“CRISES ARE OPPORTUNITIES”
JEAN MONNET AND THE FIRST STEPS TOWARDS EUROPE

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Abstract: Jean Monnet is best known as the Founding Father of Europe. This is a remarkable fact, as we know that in the course of history there have been several attempts to create some sort of unity within Europe. Most of these ended without producing tangible results. It was only after having faced the disastrous consequences of two devastating wars that the nations of Europe realised: something had to be done to prevent a third war, which, no doubt, would mean an end to European civilisation. There was an urgent need for real change, which had to be at least threefold: a change in the minds of people, followed by or aided by a change in the relationships between countries, which involved a change in politics and diplomacy. This seemed a task too immense and difficult to be realised. Had it not been for Jean Monnet and his team, Europe would probably have continued along the old lines leading to new chaos and suffering. The greatness of Jean Monnet lies not in his ability to draw up ideas but to stick firmly to them and to transform them into functioning structures. Monnet played a key role in creating the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) thus establishing a firm basis for a new Europe represented by the European Economic Community (EEC) and later by the European Union (EU), both influenced by his Action Committee for the United States of Europe. Europe is his chef d’oeuvre, that much is true. But it was not there that his career started. No one coming fresh into the political scene could have achieved so much. There is an astonishing constellation of age, places, personality, and methods that is remarkable about Monnet’s life.

Jean Monnet was born on November 9, 1888 in Cognac, the centre of French brandy production. France, in this period, was a deeply rural country and the Cognac region was one of its most rural territories. Monnet was often described as a “French peasant,” which might strike anyone not knowing his roots. Hubert Beuve-Méry referred to “his obstinacy, like a peasant determined to sell his cow,” another man who knew him reversed the image observing “his circumspect manner of inspecting a problem from every angle […] like a peasant buying a cow.” Even Valéry Giscard d’Estaing referred to him as someone having “the air of a refined peasant.” (Duchêne 1994:27) Monnet was sort of roundish, with unhurried movements. He only spoke if he knew what he wanted to say. At school, he did not do well: learning was difficult for him and he was little attracted to books. He did not even learn to write properly. At the age of sixteen, he left school and his father sent him to London to learn English. It was there that the young Monnet obtained a knowledge of the business world; “it was there that I learnt what collective action meant, of which I had not seen such a serious example neither in Cognac, nor anywhere in France.” (Mémoires 52) The Anglo-Saxon world was of primary importance to brandy-traders so they had learnt to ignore political or national prejudices and to stick to business matters. Monnet spent two years in London with a family of traders, where he learnt to speak English fluently.
Monnet’s father had a reputed brandy company, which was founded to combat the big names: the Martells and Hennessys. To do so, it was very important to have a thorough knowledge of distant markets so the Monnets kept the door of the house open for foreign customers who came from Britain, Germany, Scandinavia, and America. Success or failure depended on personal ties and assessment of the messenger. In his youth, Monnet travelled a lot selling brandy for the family firm. His father told him: “Don’t take books with you. No one can think for you. Look through the window, talk to people. Pay attention to those standing next to you.” (Mémoires 54) North America made a special impact on Monnet. In his Mémoires, he tells a story, which he repeated several times later, and which happened to him near Calgary. “I wanted to visit some Scandinavian farmers to whom I had an introduction. I asked a blacksmith who was working in front of his forge what means of transport there were. Without stopping work, he answered that there were none. ‘But,’ he added, pointing to his horse, ‘you can always take this animal. When you come back, just hitch him up in the same place.’” Monnet drew far-reaching conclusions from this experience. “In Cognac, people are wary of their neighbours and distrust newcomers even more. Here I encountered a new way of looking at things: individual initiative could be accepted as a contribution to the general good. […] Everywhere, I had the same impression: that where physical space was unlimited, confidence was unlimited too. Where change was accepted, expansion was assured.” (Mémoires 56) At this time he did not want to become more than the successor of his father as head of the Monnet & Co. firm, but later on, as he engaged himself in public service, he often recounted such events in his conversations.

At the age of twenty-five, on the way home, he heard the news about general mobilisation in France. In England he could witness how resolutely the British were preparing for the war. In France, he found a different attitude: the nation had confidence in the competence of political leaders and in the heroism of the army. Everybody believed that the war would be short. Monnet did not. He wanted to contribute to war effort – not as a soldier as he was reformed because of health problems. Wondering what to do, he started to promote co-operation on war supplies between France and Britain, who had already began to compete for resources forcing up prices in the world market. Monnet saw the terrible effort and energy being wasted on both sides. Prices of wood, copper, coal were soaring. English ships arrived loaded with goods to French ports and left empty; French ships unloaded their cargo in Britain and returned without any. Monnet had the idea of co-ordinating war efforts instead of acting separately. The two countries had the same goal: why not co-operate? He felt that this war would not only be decided on the battlefields but also by economic strength. His insight shows very clearly how much raw talent he had. “If I had this idea [of co-ordinating war effort], it was because I was young, not although I was young” – he wrote in his Mémoires. “It was in fact a new problem, a problem of the 20th century, and an intelligence without prejudices, without knowledge of the past could understand it better than the experts thinking in 19th century conceptions. […] They did not know that this war was to involve all the resources of a nation and that unprecedented forms of organisation would have to be invented.” (Mémoires 60) France and Britain were not compatible at the time; a mercantile island and a protectionist land power had very little in common. Government direction seemed natural to a France at war. To free-trading Britain, interference with traders was sacrilege. The idea of active co-operation violated convictions
rooted on the one side in blood sacrifice and in the immutable laws of economics on the other. Only a young man could ignore such biases.

The young Monnet was brave enough to want to see the Prime Minister, René Viviani himself. He was given a hand by the lawyer of the Monnet firm, Fernand Benon. Viviani, to general surprise, was ready to listen to him. Monnet shared with him his view that in case of a long war it is the military and civil supply that are decisive so these are the fields to be developed in order to overpower the enemy. For France it was not a question of putting into action English troops but of putting to use the English economic capacity and the fleet. Eventually, Monnet wanted to formulate an alliance in which neither of the allies makes decisions without consulting the others. In 1915, Monnet began to work with Étienne Clémentel, the new minister of trade. Gradually, a loose pool of British and French ships was formed, then a new organisation called Wheat Executive, which was charged with co-ordinating civil supply. A British, a French, and an Italian member calculated the needs of their country and they placed the orders together. This way, they ensured continuous wheat supply, saved shipping space, and acted against rising prices. The success of the Wheat Executive moderated national suspicions and lead to the appearance of new organisations, for example the Allied Maritime Transport Council (AMTC), charged with co-ordinating shipping needs and allocating shipping capacity. The AMTC had a crucial role in materialising the economic superiority of the allies over Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Monnet ended up as the French representative in the AMTC (besides a British, an Italian, and an American one). His career is quite remarkable if we consider that he was practically unknown in politics before the war and that he had no suitable schooling to be able to deal with economic matters. The reasons for his success lie in his methods and personality, which I shall try to outline in the following. First of all, Monnet did not want political power. He never made the appearance that he wanted to take other people’s jobs. As politicians were swallowed up in an endless struggle for power, they scarcely had their own ideas, and “when ideas are lacking, they accept yours with gratitude – provided they can present them as their own.” (Duchêne 1994:347) Monnet used to say: “It takes a long time to reach power, but very little to explain to those in power what to do.” (Fontaine 42) Monnet kept independent of politics and so he could choose his own objectives, from which he never allowed to be distracted. The simplicity and practicality of his proposals came from the fact that he promoted his ideas as specific solutions to specific problems and he worked relentlessly with his little group. During the war, he made his collaborators work extremely hard. He allowed no pause until some solution was outlined. He was ready to call anyone when he needed them, even at night. He had no sense of time and he did not observe administrative barriers.

Monnet relied a lot on his team. As he could not write, nor speak, the ideas he developed were written up for him by others. He said once: “I can’t write but I know how to correct.” (Mayne 123) Whenever Monnet attacked a new problem he gathered around him a bunch of people who knew a lot about the subject. He invited them to have a “chat,” during which approaches and positions were developed within the group. Monnet spoke little, he usually contented himself with listening to the others. Then gradually he ventured a little statement of his own. He pronounced, in his simple way, a couple of kernels of an idea. These he threw into the conversation, while the others reacted to what he said. Then he exposed a little more in a few sentences, then in a few paragraphs, and somehow he made the whole
group turn against him. They argued with him, indicating all the things that were wrong with what he was saying. Monnet listened, reformulated his ideas, and finally took into consideration all of the legitimate arguments. It was one of his strengths that he could listen to criticism. After all this, he had in his mind a perfectly formulated idea. (Duchêne 1994:349-350) By the time they finished and put down on paper what they had devised — rewritten sometimes 30 or 40 times —, it was difficult to find any flaws at first glimpse in the proposals.

Monnet’s group changed continuously as new problems were attacked. Anyone with something to offer might have been added to the group, indifferent to diploma, age, rank, or nationality. Although it was Monnet who organised the team, he did not make an effort to appear clever. He dealt with people on equal terms never talking down to anyone. This might be one of the reasons why the members of his team liked him. Another one is that he worked with such enthusiasm, energy and self-sacrifice that anyone could see he was not driven by personal ambition. He made his colleagues work hard, sometimes under pressure or constant urge but he also made them believe that they were at the heart of events, that they were writing history themselves. He was an excellent organiser who always knew which job to give to a particular person. Monnet and his team worked in an atmosphere of confidence and trust, which added a lot to the cohesion of the group.

After the Great War, Monnet did not return to Cognac. Although he did not take part in establishing the League of Nations, he was asked by Clemenceau and Balfour to be the deputy of the Secretary General, Sir Eric Drummond. His international experience could be put to good use working with this great diplomat. In 1923 – being dissatisfied with the League – he decided to leave. In the following years he regularised the accounts of the family business on the verge of bankruptcy, then became an investment banker for Blair & Co. As a banker, he took part in the stabilisation of the national currency of Poland and Romania. From November 1932, he worked with the Chinese finance minister T.V. Soong to bring to life an investment bank for China. Then until 1938, Monnet worked as a banker. During these years, he became well-versed in business and finance, and he continued building his network of friends and acquaintances around the world. An anecdote said that Monnet had a better collection of visiting cards than Churchill. Morgenthau said once “I suppose I can get along with him as well as with any other Frenchman […] but heaven only knows what all his connections are.” (Duchêne 1994:72) This might have been true after the Second World War and the Schuman Plan. At this time, Monnet was still little known but in 1938 he had a new opportunity to act.

At the time of the Munich Conference, Monnet and his wife were in Paris. Although there was a general feeling of relief in Europe, the possibility of a new war was in the air. William Bullitt, Monnet’s friend presiding over the U.S. Embassy in France, asked Charles Lindbergh (who was visiting Monnet with his wife) to help in organising some kind of air rearmament for France and he wanted Monnet to take charge. On October 3, Monnet was asked by the French Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier to go in secret to Roosevelt to acquire American warplanes. Monnet was chosen as much for his anonymity as for his skills. This was the opening of his second career in public service. It was Bullitt who persuaded him to get involved and introduced him into a group working on these matters. Bullitt also advised Daladier, saying that Monnet, with his deep knowledge of America, would be the man to send to Roosevelt. “The whole of my attention was directed to the
dangers that were piling up in Europe and threatening world peace. […] Fear was everywhere.” (Duchêne 1994:65) Monnet had already thought about the matter. This is proven by a paper they wrote six months before Munich about the possibility to establish an aeronautical industry abroad, out of reach of enemy attack, that is, in North America. This was important because although France had enough tanks, her air force was much weaker than that of Germany. Still it was not easy to get equipment from the U.S. The Neutrality Act of 1935 forbade sales of complete weapons to belligerents. Roosevelt (who did want to stop Hitler) talked to Monnet and soon an order for 1,700 planes was passed. Although there were quite a few problems because of hostile American officials, Roosevelt was adamant and asserted that French orders were good for the aircraft industry and that they would increase the capacity for America’s own defence. The French orders in fact quadrupled American monthly production capacity in less than a year. This laid the foundation for the gigantic later expansion of the U.S. aircraft industry.

War was only a few weeks away. The British and French began to feel they had more chance if they co-operated. Roosevelt had the same opinion as he soon stated that new orders and the resulting growth in U.S. production capacity must be the result of a common Franco-British effort. In any case, Monnet argued, co-operation was necessary in itself. It could take the form of joint rationing of supplies, which must be efficient and fair, and joint purchases abroad. Monnet justly thought that it was necessary to learn the lessons of the earlier war and establish at once an inter-Allied machinery. An Anglo-French Supreme War Council was duly set up. Monnet soon travelled to London to help erect a combined economic structure of economic planning. He became chairman of the Anglo-French Coordinating Committee (AFCOC) and on December 6, 1939, he deliberately declared himself an Allied, not a French, official. The most important problem the AFCOC had to deal with was that of imports. Monnet succeeded in coaxing the British into joining the French in large joint orders for American aircraft. To overcome the resistance of financial circles, Monnet had an instrument called “balance-sheet” (bilan in French), an assessment of armaments, supplies, output, and so on, which – by defining broad priorities clearly to administrations – made it difficult for them to resist the need to act. In four months, Monnet produced a balance-sheet which proved that Germans outnumbered the British and French together 1.5 to 1 in fighters and 2 to 1 in bombers. In March 1940, the Supreme War Council approved a gigantic program to purchase 4,700 airframes and 8,000 engines from the U.S. costing 614 million dollars.

In May 1940, the Germans launched their Blitzkrieg in the west. French and British troops were soon forced into a pocket at Dunkirk. France was virtually lost in a few weeks’ time. There was an urgent need to reinforce the Alliance before France capitulated so that France could continue the war side by side with Britain. Realising co-operation was very difficult given that the English wanted to keep their aircraft to protect the island; moreover, they wanted the French fleet to head for English ports. Neither Churchill, nor de Gaulle was enthusiastic about the idea of an Alliance. But there was no choice. Monnet and his team drafted several papers but the means of forming a union remained vague and with the arrival in power of Pétain the whole idea soon faded away. But Monnet did not forget this lesson. He speaks about this event at the very beginning of his Mémoires: “This lesson, which I understood sufficiently neither during the preceding war, nor in the League of Nations, and which we could not exploit quickly enough in face of the first German attacks;
but I decided to remember it as soon as a new opportunity for joint action comes. In my life, I never lacked opportunities to act. The essential is to be prepared. […] If the time comes, everything becomes simple because necessity does not let us hesitate. (Mémoires 38-39)

And Monnet did not hesitate. First, he sent a telegram to Washington: “All further consignments of war materials intended for France should be diverted to the UK.” (Duchêne 1994:83) Then Monnet wound up the Anglo-French Coordinating Committee and asked Churchill for a job. Monnet was very valuable in his knowledge of whom to approach and how to approach them in Washington so he became the French member of the British Supply Council. There he became a spokesman for all-out production. He wanted to overwhelm the enemy by formulating and putting into practice a war-winning armaments strategy. Robert Sherwood called Monnet “the great, single-minded apostle of all-out production, preaching the doctrine that ten thousand tanks too many are far preferable to one tank too few.” (Duchêne 1994:88) At that time, these views were regarded as extreme. But the unfolding of American war effort was in fact provided by Monnet and groups with similar ideas advising the president. Monnet also knew that maximum American capacity for Britain and France should be reached before American rearmament began to compete for the resources. As Britain was already unable to pay, Monnet presented a balance-sheet, which he gave to Roosevelt who soon came up with the idea of Lend-Lease. Roosevelt presented the U.S. as “the arsenal of democracy,” a term invented by Monnet. He first used the phrase talking to Frankfurter. He was immediately told not to use it again so that it could be reserved for Roosevelt. Lend-Lease furnished an opportunity for Americans and British to work together on what was called the “Victory Program,” and by the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, it was virtually ready. Within a month of entering the war, the U.S. launched the industrial effort to finish it. This is what Keynes was referring to when he said that “Monnet had shortened the war by a year.” Monnet himself wrote: “That day, more than at any other time in my life, I felt the satisfaction of having contributed to a decision that would change the course of events.” (Duchêne 1994:93) In fact, the high goals established in 1940 would have never been expanded or attained without him. (Nathan 85) This, in itself, is a remarkable feat. But Monnet’s career had barely begun.

In 1943, having finished his mission, he returned to French territory to offer his services to de Gaulle. In Algiers, he became a key figure of establishing the Comité Français de Libération Nationale (CFLN) and a member of de Gaulle’s government. This is the only time that he was directly involved in politics, which he suddenly left after the liberation of France. In the meantime, he used his American connections to have the CFLN recognised by the Anglo-Saxon powers and negotiated a full Lend-Lease agreement for France. He told de Gaulle: “You speak of greatness […] but today the French are small. There will only be greatness when the French are of a stature to warrant it…. For this purpose, they must modernise – because at the moment they are not modern. Materially, the country needs to be transformed.” De Gaulle answered: “You are certainly right. Do you want to try?” (Duchêne 1994:145) This was the genesis of the Monnet Plan. Monnet organised a Commissariat General of the Plan and recruited a team, in which was working Robert Marjolin, Étienne Hirsch, Pierre Uri, and others. The Commissariat had a light structure, and its task was to raise loans, fix priorities, focus resources, and help curb inflation. Monnet did not hide that he was determined to prevent the return of the well-established
French protectionism. Operating from 1945 to 1952, the Plan pressed a restructuring on the industry and drew up a balance-sheet and an overall programme for the future. Thus, France was at an advantage in using the resources of the Marshall Aid for modernisation. A friend of Monnet’s, William Tomlinson provided a persistent influence in Washington in favour of the Monnet Plan. The Plan was obviously an interlude in Monnet’s international career, but without it, he could hardly have proposed the Schuman Plan.

The war was now over. The victory of the Allies over Germany created a new situation, which was totally unknown before. European countries had to find a way of co-operation to establish their economic and political independence and at the same time to make sure that a new war in Western Europe would become impossible. Monnet wanted a community which would attack national sovereignty and promote real European unity at the same time ensuring that Germany develops in a democratic and peaceful way. Monnet, as head of the French National Plan, knew about the limits of national effort. Modernisation and reconstruction were of primary importance after the war and by 1949 things were looking up for national economies. It was in this year that they too began to feel the limits of national capacities. It was evident that in a few years’ time growing economies would try to encroach on each other’s territory or begin to claim protective laws.

From the Marshall aid onwards, the U.S. began to see the economic recovery of Germany and later its military contribution to Western defence as vital to the European and, therefore, world balance. By 1949, Germany was beginning to return to Europe: agreements on the Atlantic treaty and the International Ruhr Authority were signed. In May, the Basic Constitution of the German Federal Republic came to existence. France had to act quickly if she did not want to lose control of the events. In 1950, France launched a program that would politically detach the Saar from Germany and eventually lead to its annexation. A protectorate was set up to run the region. Hostilities were renewed between the two countries. Monnet did not hesitate to talk to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Robert Schuman, and to tell him that “Peace must be based on equality. We missed peace in 1919 because we have introduced discrimination and the spirit of superiority. We are now beginning to make the same mistakes.” (Mémoires 410) It seemed there would be no solution to the problem. Monnet felt it was time he stepped onto the stage. He wrote to Schuman that the states of Western Europe must make “a genuine European effort which the existence of a Federation of the West alone will make possible.” (Duchêne 1994:187) He added that working for “a real federation of the West” was the only job he would be ready to take on apart from the Monnet Plan. He knew that France and Germany had to be brought together as quickly as possible. But neither England, nor France had any positive economic or political policy towards Germany.

The Foreign Ministers of the three occupying powers (Acheson, Bevin, and Schuman) had decided to meet in every few months, and on one such occasion Dean Acheson put Schuman on notice that that at their next meeting Schuman should propose the broad lines of a German policy for the three. Schuman did not have the slightest idea about how to attack the problem. And the promised meeting came alarmingly soon: it fell on May 11-13, 1950. The minister did ask his civil servants for ideas, but these seemed to him inspired by a tradition of mistrust and to have little chance of changing the course of events. It was here that Jean Monnet could come up with a solution. He again proved his tenacity as he was determined to go on when all the other prospectors had given up. First, he proposed the
pool of the border regions between France and Germany. Then – following discussions
with collaborators – it was agreed that all French and German coal and steel would be
included. Schuman adopted the scheme and Adenauer assured him of his support.
They announced what was to become the Schuman Plan on May 9, 1950. Here we must
stop to clarify this “change of name.” As we have seen, Monnet knew whom to talk to
when he wanted to achieve something, and Europe was worth the trouble for him. His
method was to gain and maintain direct access to the source of power. Having something to
offer, he was always cordially accepted but he did not want to exhaust the good will of men
of power so he usually made his way to more junior officials who would provide him with
the information he needed and who would pass on to the decision-maker what he wanted to
say. He distinguished men of power from men of information – it is not obvious, but the
two were always different. It was in this way that the original idea devised by Monnet came
to be known as the Schuman Plan. The proposition itself came as a real shock for the
political world. The secrecy and speed with which it was conceived made sure that no one
had the time to raise serious doubts against it. This was another one of Monnet’s working
methods: to expose a ready-made proposal when no one else had any ideas. In fact, the
unexpected event caught the opposition off-balance and rushed ministers into decisions
without adequate time for reflection. But they had to take this risk: the new plan was an
obvious break with the past. The French knew that Germany – even truncated – was
potentially stronger than France. The novelty of the idea was to use German superiority in a
partnership to common ends rather than put controls on German industry. This was also a
means of integrating Germany into Europe as a partner on equal terms. The Schuman Plan
presented an entirely new approach: instead of one limited decision, it introduced
continuous change. Although Schuman viewed it only as the solution to the most urging
problems, Monnet was determined to regard it as the first step towards European
integration. Coal and steel represented an area that was focussed (and so controllable) and
of vital importance (steel industry produced the most important articles of war). Monnet
firmly believed that integration in one field of economy would inevitably generate the need
for integration in other areas as well. He saw unity as the sole and most important condition
for peace, welfare and democracy. And he knew that on the long run these could not be
maintained without a real and profound partnership in which all the nations joining the
future community are equal. The idea of a coal and steel union was not entirely new. But it
was only the idea that had existed before; it was left to Monnet and his team to elaborate a
treaty. It was very important for Monnet to create an institution. He was often heard
quoting an aphorism by Henri Frédéric Amiel: “Each man begins the world afresh. Only
institutions grow wiser; they store up the collective experience; and, from this experience
and wisdom, men subject to the same laws will gradually find, not that their natures change
but that their behaviour does.” “Institutions govern relationships between people. They are
the real pillars of civilisation.” (Duchêne 1994:401) The negotiations began on June 20,
1950 with the representatives of six countries around the table. Monnet had lots of trouble
with the 60 delegates and had to make a constant effort to persuade them.
Before the opening of the talks, Monnet and his colleagues draw up a forty-article draft
treaty that was used as point of departure. Monnet read out and commented on this draft
without giving a copy to the delegates. He did so to avoid unnecessary debate. In fact, the
others did not have propositions; they were there to pose questions. Monnet kept the
delegates working hard in an atmosphere of confinement, which was cleverly used to create a mentality of solidarity. But Monnet also had to deal with outsiders. He had to persuade the representatives of the industrialists and steelmasters that the political goals were more important than economic interests. Monnet did the work of a good teacher, who keeps an open eye on his pupils, talks to them very patiently, and is ready to explain something several times if necessary. Monnet was not good at conferences or discussions with lots of participants but he was a master of persuading individuals or small groups. So he invited them and talked to them face to face in his little office or went to see them even if it involved long journeys. “When talking, he was always watching his partner, never letting them out of sight. He never raised his voice.” (van Helmont 159) He was famous for his telephone bills and ticket reservations, which he would again and again modify causing lots of trouble to secretaries. The talks were conducted in an atmosphere of cordiality and confidence, where benevolence and creativity prevailed, and the whole resembled a conversation rather than a negotiation. Monnet firmly believed that conversation could solve any kind of conflict. “Instead of being confronted face-to-face, allow yourself to be mutually influenced. Thus – with the help of the other – you can discover things that you could not on your own and you will naturally arrive at dialogue and joint action.” (Fontaine 14) Once a director of one of the biggest German coal and steel firms went in to lecture Monnet in rather forceful terms on everything wrong with the ECSC. At the end of half an hour, he emerged thrilled. He agreed that he was the man to fight side-by-side with Monnet for a greater and more enlightened Europe. It was difficult to win against Monnet, facing his vision of the future, his plan of action, his power to move events – all of which his critics lacked. (Gillingham 157)

The bulk of the treaty was ready by early December and it was signed on April 18, 1951. It was written in French, printed on Dutch vellum in German ink, was finished in the Imprimerie Nationale de Paris, bound in Belgian parchment, tied with Italian ribbons, put together with Luxembourg paste. Monnet knew the significance of symbolic gestures. The negotiations went on after the ratification of the treaty by the member states. The inaugural address was held on August 10, 1951 in the City Hall of Luxembourg, where Monnet pronounced that “the construction of Europe does not tolerate further delay.” (Allocutions) The Common Assembly held its first meeting a month later, on September 10. Thanks to Monnet’s connections the United States recognised the ECSC as independent and declared that in matters of coal and steel it would deal with the community and not the individual countries. Britain soon followed the example.

The results of the new Community were impressing: steel prices rose less quickly in the Community than elsewhere. Italian metallurgy and Belgian mines experienced a sudden growth. Investment became more secure and predictable. And, apart from the material gains, it made obvious to everyone that the common European institutions were functioning. Its members worked a lot for this success. The building of the ECSC and the High Authority of which Monnet became the first president was called in Luxembourg “the house of madmen” and its windows were lit day and night. (Roussel 630) Monnet ignored daily routines if he thought something was of great priority. He created an atmosphere of permanent emergency in the new institution to obtain the best work from his colleagues and to marginalise national interests. For the same reasons, he always made French and German colleagues work together.
The art of the Schuman plan was to extract positive energy from potentially destructive ingredients. It drew strength from the popularity of Europe with the public. And steel was a good occasion to introduce a new approach to international relations. Still, without the Americans, the treaty would never have been achieved. Monnet could raise American support in a way no other European could rival. The force for the progress of European unity without Britain was the triple alliance of the United States, France, and Germany. Monnet was the link between the United States and Europe. He was “at the top of his form” in 1950. He made many controversial judgements which later proved to be correct: the narrowing of focus on coal and steel; the sudden announcement to fend off expected opposition; the insistence on power for the High Authority; the daring move to go on without Britain; the stress on equality and non-discrimination; the marginalising of the Saar; ties with the United States. Indeed, Monnet’s greatest strength was the art to seize the opportunity offered by a crisis to break through the conditions that protect the status quo and to introduce new elements that favoured further change. (Duchêne 1991:188) Monnet had sharp strategic and tactical insights and a nose for action. “Events that strike me and occupy my thoughts lead me to general conclusions about what has to be done. Then circumstances, which determine day-to-day events, suggest or supply the means of action. I can wait a long time for the right moment. In Cognac, they are good at waiting. It is the only way to make good brandy.” (Duchêne 1994:347)

Monnet was keen on crises because, as he said, “crises are opportunities.” (Duchêne 1994:23) Opportunities to break with the past and to do something new. There is another anecdote he repeated frequently. “A Western visitor asked Ibn Saud the secret of his success. Ibn Saud replied, ‘God appeared to me in the desert when I was a young man and said something which has guided my actions throughout my life: He told me: ‘For me, everything is a means – even the obstacles.’’” There is often a kind of common wisdom in what Monnet used to say. He spoke in ways uncommon to public men: “There is nothing more dangerous than victory,” or: “What you say is too clear to be true.” When it came to equality, he asked: “Why should there be a border beyond which I treat men differently from those on my side?” Monnet’s simplicity served several purposes – in this case, it does not mean simplifying the problems, but the solutions. Simplicity, for Monnet, was important to convince himself. This gave him confidence and power to convince others. Simplicity was also good to forestall criticism. His ideas were pre-tested with his team and when presenting them, he went to the essentials. This was very well accepted by his audiences. Simplicity also helped him address all his audiences in the same way irrespective of country, or nationality – misunderstanding could be a strong weapon in the hands of his opponents. Monnet took care to get and keep the sympathy of the press. They felt they could trust and rely upon him. Monnet was seen – especially in America and in Britain – as a source of optimism and innovation in a continent suffering from anxiety. And he enjoyed publicity, especially good photographs of himself. Many of his terms: “non-discrimination,” “accept facts,” “community of interest” tended to be taken up by the press and became common currency. Simplicity for him was also a means of building trust with common people. (Duchêne 1991:193)

In 1955, Monnet left the High Authority and returned to France to establish his Action Committee for the United States of Europe. The name was a good choice – it felt fresh and made an impact. This organisation included a selected team of politicians, trade unionists,
and other men of influence who wanted to promote European integration with every means possible, the strongest of these being lobbying. The integrative policies they pursued were to a significant extent due to small but temporarily dominant groups of people in key positions, with converging ideas, working together across frontiers, often against latent or active opposition at home. (Duchêne 1991:199) Monnet’s successes were due to the fact that he could mobilise powerful and disparate coalitions for his enterprises. He had a shadow party of internationalists on both sides of the Atlantic in the Action Committee. He made an effort to accelerate the formation of Euratom and later the European Economic Community (EEC). He was also a determined promoter of Britain’s joining the Communities. In 1975, he dissolved the Action Committee and began writing his Mémoires, a best-selling book in France and the U.S. “Mr Europe” was more popular than ever.

And how did he see his own achievement? Europe, for Monnet, was a way of exploring a new world. He kept in his office a model of the Kontiki raft on which Thor Heyerdahl crossed the South Pacific as a symbol of Europe’s own voyage to discovery. “Those young men, I explained to my visitors, chose their course and then they set out. They knew that they could not turn back. Whatever the difficulties, they had only one option – to go on. We too, we are going towards our goal, the United States of Europe, on a journey with no return.” (Mémoires 794) Monnet was certainly right. Even if the journey is long and hard, it makes possible for Europeans to control their own destiny.

References: