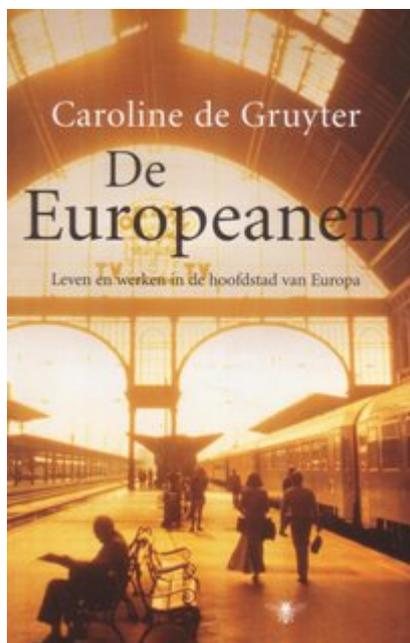


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Europe depends on Chinese threat



“The best thing that happened to the EU this year”, an official of the European Commission told journalist Caroline de Gruyter last year, “were the European flags being burnt in February in the Middle East by Muslims who were outraged over the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad”.

Thanks to the cartoon controversy, the EU appeared as a relevant institution in global politics, De Gruyter wrote in the book *De Europeanen* [The Europeans]. This book portrays the officials in Brussels who still believe in European collaboration, but who feel let down by citizens and especially by national governments.

Since the fall of the Berlin wall, Europe has lost its original *raison d'être*, a correspondent of an Italian newspaper commented. Ever since, its proponents have been searching for a new cause. They hope that Europe will have a future as a countervailing power to America, the Middle East, China or India.

“I cannot help but feel that a number of Europeans in Brussels almost cannot wait for the Chinese-Indian threat to manifest itself, which might give a boost to integration and revive the European identity”, De Gruyter wrote.

De Gruyter was a correspondent in Brussels for newspaper NRC Handelsblad for five years. Before that, she reported on the Middle East. About her time there, she wrote the book *Het koffiehuis van Mohammed Skaik en andere verhalen uit speelgoedstaatje Gaza* [The coffee house of Mohammed Skaik and other stories from the Gaza toy state].

Plumber from Southampton

In that book, Europe already made a short appearance. She gave an amusing description of clever Palestinians creating one NGO after another, in order to wheedle money out of donors including the EU. One of Arafat's officials acknowledged that dependence on subsidies turned Palestinians into 'donor groupies', but he thought this was not a problem.

When she started working in Brussels, De Gruyter developed a fascination for the Europeans. With this term, she designates European Commission officials, but also journalists, lobbyists, researchers and others who have something to do with Europe.

She decided to write a book on these Europeans and on the question whether there exists such a thing as a European identity. If it does not exist in Brussels, then where else, she asked herself.

Some of the people she interviewed do consider themselves Europeans. However, they are rather isolated. "Until the time when a cab driver in Athens and a plumber from Southampton consider themselves Europeans, we cannot be Europeans on our own here", a Brit working at a lobby group said.

Most Europeans have a rather isolated position even in Brussels, the city where they live. They do not read Belgian newspapers, do not vote in local elections and mainly hang around with other Europeans.

Neo-liberals

Meanwhile, the original inhabitants of Brussels do not feel very connected with the Europeans either. There have been shady action groups that cut the tyres of cars with European plates. Anti-European sentiments were fed by the presumed privileges of European civil servants, and by the fact that they drive up real estate prices.

However, in general, Belgians and Europeans simply live in different worlds. According to a lawyer, there is nothing special about that. In the city, all kinds of groups live more or less separate lives: Latinos, Muslims, Eastern Europeans, Flemings, etcetera. "This is really a city full of people who do not adapt to anyone or anything. The motto here is: live and let live. Let everybody have their own ghetto".

In this respect, the situation of the Europeans differs from that of expats in other cities, who generally have to deal with a dominant majority. Not here: anyone here is a minority and an outsider. No one asks you where you come from.

According to De Gruyter, European officials are often incorrectly portrayed as ruthless neo-liberals or as proponents of a Super State. In reality they are moderate progressives, who only want the best for citizens, she wrote.

However, at closer inspection, the Europeans do appear to have a specific idea of what is good for those citizens. They refer to statistics that would demonstrate that citizens want a strong Europe when it regards issues such as security, criminal justice and guarding the frontiers.

Chemicals directive

A militarisation of Europe also fits in this image. The personnel manager of a large lobby group finds it 'purely logical' to create a European army. "Why do we need twenty-five armies, if we are not fighting each other anyway?"

Similar ambition is hard to find among the Europeans if it regards the role Europe might play on social issues.

In De Gruyter's view, not much has come of European collaboration on issues such as criminal justice, migration and foreign policy. She blames national governments, who aim to let Turkey join the EU. "Citizens want European collaboration intensified, they do not want enlargement. But they get exactly the opposite".

The role of national governments is a sensitive issue among the Europeans De Gruyter met. Many complain about governments that shift responsibility to Brussels. They take a decision, and then tell the citizens that Brussels made them do it.

An amusing example is offered by the general secretary of the European Environmental Bureau. Germany voted against a chemicals directive, but at the same time sponsored the Environmental Bureau, "that was doing its best to make sure the directive was adopted".

Debate

Various people advised De Gruyter to choose a different title for her book. They also made suggestions: call it *The Brussels Sofa*, *In Belgium by Accident*, or *Island Brussels*. Anything with Europe in its title would only discourage the readers.

Meanwhile, the climate is changing fast. Europe celebrates its 50th birthday, and the German Counsellor Angela Merkel tries to gain support for a new constitution or treaty. Interest in the subject is [growing](#).

The Ander Europa [Different Europe] platform is organising a petition for a new referendum on Europe, while the Euro Marches are organising debates and will publish eight newspapers on the subject. The issue is also high on the agenda of the Summit from Below, to be [held](#) in Amsterdam on 20 May.

Against this background, it is to be expected that the demand for books on Europe will rise again. If you read Dutch and are looking for something accessible, *De Europeanen* is a good choice.

Caroline de Gruyter, De Europeanen: Leven en werken in de hoofdstad van Europa. Bezige Bij, 19.90 euro.