

Does the European Union deserve the Nobel Peace Prize?

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Monet and Schuman might have deserved the Nobel Peace Prize, the European Union does not.

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It's easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to ridicule the awarding of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize to Barack 'Drone Wars' Obama. But let's give the Nobel Committee the benefit of the doubt and accept that they were simply rewarding Obama's inspiring oratory – ridding the world of nuclear weapons, repairing US relations with the Middle East etc. – with deserved political support. Like many of us, they clearly did not envisage the new Commander-in-Chief presiding over a weekly 'kill list' [1] or continuing almost all of his predecessor's foreign policies. History has already passed judgement on their folly. But if Obama's award was hopelessly premature, the EU's is ridiculously late. Not in the sense of being long overdue, but in the sense of no longer deserving it.

Many people stopped taking the Nobel Peace Prize seriously long ago. Awards for the likes of Henry Kissinger (who actively supported coups against democratically elected leftist governments) saw to that. But among those who do still acknowledge who wins, the simple premise that thanks to the EU there have been no wars between its members appears to provide solid ground for rewarding "six decades" of "peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe" [2]. Those who share my own exasperation, I suspect, are in the minority. Many are clearly perplexed, even downright angry, at the timing of the award, which comes as the EU's commitment to democracy and human rights has never looked so shaky: the straight-jackets of austerity and technocratic government, and the routine repression of protests on Europe's streets. Yet it is precisely these "grave economic difficulties and considerable social unrest" that inspired the Nobel Committee to select the EU for the prize in the first place. The rationale is that the EU's future has never looked so uncertain, so let's remind everyone what a great idea it was, and what a disaster it will be if the wheels start coming off the project.

We should not be fooled into blindly supporting an entity whose flagship policies and founding principles have long since parted company, and we should demand better from those entrusted with Alfred Nobel's legacy.

Credit where it's due?

This year's Nobel Prize consolidates the popular myth, perpetuated by many a 'European Studies' textbook, that European integration 'began' with the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. Tied to this myth is the widely held belief that this economic union alone prevented further Franco-German wars in Europe - as if their people would have simply forgotten the deaths of 60 million people and defaulted to rearmament and war. But let's accept that early economic integration certainly helped, while recognising that there were other factors besides.

Two years before France, Italy, West Germany and the Benelux countries put pen to paper to agree a common market for coal and steel, for example, larger clubs of nations were also thinking about how to prevent a repeat of the horrors of WWII. Ten states formed the Council of Europe in 1949 [3] and a year later adopted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) with the explicit aim of giving legal force to the Universal Declaration [4] that had just been adopted by the United Nations, a text itself designed specifically to prevent another Holocaust. If the Nobel Committee wanted to acknowledge the enduring contribution to human rights of early European integration, the prize should go to the Council of Europe (which remains an entirely separate entity to the EU).

The Nobel Committee also credited the democratic transition of the countries in Western Europe that experienced fascism after World War II to the "condition for their [EU] membership". It may be splitting hairs to point out that the EU did not yet exist (it was still just an economic community) but it is airbrushing of the highest order to overlook people's heroic resistance to Franco, Salazar and the Colonels in Spain, Portugal and Greece, never mind their own democratic will. Nor, of course, did the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe escape the shackles of the USSR just so they could join the EU - it was simply the only show in town. Any misty-eyed vision of the EU as a bastion of anti-fascism also conveniently overlooks the preferential trade deal the then European Economic Community signed with Franco's Spain in 1970, as well as the tacit support given to the Colonels by the UK and West Germany at the behest of the USA.

But let's not dwell on the substantial contribution made to 'European integration' by the often dirty politics of US-led anti-communism either [5], and instead examine the EU's contribution to human rights, peace and democracy since the Maastricht Treaty entered into force in November 1993. This created the three 'pillars' of the EU that we recognised until the Lisbon Treaty integrated them into the superstructure we are left with today: that is economics, defence and security, and justice and home affairs.

Little needs to be said here about the current state of the EU's 'first pillar' and the consequences of rampant neoliberalism underpinned by a single currency. As to the EU's 'second pillar', security and defence, there has been one 'conventional' war in Europe since WWII: the bloodbath in the Balkans. In terms of peace and reconciliation, however, the EU's role has been minimal. It was the UN who deployed peacekeepers to a disintegrating Yugoslavia in 1991, NATO's bombs which 'liberated' Kosovo in 1999 (levelling much of Serbia in the process), and the UN which 'administered' its territory in the aftermath. The EU was conspicuous only by its absence. When it was finally in a position to take over some responsibilities from the UN, all that changed were the soldiers' insignia and the bureaucrats' letterheads. The peace has prevailed, but 'reconciliation' and the imposition of tens of thousands of EU rules and regulations on the Balkan states are not the same thing - far from it.

Militarisation and appeasement

The EU's perceived failures in respect to Kosovo galvanised the Union into meaningful militarisation for the first time; should there be 'another Kosovo', we were told repeatedly, the EU would be ready. Unfortunately, the subsequent design of the EU's 'conflict management' apparatus owed more to the architects of 'liberal intervention' [6] in Tony Blair's inner circle than the blue-helmeted traditions of the UN. And so it was that grand plans were conceived for EU 'Rapid Reaction Forces' comprised of 'Battle Groups' who would be followed-in by 'crisis managers', wedded to the belief that democracy could be distilled through 'roadmaps' drafted in Brussels or New York, rather than peace-making predicated on the genuine engagement of all parties to a conflict.

The wheels came off this particular bandwagon, if only temporarily, as the consequences of invading Afghanistan and Iraq without a plan beyond 'shock-and-awe' unfolded. The EU's 'headline goals' for military capacity were also missed, not least because Turkey withdrew the support it had earlier pledged after the Islamophobic governments of several EU member states made it clear that a Muslim country would never be allowed to join the EU. Turkish officials have publicly complained of being "treated like a third class country by the EU"; how very sad that the Nobel Committee chose to praise the EU for this relationship.

Strange too that they overlooked the EU's unreserved support for Israel, described by Javier Solana (the EU's foreign policy chief for a decade) in 2009 as "a member of the European Union without being a member of the institutions". EU-Israel relations are currently being upgraded yet again [7]. Try telling the Palestinians that the EU is still committed to peace and reconciliation in their corner of the EU's 'neighbourhood'.

The legacy of the EU's dalliance with 'liberal intervention' is a Union that remains subservient to NATO's vision of global policing. The USA continues to call the shots while calling out the European's for being too soft; emasculated as a peacemaker, the EU is still expected to pick up the pieces. Worse still, the concept of R2P has been fatally undermined by the US and its European allies before being given the chance to prove itself anything more than a fig-leaf for neo-imperialism. Instead of striving for a United Nations worthy of the name, the EU opted for 'neo-con'-lite, and flunked. This deserves derision, not Nobel Prizes.

We should reserve some contempt, however, for the current Nobel Laureate's relations with dictatorial regimes in Central Asia, where the EU's 'founding principles' are disregarded for military favours and energy deals. For example in Uzbekistan, widely regarded as having one of the most brutal dictatorships on the planet, where the sanctions imposed by the EU following the Andijan massacre were effectively lifted (or not renewed) in return for logistical support to ISAF forces in Afghanistan, where a million children are forced to pick cotton for 12 hours a day in appalling conditions during the annual harvest, and where the EU says it is unable to act because there's no 'official' evidence [8] of the practice.

It's the same story in relations with Turkmenistan - the Uzbeks' only slightly less brutal neighbour - where the EU has decided that widespread human rights concerns cannot stand in the way of a deal to ship their gas to Europe via the planned Caspian pipeline [9]. Some of the EU's member states are cementing this neighbourly "fraternity" with good old-fashioned arms deals, playing their part in a "peace congress" that collectively accounts for around a third of the world's arms trade. The rest of us are apparently supposed to wait passively for a Central Asian 'Spring', at which point the EU will presumably pretend it was on the side of democracy and human rights all along.

Having had these arguments with representatives of the EU, it is at this point they interrupt to point out that such criticism is grossly unfair: i.e. the EU doesn't sell any weapons, it's the member states.

These are the same member states, of course, that are the first to blame their counterparts for the EU's collective failures, or the EU institutions themselves for unpopular policies, but equally happy to take the plaudits when the opportunity arises. A Union when it suits, a community of nation-states when it does not; a two-faced Europe as much as a 'two-speed' one. This is categorically not an argument for more integration or debates among constitutional lawyers, it's an appeal for rational appraisal of the collective actions of the EU and its members that lends itself to various conclusions, some of them profoundly at odds with the convictions of the current incumbents.

War on terror: no justice, no peace

The Nobel Committee obviously didn't give much thought to the EU's embrace of the 'War on Terror' either. Like many Europeans, they may have fallen into trap of thinking that the mere existence of their human rights convention - as contrasted by the USA's perpetration of rendition, torture and indefinite detention without trial etc. - puts clear blue water between them and their belligerent cousins. Of course, had the Committee considered the complicity of many EU member states in these barbaric practices [10], and the abject failure of the EU institutions to hold them or the USA to account, it might have come to a different conclusion. On this issue too it is only the Council of Europe - not the EU - that can lay any meaningful claim to the defence of human rights.

The Nobel prize-givers obviously discounted the EU's ceaseless promotion of counter-terrorism, surveillance policies and security technology too, and with it the wholesale targeting of Muslims and other minorities in Europe. Mandatory fingerprinting, comprehensive telecommunications surveillance, unfettered access to financial records, the surveillance of movement: in these areas the EU has actually gone further than its Transatlantic partner (while tearing-up the rule book when it comes to sharing this data with the USA). The "successful struggle" for human rights in Europe lauded by the Nobel Committee appears to have peaked 20 years ago. As Tony Bunyan has observed [11]: with the need to guarantee meaningful freedoms in opposition to the Soviet Union gone, the EU was soon neglecting its founding principles. In terms of surveillance at least, the EU is now beginning to acquire some of the features of its former nemesis.

The EU has also all but ditched its once admirable peace-making traditions. It followed unquestioningly as George Bush's post 9/11 mantra of "with us or with the terrorists" was effectively enshrined into international law under UN Security Council Resolution 1373. This obliges all UN states to criminalise all "terrorist organisations" while leaving them free to decide unilaterally who the "terrorists" are in the absence of a commonly agreed definition of what "terrorism" actually is. The EU's first "terrorist list", adopted on the 27th December 2001, was simply faxed around the foreign ministries during the Christmas recess and adopted under "written procedure" without debate [12]. Ever since, as Mark Muller QC so accurately observed, we've seen terrorist designations traded like carbon credits.

The EU's record here is particularly poor. It proscribed the Kurdish PKK when on they were on ceasefire in exchange for Turkey's quid pro quo over military assistance. The now de-listed People's Mujahadeen of Iran was proscribed as part of the negotiations over access to its nuclear facilities for the Quartet's inspectors. The FARC was designated "terrorist" by the EU during its free trade negotiations with Colombia, despite the fact that the French and Spanish governments were still trying to restart negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government, negotiations that ceased immediately.

It was the same story for the 'Tamil Tigers', also proscribed while still at the negotiating table. They henceforth shunned all further dialogue, paving the way for Sri Lanka's brutal "military solution" to

the conflict; they are still counting their dead. Norway's Nobel Committee should understand better than most why we shouldn't play politics with terrorist designation: their government immediately withdrew its alignment to the EU terrorist list [13] because its long-standing role as a peace-broker in that conflict had been wholly undermined at a stroke.

Note also that it is Norway, which is not an EU member state, that is facilitating the newly restarted negotiations between the FARC and the government of Columbia - arrange a meeting with a banned terrorist organisation in the UK, for example, and you can be imprisoned for up to ten years. The point - and one that would surely have Alfred Nobel spinning in his grave - is that the international counter-terrorism framework hasn't just paralysed conflict resolution by the 'international community', it has left the civil society organisations, the professional mediators and the 'quiet diplomats' that have attempted to fill this void at risk of criminalisation for a host of 'material support' style charges that provide far too much prosecutorial discretion.

Rewarding brutality and indifference

The economic policies of the EU's 'first pillar' have made a substantial contribution the mess Europe now finds itself in. The security and defence policies of the 'second pillar' have steadily eschewed Europe's peacemaking traditions. So what of the 'third pillar': justice and home affairs? When Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission, so crassly remarked that Osama Bin Laden had done "more for justice and home affairs cooperation than Jean Monet", he was obscuring the ties that had long since bound the member states in this area: border control and 'migration management' policies.

Ever since France, Germany and the Benelux countries signed the Schengen Agreement on the abolition of internal borders and the Schengen Convention on compensatory security measures at the external borders, the member states have been engaged in a 'race to the bottom' to enact tighter and tighter controls to prevent migration from outside the EU, ever more restrictive conditions for asylum-seekers, tougher and tougher penalties for 'illegal' migration, and all of the racist scapegoating that comes with it. And let's not forget yet more deals with dictators [14] and human rights abusers - facilitated in some instances by the EU - to create migration 'buffer states' in North Africa and other parts of the world.

Unable to agree on how they might use their vast military capability as a force for good, the EU has been busy militarising its borders while presiding over the wholesale dehumanisation of migrants and refugees. To paraphrase Zygmunt Bauman: travelling the world in search of profit is a cornerstone of EU policy, travelling to the EU in search of sanctuary is condemned. Meanwhile, most Europeans have become all but completely inured to the daily suffering and often barbaric treatment meted out to unwanted migrants and refugees that the ECHR was supposed to confine to history. President Obama is rightly vilified for sending the USA's drones to hunt down 'militants' and 'high value targets', Europe is silent as the EU prepares to send its drones to hunt down migrants and refugees [15]. Our Nobel Peace Laureates are nothing if not consistent.

Like the Nobel Committee, none of us should wish for the demise of the EU at a cost of the re-emergence of rabid nationalism. Unlike the Nobel Committee, we should retain our critical faculties and recognise the danger that EU imposed austerity is helping take us there [16]. As Steve McGiffen observed more than a decade ago [17]: "Simply because we need an international approach to the problems facing humanity in the twenty-first century does not mean that this international approach, this European Union, a single currency based on discredited and extreme monetarist principles, a political system which seems almost designed to maximise corruption and the hegemony of wealthy

elites, is the only or best form of international cooperation on offer. If we are to develop genuinely international institutions which enable cooperation to take place whilst preserving the democratic rights of the peoples of different nations, then we must set about a root-and-branch re-examination and reconstruction of global governance. What cannot be reformed should be discarded, and what can be put to the service of the people should be". This task has never been more necessary or daunting. Loathe as I am to use the phrase, the last thing we need is yet more "lipstick on the pig".

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P.S.

* From TNI, 25 October 2012:

<http://www.tni.org/article/does-european-union-deserve-nobel-peace-prize>

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Footnotes

[1] http://www.reprive.org.uk/media/downloads/2012_09_27_PUB_CSS_to_Obama_drones_march.pdf

[2] http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2012/press.html

[3] <http://hub.coe.int/>

[4] <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

[5] http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Blum/US_Interventions_WBlumZ.html

[6] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/david-cronin/with-pacifists-like-this-who-needs-war-mongers>

[7] <http://euobserver.com/opinion/115991>

[8] <http://www.cottoncampaign.org/>

[9] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-11-1023_en.htm?locale=en

[10] <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2006/jun/COE-EM-rendition-7-6-06.pdf>

- [11] <http://statewatch.org/news/2005/oct/ecln/essay-11.pdf>
- [12] <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2002/jan/02euterr.htm>
- [13] <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2006/jan/norway-EU-terror-list-5jan2006.pdf>
- [14] <http://www.tni.org/interview/dirty-deals-and-unprincipled-politics>
- [15] <http://www.tni.org/report/borderline>
- [16] See on ESSF (article 26717), [Neo-nazis enter the Greek Parliament](#).
- [17] See on ESSF (article 26718), [The European Union: A Critical Guide](#).