Interview – Caroline de Gruyter

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Caroline de Gruyter is a Journalist and Lecturer based in Oslo. She is a Europe correspondent and columnist for the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad, a columnist for Foreign Policy and a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. She spent more than twenty years covering Europe, including from Brussels, Geneva and Vienna. In her recent book Beter Wordt Het Niet (German edition forthcoming), Caroline compares the EU to the Habsburg Empire.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think podcasts have undergone an interesting development. The tendency of a lot of media is to be snappy and short – because people are believed to have a limited attention span which makes it hard to keep them engaged as readers. A lot of media outlets went along with that line of reasoning, but as a result podcasts have become more popular. They can be long and take the time to explore subjects through extensive debates. People listen to them in the train, on the plane, or while exercising. I do the same and I really enjoy them. I think that because of this, people have 'rediscovered' longer and deeper stories with more layers and nuance. That is a good development for journalism, as it had become more entertainment-oriented for some time. My field of expertise is Europe and debates about the EU were often framed as completely black and white. For example, one person who was 'for the EU' was put in a studio opposite someone who was 'against the EU'. Once the debate starts, you sit back and watch these two people fight. That is more entertainment-based journalism, given this setup rarely allows for constructive debate. This still occurs today, but I believe that nuance is gradually returning to our political discussions through the influence of interesting websites like E-IR, Le Grand Continent, and podcasts in general.

How has the way you understand the world shifted over time, and what (or who prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

By moving from Amsterdam to the Middle East in the mid-1990s. It further developed my thinking about the world, because I was covering the war in Yugoslavia at the same time. I used to believe peace could be achieved in this conflict through the establishment of a ceasefire. This would allow belligerents to return to their senses and then the war could be stopped. Then, I moved to the Gaza strip in 1994, where people told me – both on the Palestinian and Israeli side – we know we cannot fight forever, but this conflict is not going to be solved. They openly supported constructive peace talks, but also acknowledged that there would be more wars to come. In Yugoslavia, I actually met a Dutch soldier, an employee of the Ministry of Defense, who had taken a few weeks off, so he could fight with the Croats. It showed me a different layer in our humanity that we had totally forgotten about in Europe: people like conflict, it is one of the reasons why we wage war regularly. As long as we are aware of this, we can be careful with politics. But if we forget these human instincts, which I think is the case in Western-Europe right now, we are in danger. This realization made a very big impression on me. The fact that we have not had a war for 70 years in Europe, except for the war in Yugoslavia, is a great accomplishment, given our history of violence and the attractiveness of conflict. Yet, Europeans of today grew up in peace and relative prosperity. We all have complaints, but if you really take a few steps back and you look at Europe from the historical perspective, one can appreciate that side of the European project more than we tend to do now.

You recently published a book on Europe and the Habsburg Empire. The title roughly translates to 'it

doesn't get better than this'. Could you tell us about the book and its central messages?

I started writing this book while living in Vienna, which is when I discovered what the Habsburg Empire was. In essence, it provided a roof over the heads of many groups and nations in Central and Eastern Europe. It began small, then expanded, and contracted over time. The Empire existed for over six centuries and ranged from Switzerland deep into Ukraine, and from the south of Poland to Croatia, whilst also incorporating parts of Italy. Various language groups and nations inhabited the territory, all sheltered under the roof of the Habsburg Empire. But, no one was ever completely happy with the arrangement, yet they chose to stay within the empire. Why? Because they knew that if the common shelter of the Empire dissolved, their pre-existing disagreements would escalate into armed conflict again. There would be no mechanism to prevent those conflicts. Moreover, the inhabitants of the Habsburg Empire were surrounded by other empires that were trying to gain influence. Many groups and nations realized that on their own, they would be too small to compete with outside actors and would be overrun immediately. So the Habsburg Empire kept big powers in check by preventing them from attacking small nations, protecting them and regulating disputes and contacts between the small nations and language groups.

While living in Vienna, a city filled with Habsburg history, I realized that the role of the Empire mirrors that of the European Union today. It provides a roof over the heads of many language groups, nations, and minority groups, so that they will not fight. Is it perfect? No, and neither was the Habsburg Empire. The comparison between them is the central theme of my book. The Habsburg Empire was a state with an army. The EU is not a state and does not have an army. It will probably never have an army, since it consists of various states that are willing to cooperate further but also those that will resist complete integration. The EU is a mechanism that helps us to live together in peace. Since every EU country has different histories, traditions, and interests, they will always clash on various issues, but the EU, like the Habsburg Empire are doing exactly that. However, this prevents the EU from ever 'becoming perfect': with every deal in Europe, with every compromise, all heads of state need to be able to go home and tell their domestic audiences that they got something good out of it. Some get a little more, while others get a little less, and the next time it might be the other way around. That way, member states are always both satisfied and dissatisfied simultaneously – but not dissatisfied to the extent that they want to leave. That is why Brexit was such a shock, even though Brexit eventually made many member states realize, including populists, that they do not want to leave the EU. Many populists are not talking of 'exits' any longer, now they want to change the EU through Brussels! Hungary is even behaving in a similar fashion to its time as part of the Empire. It was always critical of the Habsburg government in Vienna, just like it criticizes the EU nowadays and vetoes the budget or demands special privileges and status.

What is the added value of observing Europe in relation to the Habsburg Empire?

Looking at Europe through comparisons like these helps us to understand European debates better. In the media, those debates are often dominated by two groups. On one side, there are the federalists, who always think Europe is not powerful enough. On the other side are the nationalists, who always view the EU as too powerful. In truth, Europe is sometimes very powerful, like in the field of trade, and sometimes utterly powerless, for instance in foreign policy or defence. So, these groups are never satisfied. I think we should look at Europe – or the European Union – in a different way (I often refer to the EU as Europe, as Switzerland and Norway are also part of the European story, since they participate in almost everything). But this debate, dominated by federalists and nationalists who are permanently dissatisfied, should make way for a more realistic look at what Europe is: a halfway house, full of compromises. It will never be as strong as the federalists want it to be and it can never be as weak as the nationalists want it to be, it will always be in the middle – it is something that can make Europeans proud one day and ashamed on the following. Some things will go well, other things badly, that is how it is.

In your book, you state that the Habsburg Empire's disintegration due to internal pressure is a common misconception and instead due to the inability to deal with wars and external affairs due to domestic instability. With this in mind, how do you see the position of the EU in the current and evolving international political arena?

Some people have asked me: Do you think the EU could end up like the Habsburg Empire? Some say Europeans

should be careful because the Habsburg Empire was destroyed by nationalism. The Habsburg people had enough of the emperor and his family, and different language groups no longer wanted to be under the thumb of the German speaking elite. If this is what killed the Habsburg Empire, can it kill the EU too? Is Europe falling into the same trap? I think it is a poor comparison. What killed the Habsburg Empire was war. When World War I broke out in 1914, people were queuing up to be drafted into the army from all corners of the Habsburg Empire. They were more than ready and proud to fight for the emperor. This becomes clear from the letters people wrote to their loved ones or the novels that were written by authors like Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth at the time. The nationalistic sentiments within the Habsburg Empire were more focused on gaining cultural autonomy and social and political rights, and not on separatism, let alone 'exits'. No nationalist before WW I pleaded for independence. They wanted to have the right to speak their own language at school or to have their own literature, in their own language. There was a lot of social upheaval at the time, not just within the Habsburg Empire but everywhere. People wanted voting rights and democratization and this was gradually granted by the central administration of Vienna. And then the war broke out. The soldiers went to the front, but the war turned out to be very different to the Emperor's expectations, because all major powers in Europe joined the conflict. He had hoped to punish the Serbs and pursue peace shortly after. But this was a total miscalculation and the war engulfed all of Europe. All the resources of the state were directed towards the military effort, which went badly from the start of the conflict. As a result, many people who had been supportive of the Habsburg Empire lost their jobs and income. Contrary to the EU, the Habsburg Empire was a huge employer. Teachers, street sweepers, and policemen all used to be on the imperial pay-roll. Moreover, famines were taking place within the Empire, so it gradually lost the ability to provide added value to its citizens. People lost their jobs, their income, their loved ones, and cities and villages were in ruins: Why would they keep supporting the Empire?

At that point, different groups started accusing each other of causing or contributing the dire situation within the Empire. That is when nationalists became popular. People started listening to them in the hope they could offer a solution. It is not nationalism as such that killed the Habsburg Empire, as it has always been there in different forms and shapes. Nationalism could be kept in check as long as the Habsburg Empire provided added value for its inhabitants, in terms of protection, well-being, and peace. But once that crumbles, nationalism becomes stronger, which I think is the key lesson for the EU today. Once the EU stops providing added value, nationalists have a chance. During the financial crisis and the euro crisis, I was in Brussels and witnessed the chaos close up. But the EU survived those crises, despite ferocious fighting between member states, they made the euro stronger in the end because European member states wanted the EU to survive. Do not underestimate the determination of European heads of state to come out of crises stronger. They all go to Brussels flagging their red lines, such as Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who stated at some point that he would not give any more money to Greece. Eventually, when it became necessary to send a second aid-package to Greece, and then a third, he went along with it. Given Russia and Turkey's efforts to win influence in regions where the EU has a weaker presence, such as the Balkans, it was in the interest of EU stability to keep Greece closely tied to Europe. A failed state in the southeastern corner of Europe could have been incredibly destabilizing. With hindsight, it was a good decision to compromise. Leaders are willing to make compromises. This is the essence of the EU. This willingness can fade away, like it did in the Habsburg Empire, but I do not see that happening in the EU yet.

You often point out that our thinking on the EU is based on assumptions that are flawed, which negatively impact our understanding of the EU. What are these assumptions and how can we create a more accurate image of the EU in the media and public debate?

There are many misconceptions. It starts with our education: hardly anybody learns about Europe at school. Many kids in German or Dutch schools know how national laws are made, but nobody has a clue how a European law is made. That is strange, because our democratically elected governments are sitting in Brussels and take important decisions. People often blame Brussels, even though their national politicians contributed to establishing European laws and regulations! For example, national ministers decide in Brussels on enforcing banking supervision or environmental laws. Then they fly home and are criticized by their domestic audience on those decisions. This is normal, democracies function like this. But then, those ministers pretend Brussels forced these decisions on their country. That is how national politicians further distort the view people already have on Europe. If you are critical about the EU, you should learn how Brussels works, so you can make it function better. Right now, people accuse

Brussels of being dictatorial while ignoring the fact that European decisions are made by their own politicians. Many citizens are critical about the way the EU functions, and they are right: the Union is far from perfect and can be improved in so many ways. But you do not get there by accusing Brussels, you have to make your own government responsible. They are the ones at the steering wheel.

You have written extensively on Brexit in the last couple of years. What are the likely long-term impact of Brexit and will it come back to haunt the EU?

It is difficult to predict what will happen in 10 or 20 years of course. First of all, Brexit was a big shock to Europe since no one ever left the EU. It was a mental shock and for some countries like the Netherlands it was also a big economic shock. But the interesting thing is that before Brexit, the UK was not participating in major EU policy areas, such as the euro, Schengen, immigration and so forth. Whilst I reported in Brussels on the Eurocrisis and the refugee crisis, UK Prime Minister David Cameron was present at the negotiation table but did not actively participate. He sat at the table as an outsider. The UK had already 'exited' the EU, in a way. The British were a fly on the wall, which made them realize that they had drifted away from the EU. Brexit is so interesting as it was such a big event, a seismic moment, but the impact on European policy debates is limited. On the contrary, it made many Europeans more 'European', since Brexit coincided with the Trump administration and increased threat levels from outside powers like Russia. As a result, many populists in Europe are not talking about 'exits' anymore. Matteo Salvini or Viktor Orbán now pose a new challenge: they seek to change the EU from the inside. They want to be part of the European debate, which is good. It makes European politics more interesting for everybody. Those politicians are just as European as others, they just envision a totally different EU. That new dynamic makes Brussels the central theatre for debates about our common European interests, and that is a very interesting development.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Try to be independent. Read a lot, listen to everybody. The world is — and has always been — full of spin. Do not try to be the quickest to formulate an opinion, or to write a story. Take your time, try to get the full picture. Once you start doing this, you will be rewarded because people appreciate it.