

In his 1999 masters thesis Luuk van Middelaar (1973) was already sure that political ideas based solely on principles, and not on political reality, are not good political ideas at all. He therefore did not lock himself up at university after he graduated in history and philosophy but instead switched to politics. His entrance to the European political stage was accompanied by the publication of his thesis as the award winning book *Politicide: de moord op de politiek in de Franse filosofie* [Politicide: The Assassination of Politics in French Philosophy]. As a junior clerk in the Private Office of European Commissioner Frits Bolkestein he saw the difficulty with which prime ministers completed the negotiations on the first European Constitution in 2004. Van Middelaar then moved to The Hague, where he advised VVD leader Jozias van Aartsen. Here he saw that same Constitution die in the referendum of 2005. After the parliamentary elections of 2006, Van Middelaar turned his back on politics. He wrote a column for the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* and he got his PhD at the University of Amsterdam. This resulted in the book *The Passage to Europe: How the Continent Became a Union* (Yale U.P.), an acclaimed and widely translated book on the formation of the European Union. In 2010, Van Middelaar began working as a speechwriter for Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council. What follows is an interview about philosophers who place themselves outside of politics and the European political game.

Image / Sake Eizinga

#### Amongst liberals: between thinkers and acts

Libraries are full of enlightened theories about politics and governance and about justice and freedom. From Aristotle to Rawls, history is filled with thinkers who want to improve politics. But do politicians care for these abstract theories? Does the political thinker stand on the sideline or is he a valued advisor? Idee presents a series of interviews in which historian Coen Brummer interviews (liberal) political thinkers on the tension between theory and practice. This interview is the last in this series.

# The superficiality of current events is also their depth

By Coen Brummer

**Some philosophers go into politics with a specific agenda and are often disappointed. Did you enter politics more as a researcher?** That's right. I want to understand how politics works. If you get slapped in the face once in a while, you can get fed up with it, but that is just how politics works. Sometimes I see processes where political decisions are not based on the idea of a public interest; sometimes they are based on the sum of personal, political party and national interests – and then hoping for the best. Of course, I am disappointed for a while then, but this does not lead to an expression of public outrage. That doesn't interest me.

**You once said that analytical political philosophers like Tocqueville and Machiavelli appeal more to you than normative philosophers such as Kant and Rousseau.** People like Machiavelli and Montesquieu wrote wonderful books about political action. Although the former is often dismissed as a cynic, both had visions and ideals. Machiavelli had a vision about a united Italy, Montesquieu about the separation of powers. Before he wrote his book, Machiavelli had been the highest official of the Florentine state for fifteen years. He was a top diplomat, travelling constantly to negotiate, and had to run a whole administration. And at night he was reading Roman history. You can “taste” that

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political experience in everything he wrote. Montesquieu also had political responsibilities. Of course Tocqueville had no political experience when he wrote his first book, the one about America, but he travelled a lot and became a Minister later.

Your book *Politicide* is also imbued with the idea that political philosophy does not accomplish much when it does not consider political practice. *Politicide* showed how it should not be done, even though, admittedly, I did not know yet how it *could* be done. The book is more of a polemic against a philosophical approach that depends wholly on a certain concept of man. It is about post-war French philosophers who were obsessed with Hegel’s notion of struggle: man only becomes free in a struggle of life and death. In this way, someone like Sartre could justify the misdeeds of evil regimes, but you also lose sight of some essential political questions. This also often happens with more “gentle” thinkers like John Rawls. His *Theory of Justice* is regarded as a twentieth-century masterpiece, though I do not really consider it political philosophy, more applied moral philosophy. Take, for example, Rawls’s famous thought experiment: “the veil of ignorance”. Put ten people in a group and pretend no one knows

whether he is rich or poor, black or white, young or old. And then let them think about what a just society is. This is really *purely* theoretical. Because it removes the basic problem of politics: how do we deal with differences! People generally know very well whether they are young or old, rich or poor, black or white. And therefore they have conflicts, different views, different values and interests. And politics is about organizing those differences. In that respect, I am much more inspired by Hannah Arendt.

**Then what is the value of normative political philosophy?** Let me illustrate it with verbs. The normative philosophers see the world in terms of what *should be*. And that is indeed a relevant question, also in the real political world. But political decisions also revolve around what *can be*, what is possible, what *must happen*. In some situations a decision has to be taken under great time pressure because not acting is no option. I have seen many examples of that in recent years. During the euro crisis certain decisions had to be taken that people knew were not always one hundred percent well thought out because they had to be made very quickly.

**The Dutch minister of Finance Wouter Bos who bought the bank SNS REAAL over the weekend?** Exactly. Or when 750 billion euros had to be found on a weekend to keep the euro zone together. This leads to a lot of criticism afterwards, from both economic and constitutional perspectives, who complain it is a shaky way of doing things. In some ways that is correct of course, but at such moments there really is no alternative: *something* must be done. When a country is about to go bankrupt, as happened with Greece, you do not first consult all stakeholders to come up months later with a Green Paper. Time pressure is a major factor in politics.

**Is that not a failure of academic political philosophy?** No, it still is important to think about what is possible. There is definitely a place for academic philosophical thinking. Sometimes it can be very important and it can definitely have influence. But the drier types? To be honest, even

I do not read them very often. I find them quite meaningless.

**Your career seems like it was planned in advance: you look for an interesting environment and write a book about it afterwards. In this way you alternate theory with practice. To what extent is this based on a grand design?** It is mostly biographical coincidence. When I was 26 and wrote *Politicide*, my main goal was to continue my studies in Paris. Because of an idea for a thesis on economic power, I ended up with Bolkestein, who offered me an internship. I liked it so much there that I stayed and dropped the initial plan for the thesis. When I arrived in Brussels, the European Convention for an EU constitution had just started. As a junior clerk I could wander around freely there. That fascinated me, because it actually was about basic political philosophical questions. What are the relationships between countries? How does representation work? Is Europe a state or not? That trail eventually led to *The Passage to Europe*. Europe is the perfect case for a political philosopher.

**What did you learn in Brussels and The Hague? A young historian and philosopher with no political experience sees a lot of new things in the centres of national and European power.** The Hague has been a better school for me than the European Commission was. I started in a very turbulent period. My first day was April 1, 2004, the day that party chairman Van Aartsen was hit by a car by an activist. In September, Geert Wilders left the party. In November, Theo van Gogh was murdered. Van Aartsen and VVD Member of Parliament Ayaan Hirsi Ali were also threatened. Immediately afterwards came the referendum on the European Constitution. There was a constant, simmering government crisis. I was brought to the VVD to think with Van Aartsen about liberalism at the beginning of the 21st century. But when I cycled to work in the morning, I did not know what I would do that day. There was always an urgent problem or crisis to solve or a leak to the press. The first months I was sometimes thinking: when are we going to do the real work? I had come there, after all, for

that reflection on liberalism. But one morning on the bike I understood that this *was* the real work. This is political life in The Hague for the most part.

**Was that a disappointment for you?** No. The superficiality of current events is also their depth. As I theorized later on, it is about the importance of unpredictability, of “Lady Fortune”. The famous “events, dear boy, events” of the British statesmen Harold Macmillan permeate each day in politics. The American historian John Pocock once described government as a “series of devices that deal with contingent time”. Politics is what a society needs to deal with change. Politics would hardly be necessary in a static society. But in a dynamic one, like modern Europe, you need a place where interests meet and are dealt with.

**The current criticism of politics is that it often is too pragmatic. Principles are supposedly thrown overboard quite easily.** A politician with principles is obviously much more credible than one without. He or she can provide a beacon in turbulent times. If you want to effect change, than you have to point in the direction you want to go. In that way, people are presented with a vision, a prospect. Then you have to convince them. At a minimum you have to convince people that a certain decision is *needed*. Take for instance raising the retirement age. Everybody can understand that this might be necessary because of rising life expectancies. As Spinoza said: “Freedom begins with the acknowledgment of necessity”. It becomes more difficult, and hence more interesting, when you have to convince people without this necessity, if there are many possible paths and you have to pick just one. Then you need a story in addition to bare facts and arguments. This underlines the importance of political storytelling – and my love for it as well.

**The debate on Europe in the member states is often very principled. It is about sovereignty and identity. How do pragmatic European politicians deal with this?** There is a strong tendency to de-politicize European issues but that does not always work. And that is perhaps



fortunate. One of the major European issues for the coming years, both for them and for us, is British EU membership. Pragmatic and identity considerations come together and often collide on this particular issue. It is evident to most Brits that it is economically better for the UK to be part of the internal market. But there are also strong arguments against it that appeal to British identity and democracy. Last year, that tension crystallized in a speech by Prime Minister David Cameron – the famous speech in which he promised the British people a referendum on EU membership. This promise soothed the Eurosceptics in his party, but he wrapped the message in a convincing plea for EU membership. At the same time he threatened his partners that the EU had to change in order for him to advise a “yes”. A true balancing act!

Coincidentally, President Van Rompuy gave a speech six weeks later in London, where he was one of the first to put words on the psychology of the situation. Everyone in Brussels can think of reasons why Great Britain is better off as a member of the EU. But the question is how you say that. Van Rompuy said at the time that a British exit would not only change their relationship with Brussels, but also their relationships with the 26 other Member States. He consistently spoke about the United Kingdom *in* Europe and not about the United Kingdom *and* Europe. He also stressed that the very fact that London mentioned the exit option was already changing its relationship with Europe. “How do you convince a room full of people, when you keep your hand on the door handle? How to encourage a friend to change, if your eyes are searching for your coat?” That phrasing hit a few nerves there.”

**How do you cope with the tension between form and content as a speechwriter? Your own ideas as a philosopher and the views of a politician may vary, but then his views must also be shaped into a proper speech.** When Van Rompuy had to give a speech in small and impoverished Moldova that tension was very tangible. The European Union is very important there. He had to give his speech in a kind of leftover Soviet palace with a complete orchestra

and a red carpet at the entrance. I felt tension as a speechwriter most deeply there because I knew that the audience only wanted to hear one thing: that membership in the EU was a prospect for their country. On substantive grounds that seems a bad idea to me. But as a speechwriter you want nothing more than to inflame the audience, and all that would have taken was a couple extra beautiful sentences about the prospect of membership. That time I really had to restrain myself!

**What exactly is your motivation to keep publishing during your political career? Machiavelli only actively began writing when his political career was over.** I see myself as a writer. I am currently a political writer because I write speeches and texts for my profession. After this, I will go back to being a writer who writes about politics. These sides also reinforce each other. I believe that I write better books on politics because I have seen it from the inside. This gives me a better feel for the dynamic of the situation, for political relationships, for people’s interests. And if this also helps readers to get a better understanding of the political game, I think that is very valuable.”

**Coen Brummer** studied history and philosophy. In January 2015, his book *Vuile Handen; Michael Ignatieff en andere politiek denkers over de strijd tussen ideeën en macht* (Dirty Hands; Michael Ignatieff and other political thinkers on the battle between ideas and power) will appear at Elsevier Boeken.

## BOOK REVIEW



### Bibliografische gegevens

Fukuyama, F. (2014)

*Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy.*

London: Profile Books

ISBN: 978 18 466 8436 4

**Democracy as we know it is a recent phenomenon that should not be taken for granted, according to Francis Fukuyama in his new volume on *the political order*. A compelling book in which he warns against the continuous risk of political decay, the process where political institutions become incapable of overriding basic human biological impulses towards corruption and nepotism.**

By Wouter Dol

With the recent 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall we might be reminded of Francis Fukuyama’s seminal 1989 essay “The End of History?” which stated that the end of the Cold War was the final triumph of liberal democracy over authoritarianism. It propelled the American scholar to world fame - and also into controversy, especially due to his affiliation with the early neoconservative movement in the United States (from which he later forcefully distanced himself). A quarter century later he presents us with the second volume of his vast scholarly project to trace the development of political institutions to the emergence of liberal democracy. In *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy* he very thoroughly analyses why some countries become consolidated liberal democracies and others not.

Fukuyama builds on the framework he presented in the first volume of this mammoth project: *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (2011), which consists of focusing on three types of political institutions that have evolved over time: the state itself, the rule of law and democratic accountability, or the process by which leaders are answerable for their decisions. This evolution of these political institutions, Fukuyama emphasises, is remarkable since it goes against the basic human biological urges for