

Euro-Pessimism: Misunderstanding or Just Realism?

Book review of John R. Gillingham, *The European Union: An Obituary*. London: Verso, 2016. *EUVisions Intellectual Europe Review*, 7 July 2017.

The European Union: An Obituary is more than a requiem for the European Union. It is a harsh critique of the European project as it has developed, of the main drivers of the integration process, and of the very pillars on which Europe stands. The author, historian John Gillingham of the University of Missouri, opts for a long-term perspective to study what he deems to be the main shortcomings of the European project. From the first chapter to the Postscript, he dissects the main phases of the EU's building process, from its historical premises to present challenges. The approach is historical and the analysis focused on economic as well as political (structural and agentic) drives behind the EU. In a nutshell, the author's thesis is that the EU is an institution whose foundations are weak; an institution that is facing serious challenges and that is inherently unfit to cope with its problems. Thus, the EU would need reconsideration and urgent reforms to have chances to survive. It is no surprise that the last chapter's title mentions the possibility of an "endgame" for Europe. Gillingham mixes realist analysis with value-laden assessments. And this leads to what could be considered too pessimistic (even if somehow reasonable) a view of the EU.

Some Unconventional History

Before examining the book, it is worth illustrating its structure. Besides the Introduction and the Postscript, the work is made up of three parts, each containing two chapters. As a first step, the author argues that a major problem in EU studies is the Euroenthusiastic attitude of scholars: "the history of the EU must be re-thought" (1), he points out. He posits that the EU is an international organization and, for this reason, fallible, similarly to all other international organizations when it comes to adapting to external environmental changes. The EU project rests on a myth, according to the author. Indeed, the main forces behind integration have always come from exogenous factors, such as the US protection against the Soviet Union, the end of Bretton Woods, and the globalization era.

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The first part of the book deals with the first period of integration history. First, it looks at how the foundations were laid down, from the Schuman Plan of 1950 onwards. Contrary to the common approach of EU supporters, the chapter severely criticizes the ideas and actions of Jean Monnet. In particular, Gillingham points to the so-called Monnet Method, which is considered as based on wrong assumptions (i.e. neofunctionalist theory) and the undemocratic attitudes of technocratic governance. Gillingham dubs the first success of the European integration – that is, the European Economic Community – as a “perhaps necessary but hardly sufficient” (37) condition for the economic growth occurred in the 1950s-60s. Moreover, he stresses that integration soon slowed down, both for a lack of mass enthusiasm and because of contrasting national interests. However, he also highlights that the 1970s and 1980s were times when the European Commission could extend its competences beyond the custom union, especially concerning industrial policy. The European Council, in turn, offered auspices in those years for the monetary union project. Still, the EU followed unintended developing paths, compared to what its founding fathers had pursued. Overall, the role of the EU in Europe’s economic achievements was very low.

This dark picture leads to Part two, which focuses on Jacques Delors’s era. Advocating the Thatcherite approach to (dis)integration, the author argues that Delors could not understand properly the historical time in which he lived, which was transitioning from slow institutions to fast markets. “Delors became integrationist ... in order to save Europe from the twenty-first century” (76), he “breathed life into a moribund body” (103), by fashioning an imaged community without mass support. According to Gillingham, the outcomes of this grand strategy were a detrimental and “devious” (108) method of “Russian dolls”, an ineffective Commission, and eventually a dysfunctional monetary union. Delors was wrong even when he conceived a European social model, since Europe comprises many and different social models. This “fictive notion” found “cosmetic” application in the “non-enforceable” Social Charter of the Maastricht Treaty (117-118). The Eastern enlargement during the years of Romano Prodi were an exception, one of the few “solid accomplishments made in spite of ... growing unpopularity” (123). This does not mean that Prodi did not face “the same impossible task as Monnet and Delors: to build Europe without Europeans” (133).

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The third part of the book examines how unstable foundations have made Europe unable to cope effectively with contemporary challenges, such as the economic and financial crises, the refugee

issue, and terrorism. The current Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker is seen as “floundering” (165) and doubts abound on the viability of some of its priorities, such as “Social Europe” and a common European defence. It is pointed out that the democratic deficit caused by the gap between elitist views and bottom-up approaches is persistent. Overall, the EU is deemed not ready to address the economic challenges of the twenty-first century, e.g. in the areas of information technology, finance, and energy. A little breath of hope is granted to the possible beneficial effects of international trade cooperation agreements (like the TTIP) as opposed to the “iron cage” of the current EU. Gillingham’s idea is that “[a]n increasingly interdependent world order requires global networks of cooperation rather than the reinforcement of old-fashioned economic and political blocs like the EU” (242).

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It’s not All Bad

While Gillingham’s analysis does not spare to underline European weaknesses, it seems to leave aside achievements and successes. The ideological approach that the author ascribes to “all devotees of the Euro-cult” (1) eventually seems to involve him as well, just the other way round. To be sure, there is some truth in Gillingham’s analysis. It is unquestionable that Europe suffers from a democratic deficit (at least if compared to national political systems), that the integration process benefited from the Cold War and the “American umbrella”, and finally that de-politicized policy-making and inefficient bureaucratic structures are recurring problems. However, is de-integration the best way to overcome such challenges? Before providing a positive answer, one should note that the EU has actually achieved some relevant results. Peace in the continent has outlasted the Cold War. Moreover, the relationships with Russia on the one hand and the new isolationist American trend on the other hand could be driving forces towards a renewal of intra-European cohesion for security reasons. Within

Europe, slow growth is a reality, and yet Europe has been able to survive the crisis—at least until now. Achievements in the field of European citizenship rights are undeniable, and Europeans can now rely on some sort of supranational guarantees of such rights.

Actually, European integration can be a disruptive force against established national political and societal interests. However, politics should work to manage these changes and help those who lose from globalization. Moreover, it seems reasonable to think that not all European small nations have, on their own, all the needed resources to thrive in a globalized world. It is well-known that Europe is built on a lack of mass support and group identity. But identity feelings are not all pre-existing conditions, and can change with time. Nation-states could create “nations”, relying on ideational resources and granting material benefits to their own citizens. Thus, the question is not whether Europe is different compared to nation-states, but rather if Europe can do something similar for its citizenry. If not, it is likely that it will face many of the problems predicted by Gillingham. The contestation of the Brexit outcome and existing pro-European attitudes within Europe could make the picture less pessimistic than Gillingham’s (even if maybe not fully optimistic).

Rebalancing the Analysis of Europe

European governments seem caught into gridlock, but slow integration has continued in spite of the debt crisis. Windows of opportunity appear, and Brexit can be even read as one of them. One should observe if political and social forces in Europe are able to and interested in exploiting such opportunities. This could imply a radical reform of European institutions, perhaps in the direction of a less top-down and regulatory paradigm, as Gillingham hopes. *The European Union: An Obituary* has the merit to unveil facts that too often Europhiles do not (want to) see, obfuscated as they sometimes are by positive wishful-thinking. As a matter of fact, it can easily be accepted that the European project and its analysis should be reconsidered. At the same time, however, one should avoid falling into the same pitfalls stressed by Gillingham, but just from the opposite perspective. European achievements have been more than economic. Whether or not one wants to go further, or to give up, relates to his or her own material interests and, ultimately, it depends on own values and *Weltanschauungen*.