A hymn to the bureaucrats in Brussels

Who are these EU bureaucrats, the new type of civil servants that we call eurocrats? The author Robert Menasse flew to Brussels, rented an apartment and tried to get to know as many of them as possible. The outcome surprised him.

Amongst all monsters, from basilisks to Dracula through to King Kong, civil servants stand out because their imaginary presence is not merely the product of fear and excitement in the bourgeois mind, visions of menace and disaster repeatedly conjured up in order to be able to fantasise about an ultimate lucky escape, but really a fantasy of society as a whole: the image of the civil servant is a projection of all social and professional classes' prejudices.

Civil servants are said to be privileged yet as other-worldly as decadent aristocrats; as indolent and pig-headed as the petty bourgeoisie; as rule-obsessed as shop stewards and yet as workshy as any member of the underclass; narrow-minded and yet as sly as foxes (and for whom rules and regulations are Holy Writ); in thinking up nonsense they are as creative as the businessmen who cunningly engineer the needs which they claim to be meeting and, like immigrants, obsessed by the idea of procreating wildly at the taxpayer's expense.

It is astonishing how successfully this artefact, this fictional construct haunts the collective imagination without ever falling apart in the light of reality. After all, everybody has actually met a civil servant whereas they haven't met, say, Dracula and, what is more, if you correlate the percentage of civil servants which make up the adult population with the average size of a family, then the statistics dictate that two out of every three people must have a father, uncle, aunt, sister, father-in-law or at least one close relation working in the civil service.

There is no other profession with which over two thirds of the European population has such a close family relationship (the figures for Germany and Austria tally exactly with the statistical average). This is one of the great sociological conundrums: why this empirical fact and the practical experience it engenders do not dispel the surreal vision of civil servants which haunts the collective fantasy or at least bring it closer in line with reality.

A Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2010 showed in fact that 72% of the interviewees had a “very negative” or “fairly negative” opinion of civil servants. But that's not the end of it: astonishingly enough, well over 60% also say that being a civil servant is “very desirable”. Civil servants are really a unique species in the fantasy world of society, being reviled and envied by almost everybody.

Given the stubborn factuality of this absurd fiction, which, clearly, no practical experience has any chance of putting to rest, there is probably no point in reminding people of the historically important role of civil servants in erecting the standards of civilisation that we very much desire and claim for ourselves today, or, of the fact that, say, the civil service came into being at the same time as the culture of literacy, that it developed its standards, whose effects can still be felt today, at the time of the Enlightenment and that an enlightened civil service has, throughout long periods of European history marked by arbitrariness, war, unchecked crimes against humanity and unsuccessful revolutions, repeatedly upheld the minimum rule of law on which the European project is now building.

However that is precisely the point: modern Europe, as we experience it and think about it today, looks like a monstrous civil service project, the basic form of which is rampant bureaucracy. Any discussion about Europe must therefore begin with an analysis of its civil servants.

The “Brussels bureaucracy” is now the heading under which anything that triggers criticism, resentment, anger or contempt is repeatedly subsumed. The blame for this, that or anything else can ultimately be attributed to the civil servants sitting in their ivory towers who also enjoy enviable privileges for their other-worldly activities.

Quite obviously, reality now has even less chance of correcting the fantasy, since the distant figures in Brussels have replaced national civil servants as the quintessential civil servants. At the same time, without this having yet dawned on the public, the definition of civil servants has changed fundamentally – “Brussels civil servants” are not only not what society perceives them to be but, at the same time and, in particular, they are not what they are conventionally defined as being.

They no longer serve a public institution of their own State in a relationship of trust with that State but a supranational institution, such as the European Commission, whose job it is to curb individual States' own interests and ultimately to override the nation States, including those from which the civil servants themselves originate.

“Brussels civil servants” strive to coordinate the common interests and communitise the framework conditions of, at the moment, 27 States and do so repeatedly against their own countries' governments and national bureaucracies.

“Brussels bureaucrats” are therefore an historically entirely new type of civil servant - the first to have no commitment to their region or government and the first that themselves repeatedly challenge State bureaucracies and if necessary amend or annul their rules or decisions.

That is exciting enough in itself and is, above all, an expression of great historical common sense, especially if we look at the devastation wrought by nationalism and the blind enforcement of "national interests", to which the European unification project constitutes, of course, the historical response – but I only found that out when I moved to Brussels in order to get to know the civil servants in, as it were, the flesh.

I had started work on a novel set in Brussels whose main character was a European Commission official. I was wondering whether it was still possible today to meet the enormous challenge which the novel as a literary genre has always set itself (in supposedly more ordered times), namely to track down the essence of the era in reality and to recount it through the medium of specific characters and their fates, i.e. conjure up the entire reality of an era in the doings of typical individuals.

I thought that it would be best for me to go to the place where the reality of the rest of my life is being shaped, which today is undoubtedly Brussels. There, in the much-reviled "palaces of the bureaucracy" the conditions are being created which will really have an impact on our lives, wherever we are on this continent.

I asked myself: Who are these bureaucrats, these new type of civil servants, for which a separate term was invented in order to distinguish them from traditional State civil servants, namely "eurocrats"? Have they got faces, can one stereotype them, what is their day-to-day life actually like, how do their decisions come into being? So I flew to Brussels, rented an apartment and tried to get to know as many eurocrats as possible during the subsequent weeks and months, talk to them, get them to tell me about their work and their life and, if possible (which it was) watch them at work.

One surprise followed another, as if there were a secret agreement to confound all the clichés and stereotypes which generally exist of eurocrats by demonstrating their exact opposite in reality.

The first surprise: the Commission is an open and transparent institution. Its doors were open and its officials willing to give me information. And if you do suddenly encounter a series of closed doors in the corridors of the Berlaymont building it is an exception because you are in the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (but that is another story).

The second surprise: the Brussels bureaucracy is extremely lean. The EU has fewer officials to administer the entire continent than the City of Vienna alone.

The third surprise: the Brussels bureaucracy is extremely thrifty and modest. The offices, even in the upper echelons of the hierarchy, are functional but no more. There is little comfort and no luxury.

The fourth surprise: the Brussels bureaucracy is unbelievably cheap. The EU institutions have a budget amounting to 2% of European GDP to administer an entire continent and fulfill their entire mission. History has never seen anything like as large or bold a project which did not cost many times more than this.

The fifth surprise: the officials have a sense of humour. I met very few people who were the desiccated fossils one imagines civil servants to be. Their work on the European project makes them see the characteristics of their respective national identities as quirks which they treat with self-deprecating irony. One could also say that a mentality only becomes a culture once it is freed from national obsession.

Sometimes I saw in these people, whose practical example gave the lie to the fictitious image of an official, another fiction but a new one: in their practice, their work, their life plans they are already what we are supposed to become, namely genuine Europeans: polyglot, highly qualified, enlightened, rooted in the culture of their origins but freed from the irrationality of a so-called national identity. But perhaps that is not a fiction at all but the updated version of the enlightened absolutist bureaucracy.

"Ah, I see" the educated EU critics will now reply: "was the phrase: “Everything for the public, nothing by the public” not the mission statement of the enlightened absolutist administration? Is that not exactly the same problem again? That civil servants want to decide what is best for the public without having any democratic legitimacy?"

It makes no difference, they say, how well-meaning the Commission’s officials are when they come up with their directives – nobody has elected them and they simply have no legitimacy.

I am at a loss every time I hear this objection. We are talking about civil servants. Civil servants have never been elected. Every system needs an administrative apparatus, i.e. civil servants.

There are different ways of ensuring the democratic legitimation of the system, and in the case of the EU this will mainly be done by strengthening the European Parliament, but it is entirely absurd to demand that civil servants be legitimised by an election.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger criticised this “democratic deficit” – i.e. the fact that the Commission officials were not elected – to the elation of the regulars in the pub but I was not aware that the civil servants of the City of Munich where Enzensberger lives had been elected. It is, therefore, complete nonsense. Enzensberger must know that and if he doesn't then he can move to Tombstone, Arizona, where he can elect one of the civil servants, namely the sheriff.

The people in the EU bureaucracy are quite rightly qualified not by public elections but by their actual qualifications. They have left a lot behind them that not everybody is prepared to leave behind “for a job”: family, social ties, simply everything that one associates with “being at home” in the positive sense of the word. However, unlike, for example, diplomats, to whom this also applies, they are not committed to any "reasons of State" (which might well be too much for any thinking person – I would not, for example, have liked to be an Austrian diplomat in the years of the black and blue coalition government), but they are exclusively committed to a basically enlightened rationality.

They did not get their jobs by means of string-pulling, patronage, protection or membership of a party but solely by means of their education and industry: every year between 25 000 and 30 000 apply for a job as a civil servant in an European institution and take part in a complicated three-stage competition – at the end of which perhaps 100 get a post. One hundred out of 30 000. I have to admit that I admire the people who manage it. I couldn’t. As enthusiastic as I might be about the European project, I would not have the drive to prepare for and sit such an examination. But I can testify to the fact that the people that make it have qualities very different from the slick but sad conventionality and patronised acquiescence of those people whose national careers we observe.

A European Commission official, an Englishman who had previously worked in the British Prime Minister's private office, gave me a very good example of how the situation differs from that in a conventional national bureaucracy, which is at the same time a striking example of the European bureaucracy's rationality: when the British Prime Minister’s staff were discussing a problem and preparing a decision, he said, there were about ten people in the room who were all in agreement after half an hour. Everybody had the same social origins, spoke the same language, had been to the same university, had the same teachers, i.e. had exactly the same background. They had more or less the same network which had promoted their careers, the same experience and the same opinions. They had wives from the same social class and children who went to the same elite schools. They discussed how they could sell the decision to the media for much longer than the problem itself.

Here in the Commission it is precisely the opposite – and that is what is so fascinating and rewarding for him: women and men sit together who all come from a different country or have a different background, come from a different social class, have a different mother tongue, have been to a

different university and most of whom have partners who in turn have different mother tongues and different backgrounds.

The discussion is focused directly on the matter at hand and may last for hours or days. Much more experience is fed into the discussions, they have more inputs and they are more creative. They never talk about how they are going to sell the results to the media. Because you can do what you like: no matter what goes out, it only ever reaches the public through the prism of the national media.