

Book Review

Lacroix, J. and Nicolaidis, K., eds
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European Stories: Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts

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One of the ironical commonplaces about the European Union is that in essential matters, such as its constitutional legitimacy or cultural mindsets, the only way forward appears to be to fudge the issues and keep one's patience. Or, to paraphrase Carl Schmitt's anti-liberalism sneer, when faced with unresolvable difficulties, adjourn the meeting and appoint a committee of inquiry. Such an acerbic view is certainly not shared by Lacroix and Nicolaidis, the editors of this very fine collection, *European Stories: Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts*. Rather, they claim that any notion of a shared, uncontested European story is a 'non-starter'. "Behold our Europes!" proclaims the final chapter, pointing out that in myriad, complex ways, both within and between countries, the idea of being European is imagined, revered, debated and debunked in a polyphony of voices. Implicit in their optimistic, celebratory approach is the view that the European Union is at best a work-in-progress. The success of its commitment to a historic drawing together of very different nations and peoples means renouncing "thick consensus" in favour of the kind of thorough-going pluralism that recognises and accepts "deep diversity".

The book contains fifteen essays on countries ranging across the founders, joiners, returners or outliers of the European Union. Though each country's preoccupations, issues, apprehensions and hopes vary widely, the editors identify four common themes: national identity; the promise or failure of European modernity; integration and liberal democracy; and how to define the nature and ends of a European polity. Given the monumental challenges of reconciling such large baskets of contentious ideas, Varouxakis writes that what may yet prove invaluable is a British mindset used to "inconclusiveness, messiness, ambivalence, willingness to combine and compromise, and flexibility" (p. 166). Varouxakis's essay surveying almost fifty years of intellectual debate about Britain's membership of the European Union is one of the most entertaining. With a sharp wit and an eye for the telling quote, he focuses on the work of prominent academics of the Right and Left, with Eurosceptics and Europhiles on both sides. Behind much of the debate is the suggestion that the British are the watchers at the gate of true liberalism against the onslaught from communitarian continentals. As well, there is the tacit concern that Eurocentrism and imperialism might have severely undermined the credibility of Britain's civilised liberal ideals – a view readily dismissed by Conservative Roger Scruton for whom such 'England-bashing' by its own is best described as "Oikophobia" (the antonym of "Xenophobia").

Despite the editors warning about glib generalisations, it is often the sense of a national overview that is most interesting and challenging in these essays. Germany's *intelligentsia*, for example, is singled out as exceptional because it is without ambivalence or scepticism towards European integration. The German discussions, Mueller writes, have been largely legalistic, preoccupied with the constitutional norms and practicalities of a Europe-wide polity. Domestically, until the last decade or so, there has been a pervasive wariness of resurgent nationalism, so that even the debates on the concepts of statehood and the rule of law developed by the Schmitt School have been seen as matters of internal institutions and values, tangential to the European project.

To call these essays "stories" is perhaps an overstatement, if by that is meant structured narratives anchored in times and places. Rather, as the editors acknowledge, what they often evoke is a tangle of shifting national and transnational perspectives, which may be nostalgic, imbued with myth and memory, as well as fractured, even contradictory. For example, Barbu's analysis starkly contrasts how for many Romanians the European Union simply represents "a giant supermarket" with the esoteric mysticism that has prevailed amongst the country's foremost thinkers even "in the dark times of Communism". Inspired by the country's most famous public intellectual, right-wing extremist and anti-semitic theologian Mircea Eliade, Romania's "collective thirst for holiness" is here claimed to place a minor, peripheral nation in the vanguard of "a struggle for the European soul". Characterised as predominantly messianic, anti-democratic and anti-modernist, Romania's *intelligentsia* emerges from Barbu's analysis as "a deviant case". But his essay also gives focus to one of the central issues of the book: how we are to understand the concept of the 'intellectual'. According to Lacroix and Nicolaidis, the definition must be necessarily broad and cautiously "objective"; in short he/she is simply someone culturally authoritative with a significant public profile

The problem here is that one of history's lessons is that both good and bad judgment, as well as passionate political commitment, may be integral elements of any intellectual debate. Whether ingenuously or deliberately, influential intellectuals have also been seriously mistaken. And even the most so-called high-minded, level-headed rationalist would be naïve to assume that his/her opinions cannot be co-opted into the political arena, and for the worst possible reasons. Insofar as these scholarly essays are discussed publicly, there are no guarantees that their influence will be a benign contribution to Europe's narrative choruses. Consider, for example, Gora and Mach's "story" of the Polish *intelligentsia* emerging unsteadily from a geopolitical mindset steeped in memories of past glories and humiliations; or Barbu's evocation of a 'deviant' Romanian *intelligentsia*. Both analyses present the kind of themes that can serve to confirm other nations' prejudices, rather than exemplifying the progress of enlightened understanding. As always, the question then remains of what to do when Europe's laudable polyphony becomes deeply discordant, when its national voices become darker, harsher, more divisive and belligerent - in other words, in what circumstances the bonds of a European democracy might not be sufficiently strong or enduring.