

My Visit to the EU in Brussels: Learning and Disappointment
June 20 to June 24, 2016

Thanks to generous support offered by the Jean Monnet Center of European Excellence at the University of Wisconsin-Madison I was able to participate in a teaching (and learning) conference for high school and community college social science instructors from June 20 to June 24 in Brussels—the home of the European Union. On February 21, former British Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the date for the United Kingdom’s referendum on whether to leave or remain in the European Union would be set for Thursday, June 23. Clearly, the Prime Minister wanted me to have an interesting visit, and he definitely didn’t disappoint me.

At Madison Area Technical College, I teach a wide range of history courses to an incredibly diverse student body with a wide range intellectual interests and academic preparation. Each semester I teach at least session of course called “Europe and the Modern World” that begins in about 1789 and theoretically ends in the present year. Because so many of my students take my classes with minimal background in European history, I have avoided teaching about the European Union. To be frank, I thought my handling of the EU would consist of doing little more than chatting about less-than-scintillating events in administrative and bureaucratic history and followed up by my serving dollops of what could only be described as an alphabet soup of EU acronyms. Thus, I hoped my visit to the EU would make me less timid about dealing with the topic in survey courses. This was indeed the case.

For teachers, from June 20 to June 24, our days included visits to and talks presented at the European Union Parliament, the EU Commission, the European External Action Service, the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the American Diplomatic Mission to the EU, and Bruegel—an independent, non-partisan think tank that studies EU affairs. In order to prevent this report from causing an acronymic-induced episode of narcolepsy, I’m

going to focus on what visits and presentations were most helpful to me as a community college instructor and then explain how my visit has revamped my handling of the EU in my courses.

First of all, the visit to the EACEA was incredibly useful. Before my visit to Brussels, I have to confess that I believed that the Erasmus program and other educational exchange programs the EU administers were designed for the benefit of university students from upper-middle class backgrounds while paying little attention to hairdressers, carpenters, and other skilled and specialized workers. This presentation proved how horribly wrong I was and spelled out that the EU is intensely interested in and eagerly facilitates the exchange of students who are not focused on traditional academic subjects but the skilled trades and other artisanal crafts. While my teaching load and course preparation makes it difficult to do so, I have shared this information with some of my colleagues who teach in Madison College's Ingenuity Center—where the skilled trades are taught. I hope I can encourage some of my fellow teachers to engage in a transatlantic exchange with the EACEA.

During my visit to Brussels, I also developed a far better understanding how the European Commission, the so-called executive arm of the EU, works to implement European policy. Because, as I mentioned earlier my exposure to the EU is largely limited to reading administrative history accounts, I'm not as familiar with this aspect of the EU as I should be. After attending Commission presentations and reading the voluminous amount of free materials available from EU "information points," I have to admit that I'm more than a bit taken aback by the criticisms Eurosceptic direct at the Commission. Before EU legislation becomes implementable (for lack of a better word), member countries have the opportunity to torpedo the proposed legislation. While the EU Parliament doesn't have the power to re-shape legislation, member states can indeed impede and block its approval. Time after time, in after-hour visits at

Brussels cafes and taverns, I would discuss the European Union with genial and not-so-genial restaurant staff and patrons, and I was struck by how little my fellow conversationalists knew about the operations of the Commission and the EU Parliament. While I understand the criticism aimed at the EU's democratic deficit, I was quite surprised by how poorly "native" Europeans (nice people from Brussels) misunderstood how the EU operated. This emphasized, at least to me, that the EU needs to do a far better job of explaining what it does for all its member states. And, while it may be a bit tedious to do so, I need to spend time doing thus in my classes.

However, my trip to Brussels spelled out just how interesting the EU and EU politics can become. As I mentioned earlier, British Prime Minister David Cameron kindly scheduled the Brexit referendum on the penultimate day of our visit to Brussels. In the days leading up to the vote, I chatted with my fellow instructors and our consensus on the vote was "Remain" would defeat "Leave" by about three percentage points. On Thursday night, I stayed up as late as I could to watch the returns. Before that, I had even watched the "Leave/Remain" debate that was broadcast on the BBC. On the morning of June 24, I learned that the United Kingdom (not Scotland and Northern Ireland) voted to leave the EU. The next day, when we visited the Bruegel think tank, Brussels felt like it was no longer encased in a gigantic EU-backing bubble. On Friday morning, this bubble had been suddenly popped and the city felt deflated. In the "European" part of Brussels, the mood was filled with disappointment. While I'm not remotely an expert on EU affairs, I think it would be fair to say that the EU and its supporters had not effectively conveyed all of the good that the EU does for its member states. While this may be a bit facile, when I returned to the classroom in the fall semester, I incorporated a specific EU discussion about the Brexit debate in the United Kingdom, especially in the context of Irish politics and whether or not the vote of Northern Ireland to remain might have any influence on

nudging Ireland to unification. Not only that, my modern Europe course will be discussing how the Brexiteers' victory may (or may not) embolden similar anti-EU groups in countries like Hungary, Poland, France, and the Netherlands.

However, most immediately relevant for my courses is the EU's handling (or mishandling) of the migration crisis of 2015 and 2016. [Interestingly, the presenter at the European Network against racism referred to this humanitarian crisis as a "reception crisis," a term that I will introduce in our class discussions for the spring semester of 2017.] Trying to coordinate consistent EU migration policies among member states that hold drastically different views regarding the arrival of overwhelmingly Muslim immigrants has been especially difficult. The presentations on the influx of migrants were especially interesting and clearly spelled out the gargantuan task that the EU faces. Although Angela Merkel assured Germans that "Wir schaffen das" at the height of the crisis, dealing with the arrivals seems even more daunting. Europe and the immigrants who've arrived and continue to try to make it there are engaged in a humanitarian crisis that contains both tragedy and triumph. As a result of my visit, I've now made this crisis a key part of my course in ancient civilization. In the fall semester, I assigned my students a short book called *The Day of the Barbarians* by the Italian scholar and EU supporter Alessandro Barbero. This book examines the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Goths into the Eastern Roman Empire in the summer of 376 CE and explains how their arrival and Roman exploitation of the Goths led to the disastrous battle of Adrianople where Roman armies were destroyed and Valens, the Emperor of the East was killed. While the Europe of the twenty-first century is a long way away from the fourth century Roman Empire, I have asked my students to compare and contrast these crises. I held a trial run this past semester and will be re-running the exercise this spring. In the fall, I was especially impressed by the sophistication in student analyses. This

semester I have a much larger classes and I'm particularly anxious to learn how they analyze the Empire's handling of these new arrivals and compare it to how Europe, especially "Mother Angela," continues to deal with this great issue.

This is what I took out of my visit to the EU in Brussels. In short, my visit, conversations, and readings helped to humanize an institution that's all too often represented as faceless. I must admit that I shared in the disappointment of Europe in Brussels when it learned that the United Kingdom voted to leave. However disappointing, the British decision to leave Europe has made generating discussion about the European Union considerably easier, and my Brussels sojourn has also provided me with a better way of teaching the EU in my classes—so much so that I've historically connected a Roman emperor with Germany's current chancellor.