

## Book Review

Ullrich Kockel (2010)

### *Re-visioning Europe: Frontiers, Place Identities and Journeys in Debatable Lands*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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"Once upon a time, not all that long ago, there was a place called 'Europe', which some of us may still remember" (p. 1). This poetic prose opens *Re-visioning Europe* by Ulrich Kockel, Professor of Ethnology in Ulster and so it continues for 200 odd pages, offering a "synthesis dealing with migration within and into Europe; frontiers and boundaries; heritage and tradition; socio-economic structures, processes and change; and, finally, the role of ethnology in education and cultural practice" (p. ix). Given the fact that the book is "framed by personal reflections on changing visions of Europe", it is unsurprising that it attempts explaining too much, while at the same time offering too little gist of what it actually purports.

To start from, the book lacks a theoretical framework, making it hard to identify where the reflections of the author on travels around and travails about Europe sit conceptually. Indeed, reading an ethnographic research monographs is frequently a challenging experience for political scientists who fancy coherent methodological frameworks to depart from, a contribution to theoretical and case-study debates and ultimately, clear statements on basic assumptions and anticipated outcomes of research. Neither is it clear what the author factually adds to European studies in general: throughout the book a plethora of issues are observed and commented upon, neither of them is de-constructed to an end. At times, it seems that Kockel does not wish to engage in re-constructing narratives either. However, the readers of JCER will appreciate this book as a source of insights into and a personal reflection upon cultural, social and political realities, rather than an eye opener on processes and issues with which European studies deal.

Regardless, there are several issues that make the book a worthy read. First, is the role that political, and increasingly economic, processes play in preventing deeper integration of European societies. Kockel's main point of reference here is his observation of scaling down the state affecting individual choices in several domains: in chapter 2 it is the diminishing role of the state and regional frontiers, in chapter 3 – the constraints going together with the geographic mobility of citizenry, and in chapter 4 – individual options to handle the dominance of economic constraints in everyday life. Despite the centrality granted to structural constraints on individuals and groups throughout the book, however, Kockel only conceives of these as important in terms of their negative impact on individual choices. The book can also be read as lamenting the increase of opportunities which are explained by reference to diminishing social cohesion in Europe. The idea of

lacking cohesion as a potential impediment for deeper European integration is interesting. Yet without clearly identifying the structures he sees as important tools of social cohesion, Kockel falls into the trap of hand-picking observations as they suit him: his case-studies are ranked good or bad, depending on the side he is taking. It is always a majority on some political scale that he aligns with, making it impossible to conclude anything but his preference for the strong role of coordinating structures to guide social change.

Does this suggest that individual (and at times, group) actors are secondary to the analysis in the book? This is unclear, largely because the second point reiterated throughout *Re-visioning Europe* is these very agents of change. Kockel's narrative strongly emphasises the important role that social actors play in the process of social, political, economic and cultural transformation in an increasingly borderless Europe. Starting from a participant observation through the eyes of the travelling European, the volume is abundant with an unperturbed observation of the gains and losses of this continent's heritage that span the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kockel is sceptical about the role of individuals in the process: Who set European integration processes into motion? Why did economic liberalisation and labour force mobility become of importance? What happens to traditional forms of identity and belonging in the age of voluntary migration? And ultimately, who benefits from all of the above? This allows Kockel to query nearly all social and political developments in contemporary Europe, writing off any rationality of the actors re-visioning Europe's past and present throughout chapters 5 and 6. This is an extremely important point to consider for students of European studies who tend to engage with structural overlap across various European regions and states, yet rarely perceive of European integration as a process that is caused by, and in turn affects, European citizens.

Finally, and with both his fancy for power-structures and actors disengaged from an active role in social change, there is only one possible background agenda Kockel is pushing throughout the book. It is worth closing up on it: Kockel seems to distrust the bounded rationality of actors involved in envisioning the common European future. Actors appear throughout as being rational in making their choices, especially when it comes to their identities and strategies to mark others' difference. However, Kockel remains uncertain whether identifying oneself as part of the group does not inherently lead to excluding non-members from the European project. Here again, rattling down a multi-scale comparison from European, state to community levels, he makes it extremely difficult to nail the argument down. But the description of structural pressures exercised upon individuals and groups by rigid political structures allows for a conclusion: Kockel is not romanticising the importance of social ties or a permanent, even though imaginary, place of belonging and reference he calls *Heimat*. Kockel is all about "experience", what sociologists would call "socialisation", and political science jargon would term "institutional constraints" for envisioning Europe and Europeans to come.

The conclusion of this book is unambiguous about the issues that the author has with European integration and change, making individual perceptions of place, belonging and choices people make a valid point of reference for the entire volume. Most often, individual and group choices confirm, but also contest and thus change, social institutions, political structures and choices of other agents, thus facilitating dialogue and exchange of options. As the book indeed makes clear, all of these have played an essential role in linking generations, transmitting social norms and ensuring political stability across Europe since the 1945. The lack of similar social constraints at the European level is already driving geographically, socially and culturally disparate segments of the European society apart. Migration, faltering state borders, economic integration and issues about the history of nations-in-conflict all have their stakes in questioning the sustainability of European integration.

Your reviewer found it at times challenging to buy into Kockel's argument, which hints at debates in social sciences, yet rarely references any; plunges into thick descriptions on a case-by-case basis, yet does not shy away from broad generalisations; discards opinions (and scholarship) that does not sit well with his view, yet fails to prove his own point; and on top of it all, is insightful, yet too often emotional. Thus, reading *Re-visioning Europe* I could not stop asking myself whether one really needs to use clichés, instead of causal explorations of contemporary changes in Europe? Kockel's observations from his field work and research over the past twenty years are hard to read as an academic piece of work because they lack perspective; too many useful observations are made in passing and are never returned to. *Re-visioning Europe* is an interesting pass-time read for a social scientist, but one should be equipped with plenty of time to translate the ethnographic prose into categories of social sciences. If one makes an effort to do this, the book rewards one with a different perspective on issues forming the background to social (and political) science debates on European integration.

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