (1997) *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-state*, New York: Routledge.
Hooghe, L. (1999) 'Supranational activists or intergovernmental agents? Explaining the Orientations of Senior Commission Officials toward European Integration', *Comparative Political Studies* 32(4): 435.
Hooghe, L. (2001) *The European Commission and the Integration of Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hooghe, L. (2005) 'Several roads lead to international norms, but few via international socialization: A case study of the European Commission', *International Organization* 59(4): 861–98.
Ingold, T. (2011) *Being Alive. Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Abingdon/New York: Routledge.
Kelley, J. (2004) 'International actors on the domestic scene: Membership conditionality and socialization by international institutions', *International Organization* 58: 425–57.
Kuper, A. (1999) *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Kwon, H. (2008) 'The ghosts of war and the spirit of cosmopolitanism', *History of Religions* 48(1): 22–42.
Latour, B (2004) 'How to talk about the body. The normative dimension of science studies', *Body and Society* 10(2–3): 205–29.
Levy, R. (2006) 'European Commission overload and the pathology of management reform: Garbage cans, rationality and risk aversion', *Public Administration* 84(2): 423–39.
Lindberg, L. (1963) *The Political Dynamics of European Economic Integration*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Littoz-Monnet, A. (2007) *The European Union and Culture: Between Economic Regulation and Cultural Policy*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Lord, C. (1998) *Democracy in the European Union*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
Mattera, A. (2005) 'The principle of mutual recognition and respect for national, regional and local identities and traditions', in F. Schioppa (ed.), *The Principles of Mutual Recognition in the European Integration Process*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
McDonald, M. (1989) *We are not French!'Language, Culture and Identity in Brittany*, London and New York: Routledge.
McDonald, M. (1996) '"Unity in diversity": Some tensions in the construction of Europe', *Social Anthropology* 4(1): 47–60.
McDonald, M. (1997) 'Identities in the European Commission', in N. Nugent (ed.), *At the Heart of the Union: Studies of the European Commission*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 144–66.

McDonald, M. (1998) *An Anthropological study of the European Commission*, Brussels: European Commission.
McDonald, M. (1999) 'European Identity – an anthropological approach', in T. Jansen (ed.), *Reflections on European Identity*, Brussels: European Commission, Forward Studies Unit.
McDonald, M. (2000) 'Accountability, anthropology and the European Commission', in M. Strathern (ed.), *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*, London: Routledge.
McDonald, M. (2006) 'Neo-nationalism in Europe: Occupying the available space', in A. Gingrich and M. Banks (eds), *Neo-nationalism in Europe and Beyond: Anthropological Perspectives*, Oxford/New York: Berghahn.
McDonald, M. (2012) 'Medical anthropology and anthropological studies of science', in U. Kockel, M. Nic Craith and J. Frykman (eds), *Companion to the Anthropology of Europe*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
Merleau-Ponty, M. ([1945] 1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Michel, H. and Robert, C. (eds) (2010) *La fabrique des Européens. Socialisation et construction européenne*, Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg
Mitchell, T. (1998) 'Fixing the economy', *Cultural Studies* 12(1): 81–101.
Monnet, J. (1978) *Jean Monnet: Memoirs*, London: Collins.
Niemann, A. (1997) '"Europhoria", friendship and wine: The stuff that built another Europe', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 11(1): 277–92.
Nugent, N. (ed.) (1997) *At the Heart of the Union: Studies of the European Commission*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
O'Neill, M. (1996) 'Paradigms of integration', in M. O'Neill (ed.), *The Politics of European Integration: A Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 21–144.
Page, E. (1997) *People who Run Europe*, Oxford University Press.
Peterson, J. (2008) 'Enlargement, reform and the European Commission. Weathering a perfect storm?', *Journal of Public Policy* 15(5): 761–80.
Pierson, P. (1996) 'The path to European Union: An historical institutionalist account', *Comparative Political Studies* 29: 123–64.
Porter, T. (1995) *Trust in Numbers. The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rhinard, M. (2010) *Framing Europe: The Policy Shaping Strategies of the European Commission*, Republic of Letters.
Schioppa, F. (ed.) (2005) *The Principles of Mutual Recognition in the European Integration Process*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
Shore, C. (2000) *Building Europe. The Cultural Politics of European Integration*, London: Routledge.

Spence, D. (1994) 'Staff and Personnel Policy in the Commission', in G. Edwards and D. Spence (eds), *The European Commission*, Harlow: Longman, pp. 62–94.

Stevens, A. and Stevens, H. (2001) *Brussels Bureaucrats? The Administration of the European Union*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Toren, C. (1999) *Mind, Materiality and History*, Abingdon/New York: Routledge.

Trondal, J. (2003) 'The parallel administration of the European Commission: National officials in European clothes?' Available at: http://aei.pitt.edu/2964/ [accessed 10th September 2011].

Trondal, J. (2004) 'Re-socializing civil servants: The transformative powers of EU institutions', *Acta Politica* 39: 4–30.

Vilaça, A. (2009) 'A critique of the embodiment paradigm from the point of view of Amazonian ethnography', in H. Lambert and M. McDonald (eds), *Social Bodies*, Oxford/New York: Berghahn.

Wallace, H., Pollack, M. and Young, A. (2010) *Policy-Making in the European Union*, 6th edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Wessels, W. (1998) 'Comitology: Fusion in action. Politico-administrative trends in the EU system', *Journal of European Public Policy* 5(2): 209–34.

Maryon McDonald studied social anthropology at Oxford University, and since 1997 has been Fellow in Social Anthropology at Robinson College, Cambridge. Her research interests include nationalism, medical anthropology, anthropologies of science, the EU and questions of accountability; her fieldwork has been conducted in France, the UK, and in EU institutions. She was a member of the first anthropological team allowed to do fieldwork inside the European Commission, and has published widely on questions of identity and on the anthropology of the EU (including: '''Unity in Diversity'': some tensions in the construction of Europe' in Social Anthropology, 1996, 4 (1); 'European Identity: an anthropological approach', in T. Jansen (ed.), *Reflections on European Identity*, Brussels: European Commission (Working Paper 1999, SG/Forward Studies); 'Anthropology, Accountability and the European Commission', in M. Strathern 2000 (ed.), *Audit cultures*, London and New York: Routledge; 'Neo-nationalism in Europe: occupying the available space', in A. Gingrich and M. Banks 2006 (eds), *Neo-nationalism in Europe and Beyond: Anthropological Perspectives*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn).

Address for correspondence: Maryon McDonald, Robinson College, Cambridge CB3 9AN, UK.
Email: mem26@cam.ac.uk