



RESEARCH ARTICLE

From post-war reconciliation to European integration? Competing historicities of ‘exchange’ in European small-town twinning

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Abstract

Town twinning is often seen as a linear driving force of European integration. This article argues that town twinning’s historicity is more complex. The initial post-war period, according to today’s practitioners’ accounts, was characterized by a high degree of personal involvement which transformed into an exposure to relationship uncertainty. By way of contrast, twinning practices since the 1990s are reported as being driven by a more managerial logic. The shift from the imaginary of ‘reconciliation’ to that of ‘integration’ comes along with a change in twinning practices, the distribution of responsibilities and the share of personal involvement and exposure.

Introduction: implications of history in town twinning in Europe

While town twinning, under different names (such as ‘sister cities’ in the US context),¹ has become a practice of world-wide currency in the course of the twentieth century, it was arguably in post-war Central, Western and Southern Europe where the practice received some of its definite impulses. Today, Europe hosts the greatest number of inter-municipal relationships figuring under the formal heading of ‘twinning’. It is also in Europe where town twinning is held to be of great importance by political bodies and institutions, most notably the European Union (EU), which sees town twinning as a major pillar to deepen citizens’ understanding of Europe, foster a political identity as citizens of Europe in them and raise socio-cultural support for EU policies.²

¹See D.H. Smith, ‘Voluntary inter-cultural exchange and understanding groups: the roots of success in U.S. sister city programs’, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 31 (1990), 177–92; and R.D. Cremer, A. de Bruin and A. Dupuis, ‘International sister-cities: bridging the global–local divide’, *American Journal of Economic and Sociology*, 60 (2001), 377–401.

²*Europe for Citizens Programme 2007–2013: Programme Guide*, version valid as of January 2013, Directorate General for Communication / Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (Brussels, 2013); and

It is therefore not without reason that the beginnings of post-war town twinning, dating to the late 1940s, are often seen as precursors of later waves of political integration of what was eventually to become the European Union. According to this set of political-historical narratives, town twinning initially arose out of particular cities' ambition to contribute to post-war reconciliation among European populations.³ Post-war town twinning saw not only several waves of extension to municipalities in states so far not taking part in the exchange (from France, Germany and the UK to Southern European countries and later to Eastern Europe, in particular), but also several rearticulations of the potential political role of towns and municipalities – for instance, the idea of an 'alternative foreign policy', with a view to socialist polities in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, or the project of cities as transnationally oriented political subjectivities heralding post-national forms of European and global relationships in the 1990s and since.⁴ As far as the EU is concerned, it sees town twinning mostly as an instrument in bringing European citizens to the level of political integration already achieved by the supra-nationalization of the EU's political and economic institutions, thus continuing the long post-war work of breaking down political, economic and political-cultural barriers in Europe.⁵

Town twinning, thus, has its own European history. At the same time, it is a practice whose practitioners are usually quite aware of that history. Not only were many studies concerning the historical trajectory and the transformation of practices of town twinning authored by practitioners themselves.⁶ What is more, and this will be the focus of this article, twinning practices themselves seem to be imbued with a sense of their historical contextualization. They make the sense they do for the practitioners insofar as they are viewed from the perspective of being embedded in

Europe for Citizens Programme 2014–2020: Programme Guide, version valid for the calls as of January 2020, European Commission: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (Brussels, 2020).

³H.B. Bock, 'Europa von unten. Zu den Ursprüngen und Anfängen der deutsch-französischen Gemeindepartnerschaften', in A. Jünemann, E. Richter and H. Ullrich (eds.), *Gemeindepartnerschaften im Umbruch Europas* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 13–35; H. Mirek, 'Die Entwicklung von Städtepartnerschaften', in P. von Kodolitsch (ed.), *Kommunale 'Außenpolitik'. Zur Auslandsarbeit der Gemeinden und zu den innerdeutschen Städtepartnerschaften*, DIFU-Materialien 2/89 (Berlin, 1989), 33–46; H. Schmalstieg, 'Städtepartnerschaften im Wandel', in von Kodolitsch (ed.), *Kommunale 'Außenpolitik'*, 19–31; T. Grunert, *Langzeitwirkungen von Städtepartnerschaften. Ein Beitrag zur europäischen Integration* (Kehl am Rhein and Straßburg, 1981); B. Wagner, *Partnerschaften deutscher Städte und Gemeinden. Transnationale Beiträge zur internationalen Sicherheit* (Münster, 1995); H. Garstka, *Die Rolle der Gemeinden in der internationalen Verständigung nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg gezeigt am Beispiel der deutsch-französischen Verständigung* (Stuttgart, 1972); H. Ullrich, 'Vorwort', in Jünemann, Richter and Ullrich (eds.), *Gemeindepartnerschaften im Umbruch Europas*, 7–11.

⁴P. Joenniemi, 'Cities as international actors: the nexus between networking and security', in C. Wellmann (ed.), *From Town to Town: Local Authorities as Transnational Actors* (Münster, 1998), 29–36; Wagner, *Partnerschaften*; B. Wagner, 'Twinning: a transnational contribution to more international security?', in Wellmann (ed.), *From Town to Town*, 37–44; D. Weigel, 'Transnational co-operation between towns and regions: a foreign policy perspective', in Wellmann (ed.), *From Town to Town*, 45–9; G. Széll, 'Development and co-operation in global twinning: nineteen theses on the perspectives on twinings for the next 30 years', in Wellmann (ed.), *From Town to Town*, 61–6; P. Joenniemi and J. Jańczak, 'Theorizing town twinning: towards a global perspective', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 32 (2017), 423–8.

⁵*Europe for Citizens Programme 2007–2013; Europe for Citizens Programme 2014–2020*.

⁶For instance, J. Sticker, *Kommunale Außenpolitik. Jumelage – Verschwisterung – Twinning – Gemellaggio – Verbroedering*, 2. Erweiterte Auflage (Cologne, 1982); Mirek, 'Die Entwicklung von Städtepartnerschaften'.

a historical constellation. The European history of town twinning has thus, in Charles Taylor's terms,⁷ an 'imaginary' quality for town twinning practices: their history provides a point of reference that lends twinning-related practices, which do not always relate to historical and political idioms but can be quite mundane (like paying visits, hosting guests, taking them out for dinner, going on joint excursions and so on), sense and meaningfulness, thus informing those practices as they take place.

Looked at from the perspective of such *implications of history* in twinning practices, the rather linear narrative that connects the fleeting beginnings of twinning (the first inter-municipal relationships were forged between cities that had been reduced to rubble during the war)⁸ with their present strong European institutionalization is eroding. As I will demonstrate in this article, even today twinning practices are informed by a sense of historical unlikelihood, risk, maybe venturesomeness, that characterized the beginnings of town twinning. 'Beginnings', as the plural denotes, does not refer to any singular moment of birth associable with one pre-eminent date, but to those occasions when twinning relationships between particular municipalities were forged, when first visits took place, when new members joined an already existing twinning relationship, or generally, when new experiences were made and reflected upon.

Some studies in the historiography of town twinning address the questionable narrative 'from post-war reconciliation to European integration'. For instance, Antoine Vion reconstructed town twinning as a vehicle of the politicization of towns and municipalities already in the 1950s, thus pointing out the historical contingencies of twinning rationales within specific national (in his case, the French) contexts.⁹ On the example of East–West twinings, Stefan Couperus and Dora Vrhoci argued against historical accounts that stress the ushering in of an entrepreneurial and neoliberal governance logic in town twinning at the expense of the idea of bottom-up reconciliation since 1989, insisting on the robustness of the reconciliatory logic especially in twinings with a longer history.¹⁰ Against the background of these contributions, the particular challenge to the linear narrative that will reveal itself in the course of this article is a sense of historical unlikelihood among practitioners regarding the 'beginnings' of town twinings that still informs certain aspects of twinning in Europe. Yet, I should be clear from the start that such sense of historical unlikelihood might be a characteristic of the sample that I have been working with, which encompasses qualitative interviews with twinning practitioners in small towns in Germany along with some ethnographic evidence of twinning-related events that I observed.¹¹ Many of these interviews make reference to the historical positionality

⁷C. Taylor, 'Modern social imaginaries', *Public Culture*, 14 (2002), 91–124.

⁸See M. Weyreter, 'Germany and the town twinning movement', *Contemporary Review*, 282 (1982), 37–43.

⁹A. Vion, 'Europe from the bottom up: town twinning in France during the Cold War', *Contemporary European History*, 11 (2002), 623–40; A. Vion, 'L'invention de la tradition des jumelages (1951–1956): mobilisation pour un droit', *Revue française de science politique*, 53 (2003/04), 559–82.

¹⁰S. Couperus and D. Vrhoci, 'A profitable friendship, still? Town twinning between Eastern and Western European cities before and after 1989', in E. Braat and P. Corduener (eds.), *1989 and the West: Western Europe since the End of the Cold War* (London and New York, 2020), 143–59.

¹¹The interviews and participant observation were conducted with 65 twinning practitioners in altogether 12 small towns in Hesse (up to a population of 30,000) in the period between 2012 and 2014. Some more

of Germans vis-à-vis other European nationals after World War II. They relate the unlikelihood of twinning to a generalized anxiety that non-German Europeans, given the history of National Socialism and the war begun by the Nazi regime, might find it difficult to enter into relationships with Germans. Also, a sense of unlikelihood might be conditioned or fostered by the context of small-town twinings, which, in the absence of robust and sustainable funding by the municipality, have to rely on civic activism and honorary office to a much greater degree than twinings between bigger cities, in which twinning has often been planned, administered and funded directly by the public administration.

Even given those limitations of a national focus within a transnational field of practice, it is possible to attain a sense of questioning of linear historical trajectories, namely when taking into account that other respondents in the same sample framed town twinning in completely different ways. This pertains, in particular, to a sense of historical rupture relating to the contemporary moment. For many practitioners, town twinning is a practice undergoing fundamental changes.¹² While some of them deplore this development, arguing that it steers twinning away from its original and genuine meaning (which is often framed in terms of 'friendship'), others see those same changes as heralding a fresh approach to twinning, consisting mostly in focused co-operation in certain fields of inter-municipal activity. This latter stance can be aligned with the EU's present take on twinning, namely, as directly contributing to a Europeanization of diverse fields of societal activity. In this new take, the implicated historicity of town twinning seems to lose at least some of its traction, instead championing a forward-looking perspective that deploys the idiom of the 'project' and relies on an understanding of European integration as full-fledged exchange.

In essence, this article argues that it is that idiom of exchange that articulates a linear view on twinning's history in Europe precisely as it sees town twinning as ever engaging new constituencies of exchange since its 'Beginning' (with a capital B) – while the position that articulates the unlikelihood of all twinning 'beginnings' (with a plural s) is closer to an understanding of historicity that questions linearity, underscores historical implication and, importantly, directly challenges the ubiquity of 'exchange' as a metaphor to understand the historical meaning of town twinning.

In order to make these points, the article first discusses the EU's current discourse on the role of town twinning in the project of European integration along with some recent references to town twinning in the social scientific research literature. From

episodic observations and informal interviews took place before that. The practitioners had different roles in town twinning, ranging from municipal staff to members of different twinning committees and other voluntary associations to hosts of foreign guests and participants in excursions. The interviews were conducted with individual interlocutors or with small groups; often, the interlocutors themselves suggested and invited other persons to join the interviews. See A. Langenohl, *Town Twinning, Transnational Connections, and Trans-Local Citizenship Practices in Europe* (New York and Basingstoke 2015); A. Langenohl, 'The merits of reciprocity: small-town twinning in the wake of the Second World War', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 32 (2017), 557–76; A. Langenohl, 'European integration, valuation, and exchange: toward a value theoretic understanding of transnational sociality in the European Union', *Przegląd socjologiczny*, 68 (2019), 77–98.

¹²For an anthropological theorization of change as practised, see A. Lottermann, 'Partnerschaften in eigener Sache. Der gegenwärtige Wandel des Nachkriegsformats Städtepartnerschaften in deutsch-polnischen und deutsch-türkischen Verbindungen des Ruhrgebiets. Eine kulturanthropologische Studie', Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, Ph.D. thesis, 2016.

there, the article proceeds to a brief discussion of empirical data that utilize this discourse on town twinning as fostering European integration. In these two sections, the focus is on the formation and amalgamation of an understanding of European integration in terms of exchange with an understanding of post-war history *in Europe* as a linear history *of Europe*. The next section juxtaposes this position on European integration and the role of town twinning in it with other examples from my interview sample which speak to the unlikelihood of European beginnings by the example of the beginnings of twinings. These examples from the interviews are interpreted as instances of an understanding of sociality which conceptually precedes exchange, where the act of addressing the other, and being addressed by the other, challenges any notion of attained subjectivity that underlies the concept of exchange. The last section concludes on the idea that the *contemporary* implied historicity of twinning might be envisaged in terms of ‘proto-exchange’. The suggestion is not that the historicity of proto-exchange denotes a form of European sociality that has not yet linearly attained its full dignity, which would be exchange, but that the historical unlikelihood of twinning, as it has informed and given sense to at least some crucial practices of town twinning, is currently being reorganized into such a narrative of linearity, according to which the beginnings of town twinning are turned into the pre-history of a fully Europeanized present that has only one Beginning (with a capital B).

Situating the EU’s discourse on town twinning in Europe within the field of research

Unlike other practices involving transnational relationships in and beyond Europe, like migration, economic ties or professional networking, town twinning has so far received comparatively little attention in the social scientific research literature.¹³ To my knowledge, the only social scientific monographs on town twinning available in English are my own contribution¹⁴ and a recent book by Michel S. Laguerre on the ways that twinning might make use of new communication strategies in the digital age.¹⁵ And while there are some edited volumes and journal special issues on town twinning, next to book publications mainly in German, they regularly embed twinning-related research into grander questions of the international political economy, international relations or new modalities of municipal governance.¹⁶ Thereby, a certain twofold tendency reveals itself in this literature. On the one hand, twinning is seen as heralding new modalities of international political and economic co-operation. For instance, since the 1990s, several contributions foregrounded the potential of twinning to contribute to making municipalities visible as seats of political agency beyond the framework of the international system, which presupposes nation-states as the ultimate owners of political initiative.¹⁷ On the other hand,

¹³Cremer, de Bruin and Dupuis, ‘International sister-cities’.

¹⁴Langenohl, *Town Twinning*.

¹⁵M.S. Laguerre, *Global City-Twinning in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, 2019).

¹⁶Sticker, *Kommunale Außenpolitik*; Jünemann, Richter and Ullrich (eds.), *Gemeindepartnerschaften im Umbruch Europas*; Wellmann (ed.), *From Town to Town*; A. Statz and C. Wohlfarth, *Kommunale Partnerschaften und Netzwerke. Ein Beitrag zu einer transnationalen Politik der Nachhaltigkeit*, Schriften zur Demokratie, Bd 20 (Berlin, 2010); Joenniemi and Jańczak, ‘Theorizing town twinning’.

¹⁷Joenniemi, ‘Cities as international actors’; Wagner, *Partnerschaften*; Wagner, ‘Twinning’; Weigel, ‘Transnational co-operation’; Széll, ‘Development and co-operation’.

twinning as an institutionally formatted practice is almost as often seen as challenged by other forms of inter-municipal relationships, like, for instance, ‘city networks’ which are argued to be more focused on, and animated by, certain policy and economic issues.¹⁸ As Julia Grosspietsch argues, town twinning sees itself exposed to impacts of transformation resulting from such a more thematic and output orientation: ‘twinning [is increasingly being seen] both as an explicit strategy of Europeanization and as a boosterist attempt to promote a city’s economic competitiveness’.¹⁹ What thus seems to be established is a greater governance-related logic of town twinning, according to which twinning practices are referred to political or economic outcomes that they are supposed to support.

These diagnoses stand in direct continuity with the European Union’s twinning-related agendas. It is not an exaggeration to say that since the 1990s Europeanization has been the most important contextual development impacting twinning practices. On the one hand, this has to do with the fact that European institutions (like the EU itself, but also the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, CEMR) play the role of allocating the bulk of twinning-related funding in Europe. The EU in its Europe for Citizens Programme²⁰ regards town twinning as being one of the major pillars of European integration, in particular, as announced in the current Programme Guide that specifies the funding conditions, with respect to ‘activities that cover civic participation in the broadest sense with a particular focus on activities directly linked to Union policies, with a view to concretely participate in the Union policy-making process’.²¹ The CEMR attributes town twinning quite specific and problem-oriented functions like ‘projects on waste treatment, water management, economic development, and improving social services’.²² While the prominence of town twinning with European supranational institutions testifies to the importance that is attributed to twinning as a promotion vehicle of socio-cultural Europeanization and the inclusion of inter-town networks into pressing issues in the EU (and beyond), it is also noticeable that twinning is seen primarily as an instrument in achieving these goals, not as an end in itself. Thus, Grosspietsch has argued that twinning is increasingly seen as a set of practices that ‘may be tied into any number of political objectives, from reconciliation, cultural exchange, solidarity, or poverty alleviation, through to economic exchange, the internationalization of local enterprise and the common promotion of business tourism’.²³ In other words, town twinning is increasingly viewed, and funded, as a governance instrument: municipalities receive financial support from European institutions mainly under the condition that they can credibly claim to contribute to the practical solution of

¹⁸K. Kern, ‘Transnationale Städtenetzwerke in Europa’, in E. Schröter (ed.), *Empirische Policy- und Verwaltungsforschung. Lokale, nationale und internationale Perspektiven* (Opladen, 2001), 95–116; H. Leitner, ‘The politics of scale and networks of spatial connectivity: transnational interurban networks and the rescaling of political governance in Europe’, in E. Sheppard (ed.), *Scale and Geographic Inquiry* (Malden, MA, 2004), 236–55; M. Jayne, P. Hubbard and D. Bell, ‘Worlding a city: twinning and urban theory’, *City*, 15 (2011), 25–41.

¹⁹J. Grosspietsch, ‘More than food and folk music? Geographical perspectives on European town twinning’, *Geography Compass*, 3 (2009), 1281–304.

²⁰Europe for Citizens Programme 2007–2013; Europe for Citizens Programme 2014–2020.

²¹Europe for Citizens Programme 2014–2020, 22.

²²CEMR, *Twinning for Tomorrow’s World: Practical Handbook*. Conseil des Communes et Régions d’Europe / Council of European Municipalities and Regions (Paris and Brussels, 2007).

²³Grosspietsch, ‘More than food’.

'European' problems or the development and furthering of 'European' political agendas. The default modality of how towns receive funding from the European institutions thus invokes highly formalized procedures of application, which usually define 'projects' that twinned towns jointly work out, pursue and budget.

There is a conspicuous conceptual continuity between the characterization of town twinning by the European institutions and recent studies which confront or contextualize it with other forms of international or transnational social co-ordination. The continuity consists in the implicit argument that, as the political context for twinning is changing, so is its political role and concrete practices, too. While not all studies referred to above directly establish that changes going on with respect to town twinning are a causal result of changes in its political contextualization or in the overall field of 'social transnationalism' or 'horizontal Europeanization'²⁴ that twinning is seen as being a part of, there is a clear tendency to *conceptually* subsume transformations in the field of town twinning to much larger processes, to which twinning then can be seen as only reacting. The main difference between the research literature's and the EU's view on twinning is thereby whether these larger contextualizations of twinning are referred to normatively (as demands to twinning emanating from the political aim to deepen the EU's integration) or analytically (as descriptive statements that are held to explain or to predict that twinning cannot be any longer what it used to be).

As opposed to this stance, the present article suggests understanding changes in twinning practices as processes that need to be *accomplished*, and that means, first of all, made sense of. As was conceptually argued in the introduction, the historicity of town twinning cannot be reduced to an analysis of its historical contexts, but has to focus on how references to history are themselves constitutive of twinning practices, including their change. This presupposes to abandon the view that twinning is a self-identical and homogeneous practice, and instead to foreground its heterogeneity. In that respect, Nick Clarke has helpfully proposed to see twinning as concretely variegated combinations of practices that can be analytically viewed as 'devices', 'repertoires' and 'models' that not only attain different materializations of twinning practice but are also open to other practices of transnational activities without having to adopt the latter's logic.²⁵ Moreover, Annina Lottermann's anthropological investigation into changing patterns of town twinning argues that contemporary transformations of town twinning should be approached as practices, that is, as a perpetual accomplishment of calibrating established social processes with new demands, logics and opportunities.²⁶ Applied to the historicity of town twinning, and combining the insights from Clarke and Lottermann, one may argue that references to the historicity of town twinning play a constitutive role in accomplishing changes in the devices, repertoires and models of twinning.

²⁴S. Mau and J. Mewes, 'Horizontal Europeanisation in contextual perspective: what drives cross-border activities within the European Union?', *European Societies*, 14 (2012), 7–34.

²⁵N. Clarke, 'Globalising care? Town twinning in Britain since 1945', *Geoforum*, 42 (2011), 115–25.

²⁶A. Lottermann, 'Transnationalisierung und Europäisierung. Wie deutsch-polnische und deutsch-türkische Städtepartnerschaften ein transnationales Europa kreieren', in M. Hühn, D. Lerp, K. Petzold and M. Stock (eds.), *Transkulturalität, Transnationalität, Transstaatlichkeit, Translokalität. Theoretische und empirische Begriffsbestimmungen* (Münster, Hamburg and London, 2010), 115–31; Lottermann, 'Partnerschaften in eigener Sache'.

This sets the stage for understanding the role of historicity in practices of change. Historicity cannot be reduced to a mere contextual factor, but instead has to be made visible as a point of reference that informs the ways that change is understood, practised and negotiated. Both the corpus of studies devoted to recent, institutionally triggered changes in town twinning and the EU's position on the functionality of twinning for a deepening of European integration miss this implication of historicity in practising town twinning and its changes, dispersing historicity in a linear notion of historical change. In contrast to this neglect of the historicity of town twinning as informing its practices, the next two sections account for the sense that twinning practices make for their practitioners. First, I highlight patterns of interpretation that see twinning as entering a new stage that demands to leave behind inherited practices, and which find themselves in an overall accord with the EU's discourse as well as the studies diagnosing a changing institutional and political environment for twinning. Second, I turn to patterns of interpretation that reveal themselves as being informed by the deeper historicity of twinning: relating to episodes in the history of their twinning relationships that they regard as important or exemplary, practitioners frame these occurrences as being implicitly or explicitly informed by the post-war constellation of town twinning in Europe.

A sense of (ex-)change: how twinning practitioners reconstruct ongoing transformations

The interviews I conducted contain many examples where interlocutors refer to ongoing changes with respect to how town twinning is practised.²⁷ Most often, this is framed as a weakening of an ethics of 'friendship' that is held to have informed twinning in the past but is waning in the present. 'Friendship' refers to strong social bonds with other participants in the twinning network. Often, out of the many relationships that practitioners sometimes entertain, friendship is referred to one relationship alone – possibly leading up to a point where conflicts lurk about how one picks one's friends in the partner town, and whom in turn one has to turn down. The Tischler family of Bittlich represent an instance for a long-lasting friendship with a family in France which for them embodies the spirit of twinning to a large degree.²⁸ In an interview conducted in their living room, they pointed to a photograph hanging on the wall, exclaiming: 'That's him! That's our friend.' They referred to a person and his family with whom they said they share a 40-year history of mutual visits within the twinning exchange, kids coming over for the summer holidays, and visits to family celebrations like weddings. While in this interview the sense of friendship was conveyed as still being strong, at the same time my interlocutors contemplated the possibility of not being able to maintain that friendship for very long, due to their age. This is an instance of how twinning-related changes are often associated with generational changes. In an interview with a twinning practitioner from another town, the interlocutor repeatedly stated that, for him, twinning is essentially about interpersonal friendship – a dedication that he seemed to miss in younger people, trying to trigger interest in them in finding out about how their peers from former

²⁷All names of persons and places have been changed in this section. See n. 11 for a description of the sample.

²⁸The interview took place in March 2013.

twinning exchanges fared, but apparently with little success. This interpretive pattern is, in turn, embedded within a more general perception that twinning might be a model of international exchange with only little attraction for youngsters, who, as some interlocutors mentioned, have more opportunities of international travel than in the past, even as those opportunities are usually seen as more superficial and more oriented toward tourism and on–off contacts. The historicity of twinning thus invoked ‘remembers’ friendship as an ethical modality of social relationships connected to a time in which twinning was a precious, if not the only, way of forging transnational personal relationships, or what European Studies scholars today refer to as ‘social transnationalism’;²⁹ and at the same time, that modality, from the practitioners’ point of view, retains its worth and dignity as it is declining.

However, the perception of friendship undergoing change, and possibly decline, is not only framed as being a matter of generational changes. Rather, it is also inserted in perceptions of changing priorities of how twinning ought to be practised in the present. In some of the interviews, practitioners related to a process which might be called professionalization of twinning. Especially with a view to acquiring funding from the EU’s twinning-related funding lines, it was reported that meetings between delegates of different towns tend to take on a more business-style character. For instance, in order to prepare grant applications to the EU, delegates would meet not in any of the towns of the twinning network, but in hotels located near airports served by budget airlines. Formalizations and differentiations of roles within the twinning committees (a process that is fostered by the German *Vereinsrecht*, which demands that there be different functional roles in registered social associations, like head of board, deputy head, treasurer and so on) point to the same direction. In towns with more than one twinning relation (which was the case in almost all towns in my sample), one usually finds persons in charge for the different twinning relationships as well as for the media presence of the twinning committees’ activities. This professionalization of twinning was mentioned by some interlocutors as subverting the ‘real partnership’ (as Mr Schuster from Grünhausen put it) of twinning which resides in intensive interpersonal relationships.

Yet, other interlocutors champion a way of practising twinning that embraces the professional logic. For instance, Mr and Ms Mooshatter from the town of Lahnfels³⁰ explicitly challenge the traditional view on twinning as relating to interpersonal relationships, especially ‘friendship’, which they regard as unhelpful for attracting a broader interest in twinning: ‘these association members of course think it’s great if they can always meet up with the same friends in the association they’ve known for over 30 years’. For the Mooshatters, the championed model of twinning is a transnational platform for theme-specific encounters and co-operation, for instance, workshops among artists or professional groups. The key argument for those ideas resides in the consideration that people need to be given a motivation for engaging in twinning, and that this motivation can be instilled through relating twinning to preferences determined by their occupation: ‘Professional exchanges or other things, always groups who have a particular hobby, are engaged in particular activities, have particular skills, from our point of view that would perhaps be quite helpful in placing the thing on a broader base.’ In contradistinction, the former way of practising

²⁹S. Mau, *Social Transnationalism: Lifeworlds beyond the Nation State* (London and New York, 2010).

³⁰The interview took place in February 2013.

twinning is perceived by the Mooshatters as a traditionalist and exclusionary mode of sociality. Interestingly, they argue that friendship might play a role in forging twinings, but not in developing them further. Says Ms Mooshatter:

There [in regard to Turkey] it's still possible to do a kind of pioneering work, as you did 30 or 40 years ago, you could start with individual friendships, so that people simply get to know one another, but these other people, the French and Italians and especially the Dutch, you come across them all the time here. That's got to change a little, hasn't it, if there's to be any point to it.

According to this account, the modality of 'friendship' did play an important role in twinning, but one that is distinct from the celebration of friendship as reconstructed in the first part of this section. The relationship modality of friendship is not seen as something that has been achieved and remains important even if it is on the decline as a blueprint for twinning, but as an obstacle to a more inclusive, preference- and output-oriented, professionalized transnational sociality.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the professional and the friendship modalities of twinning are completely at cross purposes. In almost all of the twinings I investigated, both modalities can be found, and the business-like co-ordination of funding activities does not *per se* rule out the presence of more intimate forms of relationships.³¹ However, these two modalities of creating twinning relationships invoke quite different historicities. For the friendship modality, the history of twinning in Europe is a history of sociable and personal exchange as transnational interpersonal relationships accumulated and strengthened over time, which gives that history a specific importance in contemplating present transformations of twinning practices. For the more professional modality, the history of twinning is far less important, as that modality privileges a future and output oriented model of exchange which, in terms of economic theory, is close to a market model according to which people will only engage in twinning exchanges if they can expect an output that resonates with their preferences.

These findings from my interview sample speak back both to the EU's current view on twinning, as a project- and output-based set of transnational activities aimed at deepening European integration, and to that part of the research literature that foregrounds the dissolution of the specifics of town twinning in more thematic, governmental and output-oriented international collaborations between municipalities in Europe. Here, of particular importance is the respective understanding of historicity in the different evaluations of the modality of friendship. 'Friendship' seems to invoke a historicity in the general understanding of town twinning that cannot easily be aligned with the professionalist, and implicitly market-oriented, notion of twinning as output-oriented exchange. The modality of friendship installs twinning's remembered past as a yardstick for an evaluation of current tendencies, while the modality of professionalism relegates friendship to a past which is already obsolete. Projected back onto the EU's discourse and that of the research literature quoted in the last section, it becomes obvious that these discourses fashion a rather specific understanding of the historicity of twinning (and the EU): namely, one that

³¹This resonates with Couperus and Vrhoci's ('A profitable friendship') argument regarding post-1989 East–West twinings.

takes for granted past achievements precisely as they are devalued as criteria for critically gauging current developments.

Remembering unlikely encounters: twinning prior to ‘exchange’

While, as has just been shown, there is ample evidence for a continuity in the ways that the EU frames town twinning with those that some of the practitioners in my sample conceive of it – namely, in terms of project orientation and exchange between different, functionally defined stakeholder groups – other evidence points in a different direction. It is this other direction to which I will turn now. Many interlocutors shared with me stories of how they became involved in town twinning, and what they felt to be crucial events and exemplary anecdotes in the twinning practices they themselves experienced or were told. In what follows, I will refer to three such accounts. They come from persons who were involved in town twinning in different roles and capacities. One interview was appointed with Mr Tischler who was mentioned above. He mainly told me about a befriended family in the French partner town with whom the Tischler family have maintained contact over 40 years. The second conversation was a group interview with three interlocutors who had been holding different offices in the local twinning committee, among them the present chair of the committee and a former mayor of the town. Another one was recorded in a pub – a talk with a person who had been taking over important roles in the evolution of the town twinning especially with the French partner town over a period of 40 years. These accounts, to which I will now turn in sequential fashion, reveal an important motif in the understanding of the implications of history in town twinning practices, from the practitioners’ points of view.

The interview to which I will turn first was conducted with Mr Tischler who had been recommended to me as an interlocutor by Bittlich’s twinning committee, on the grounds that he was one of the most long-standing participants in the exchange, yet without holding a formalized role in the committee’s work.³² I was invited to visit him at home, and we sat down in the living room together with his wife. Mostly, it was him who spoke. The overall gist of his narration revolved around the pleasure that the exchange had given him and his family over 40 years, and he especially focused on unexpected turns and pleasant surprises in that story. One of these unexpected turns referred to an excursion that he was invited to go on by the grandfather of his friend in the French partner town, which included a visit to an old man who had lost his son in World War II. It seems that this visit was suggested by the family’s friend at very short notice, that is, when the excursion had already begun. The interlocutor told that episode in a sequential way, thereby underlining the tense situation that he found himself in by dint of that invitation:

And so he [the grandfather] says, let’s go there. And when we arrived there he says: But I don’t know how the elderly man is going to receive me because I’m German and his son with the war, his only son was killed in the war. Well, I moved in there and listened how they talked to each other, and raised my ears and finally said that I was a voluntary firefighter in Germany [orig.: in *Allemagne amateur-pompier*], I said, we don’t look at denomination or skin

³²The interview took place in March 2013.

colour or religion, I said, we help anyone if there's something, also on the highway [orig.: grand autoroute]...And because he – when we were in that man's house, I realized: I am *welcome* here. As I had been telling them that we as firefighters, that was where my connection came from in the first place.

The episode narrated by the interlocutor refers to a situation with a considerable degree of subjective unlikelihood regarding a 'successful' unfolding of that situation. This uncertainty emanates from a sense that the history of World War II might inform the situation in a way that the interlocutor cannot control. In all probability, it would have been virtually impossible for my interlocutor to decline the suggestion to visit the old man who had lost his son in the fight against the German army; and it was equally impossible to exert any kind of influence on the situation prior to its beginning. In other words, the interlocutor relates to himself as being exposed to an encounter that might not only be difficult to endure, but also one that might be broken off by his host at any time. Due to the historical contextualization, from the interlocutor's perspective, his potential host, the old man, had every reason to decline entering into that situation – that is, not hosting him – as well as asking him to leave his house at any time. It is a situation of such a degree of exposure that the only thing one can do is to enter it and see what happens (which is what the interlocutor said he did). The unlikelihood of a possible mutual conduct of such a situation matches the exemplary significance the situation attained once it became clear that he would be 'welcome' – the reason to tell it to somebody like me.

In another article, I have referred to this situation, with a reference to Emanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida,³³ as a situation of an asymmetrical 'welcome', where initiative has to be abandoned in the face of the contemplation that it is *exclusively* the other person who commands the situation.³⁴ The historicity of that situation consists in creating a risky, fragile, and only potential, beginning through the entry of war-related memories and sentiments into the present. It is a beginning whose historicity cannot be undone by any linear accumulation of a sense of shared interests and concerns because that situation compresses all historicity into the singular event of the 'welcome'. This is also why the historical significance of that situation resides outside of any narrative of successful exchange. All exchange-related matters that might or might not follow from it (in other parts of the interview the interlocutor mentioned the regular 'exchange' of children between the befriended families over the summer holidays, which he however does not relate to the episode discussed here) can never attain the same sense of an overwhelming gift – of a 'welcome' which might well, and for genuine reasons, have been declined. In the face of the war history, one does not have the slightest control over being welcomed, and this is precisely what will turn the welcome, if it is extended, into a beginning.

The second conversation referred to here touched upon a period in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the twinning committee and the mayor's office of the town of Bittlich decided to engage in a relationship with the town of Płotnice in Poland. The conversation took place in a public building where the committee keeps its documents, with the current and a former head of the board of the local twinning

³³J. Derrida, 'A word of welcome', in *Adieu to Emanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA, 1999), 15–123.

³⁴A. Langenohl, 'Facing one another: ethics of friendship in town twinning', *Przegląd socjologiczny*, 63 (2014), 27–47.

committee and a former mayor participating.³⁵ Some of Bittlich's inhabitants, notably the mayor himself, had discovered links to the Plotnice area as the former place of settlement from which they left after the end of World War II. In the conversation, my interlocutors in particular discussed resistances to the plan to engage in a twinning relationship. In Bittlich, it turned out that many people had what the interlocutors referred to as anti-Polish prejudices. Those attitudes struck the Bittlich twinning committee, as Ms Sinkowicz remembered, by surprise and went against their implicit assumption that learning processes had been taking place in the preceding decades:

When it came to discussing youth exchanges I was asked whether you needed to hide the silver spoons, if you should lock away jewelry [laughs]. So I said, do as you please, or don't take anybody. Well, that was quite fierce. I hadn't expected that, I really wouldn't have expected it... That really affected me personally very strongly, that such a reaction was still possible.

Conversely, in the same conversation Mr Kopanke, the former mayor, recalled serious reservations on the side of the Plotnice municipality against the establishment of a twinning relationship, which were grounded in fears that demands for compensation might follow suit: 'I was interrogated in a manner of speaking by the parliament there for over an hour... about why we were coming, that is, whether we're coming for revanchist purposes to – because you have to say that the Poles were still afraid at that time. "The Germans are returning", we're "taking the country back again".' In the course of the ongoing conversation, the interlocutors asserted that all of these obstacles to the twinning plans were eventually overcome and that the exchange was meanwhile embraced by the population. The idea of including a Polish partner town in Bittlich's twinning relationships was explicitly framed by Mr Kopanke as being related to World War II:

Plotnice, well, was discussed like this: now we have a partnership almost 20 years after, that is, almost 20 years with France, we didn't have just one direction, war enemies, but also a different direction, namely the East. Now, what's the state of things there, shouldn't we want to have a partnership [there] as well.

The three interlocutors constructed in our conversation a panorama characterized by a very complex historicity. On the one hand, they mention the sense of historicity after 1989 which lent itself to be used to extend the twinning relationships of Bittlich, thus giving it a deeper resonance with the narration of a progressing European integration. Yet, on the other hand, that use of historicity was complicated by other historicities that the twinning practitioners saw themselves confronted with. The first was related to an initial unexpected reluctance on the side of the local population to embrace the exchange with the town in Poland, which Ms Sinkowicz refers to as a residuum of anti-Polish stereotypes, pointing to learning processes that still need to take place. The second was related to the reservations on the side of the Polish municipal government, who were perceived as being fearful of being complicit in the rise of German historical revanchism, that is, to demands for compensation from Germans who left Poland after the end of World War II.

³⁵The conversation took place in January 2013.

It is difficult to determine from the recorded conversation both the extent of anti-Polish sentiments in Bittlich and the depth of the reservations in Plotnice at the time these negotiations took place. Yet it is obvious that these two historicities, according to the way they were reconstructed in the conversation, intervened in my interlocutors' anticipation of a linear success story of twinning exchange. They brought with them the challenge of *beginning* a concrete twinning, rather than the ease of simply continuing and expanding a twinning success model. As with the earlier case discussed in this section, I contend that it is precisely that challenge that lent the eventual positive outcome of the twinning negotiations (a twinning agreement was concluded, and people obviously happily engaged in the exchange after all) its significance and, so to speak, singularity. This twinning is remarkable for Bittlich not least because it was established against resistances – resistances which spelled themselves out through an entry of historically folded reservations into the present, and which only seemingly paradoxically provided the gist that makes this particular twinning stand out in the eyes of the practitioners as a beginning.

The third conversation referred to here took place in a pub in the small town of Kolb. It was conducted by a collaborator of mine, whose interlocutor was Mr Kraft, a person who had given the town twinings of the town of Kolb some important impulses (according to other interlocutors), yet who did presently not hold a formal office in the twinning committee.³⁶ In the course of the conversation, a particular emphasis emerged regarding the relationship with the French partner town, which in 1990 had invited a delegation from Kolb to participate in the local French national holiday celebrations, permitting the Kolb fire brigade band to march alongside the procession. The interlocutor said he saw this as a sign 'that resentments had been removed to the point where you then do something together'. However, he also mentions tenseness on another occasion, when the delegation from Kolb arrived in the French partner town for the first time:

The first time we were down there we took a wreath for the Fallen Soldiers' Memorial, and it was to be laid down, and a plan was worked out with the Mayor's office to walk through part of the town centre in a procession to the war graves' memorial. And then we suddenly heard the rumour from Court Vieux, a town about 30 kilometres away, that some right-wing extremists would be coming who wanted to cause trouble. And everybody got extremely nervous and we're there with very divided feelings and lined up for the procession and we're thinking, let's hope it goes off well, and it did go off well too. You couldn't help but notice that there was a real tension in the air.

As this account shows, even fully officially orchestrated and organized events, like the participation of a delegation from a German partner town in the French national holiday celebrations, take on a different meaning if contextualized with other episodes which constituted a risk from the perspective of those involved. The whole constellation, assembling two episodes that crucially invoke history (the French national holiday and the world wars), is charged with a very intense and 'thick' historicity from the very beginning. The interlocutor mentions the extraordinary sense of being given, as an international guest, the opportunity to fully participate in a major national ritual; and, as the interview unfolds, this intensity is inflated through

³⁶The interview was conducted in December 2012.

the telling of an episode where it was feared that right-wing forces might sabotage the very first visit. The historical ramification, although remaining somewhat vaguely articulated, implies that it cannot be taken for granted to participate as an international (even more, potentially, as a German) guest in national commemorative ceremonies in France. The extraordinary significance that such occasions have for the interlocutor is informed both by his excitement about the opportunity to be part of the national holiday celebrations and by his remembered fear of a disturbance of a wreath-laying ritual by French nationalist activists.

Thus, the interlocutor invokes a scene in which an opportunity to attend is offered to the delegation from Kolb which could not have been initiated by that delegation, but which might easily be challenged, denied and reclaimed by *some* social force. It is a scene that reminds me of one of my first cases referred to above, namely, the extension of a gift that could never have been asked for, and which is always precarious and in danger of being challenged as long as the situation endures (or is not extended in the first place). For a point of view that looks at town twinning as a practice that step by step clears the stage for European exchange and integration to happen – and which is characteristic both for the EU's discourse and for large parts of twinning historiography – this is a serious challenge. For instance, to argue that an invitation to be part of the official national holiday celebration indicates a high degree of already achieved European integration on the basis of exchange misses the point that that invitation could not have been demanded in any way. In the case of such situations, the idiom of exchange bypasses the significance of offers that do not come as responses to other offers, and instead create risks precisely *as* they are offered.

Concluding this section, episodes such as those discussed here are just one layer of twinning practices, next to much more mundane activities such as developing funding applications, going on entertaining excursions, being invited to receptions or hosting guests and taking them out for dinner. Yet, it is such episodes that are remembered as being decisive for the particular relationships that a town entertains, as well as for the practice of twinning as such. In contrast to many occasions where one might describe twinning as a more or less smooth course of exchange (of course always accounting for the different interests and conflicts between them), these are high-stake situations in which no transactionalist understanding of sociality and interaction can apply. Their venturesome character derives from an exposure to an other whom is encountered and who owns the initiative. Under these circumstances, the only pair of options given is to engage with the situation and hope for a positive outcome, or to leave and deny it. In the framework of the present article, a more precise point is that it is historicity – that is, the understanding that history has set the stage for a present conflict, tension or dilemma, and thus has to be confronted – that makes these high stakes comprehensible in the first place. In other words, it is historicity that makes clear to town twinning practitioners when the initiative is not theirs, where the limits to crafting a situation lie, and how agency might still be possible.

Conclusion: proto-exchange as a key to understanding contemporary town twinning in Europe

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the main findings of this article and make a conceptual suggestion concerning the link between the historicity of town twinning

in Europe and the way that the idiom of exchange figures in it. Referring to the conceptual work of Nick Clarke and Annina Lottermann, I have argued that town twinning in its present condition and tendencies ought to be understood less as a practice subjected to political and institutional change, than as change that is practised. This means engaging with the significance that twinning practitioners attribute to changes they perceive in what they are doing, and why. Historicity was introduced as a dimension of meaning-making of change understood as a social and cultural practice: references to the history of town twinning enable practitioners to talk about their practices in a way that renders change intelligible and meaningful to them. Thereby, two main modalities of invoking history could be found in the material analysed: one modality that interprets ongoing changes as a departure from the post-war history of town twinning, which appears as obsolete given new possible functions and tasks of town twinning; and another modality which frames developments in particular twinning relations against the background of a history that might at any point make itself felt in the respective present. The first modality of historicity sees contemporary town twinning as bound to develop into a fully fledged and reciprocal exchange, thus presupposing subjectivities and interests that can then enter into such an exchange. The second modality highlights the anteriority of the respective other in twinning-related encounters. According to this understanding of twinning historicity, subjectivity cannot be presupposed but may form only as a consequence in high-stake situations where the initiative rather lies with others than with oneself.

Thus, 'exchange' emerges as a hinge that links, yet also separates, different twinning historicities as they inform the perception and interpretation of change. Or more precisely, both historicities revolve around an, only implicit, articulation of that which exists *prior to* exchange. The current attempt to develop twinning into a fully fledged practice of exchange, which in fact replays the EU's ambition to make twinning one of the pillars of its policies, looks at the history of post-war twinning more in the sense of a *pre-history*, before exchange proper could be fully established. By way of contrast, the interpretation of twinning as being responsive to a return of the past as a decisive feature of the present condition highlights those social processes as constitutive for twinning which *conceptually* lie prior to exchange. In the face of a European history characterized by two world wars and countless mass atrocities, those social processes inform twinning as appearing historically very unlikely (and as I mentioned in the introduction, this might be a sense especially common among Germans, given their political responsibility for many of those atrocities). The most unlikely practice that can be expected under such conditions is, indeed, fully reciprocal and symmetrical exchange. Thus, even as twinning seems to steer into a direction which favours exchange, the balancing of interests, mutual benefit and output orientation, proto-exchange keeps informing its imaginary dimension.

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