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Kiran Klaus Patel, *Project Europe. A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2020)

On 25 March 2017, the leaders of the members states of the European Union (EU) came to celebrate the 60th anniversary since the signing of the Treaties of Rome. Spoiling the birthday bush, was the undeniable fact that the EU was facing a multi-dimensional crisis, juggling the eurozone troubles, the migration crisis, Brexit and the rising tide of populist Eurosceptic parties. The official narrative coming from the circles of Brussels was sober but still nostalgically resorting to old and enduring myths of the 'founding fathers', the memory of the Second World War that described European integration idealistically built on the themes of reconciliation, peace and security. In the post-wall period, as dubbed by Timothy Garton Ash, it was vital for the history of the EU to be instructive in sobering up expectations and evaluating in a sober light the successes and failures of the direction of the EU.[1] Tony Judt, in one of his prophetic essays, stated that 'if we look to the European Union as a catchall solution, chanting 'Europe' like a mantra, and waving the banner of Europe in the face of recalcitrant 'nationalist' heretics, we may wake up one day to find out that far from solving the problems of our continent, the myth of Europe has become an impediment in recognising them'.[2] Kiran Patel's *Project Europe* published in 2020 ambitiously seeks to rectify stereotypical narratives and heeds other historians' advice and warnings by distinguishing between planning goals, implementation and impact of European policies. In this light, his book acts as a salutary reminder of the need of scholars and practitioners not to focus only on the achievements and successes of the EU but also to reconsider how and in what areas the organization failed.

Writing a history of European integration, that is interesting for scholars and public alike, is almost an impossible feat given how inconceivably remote, technical and complicated is the process of European unification. Along comes an author like Kiran Patel, who is able to chart a critical history of the EU, without getting bogged down on the technicalities but providing a well-crafted piece of contemporary history that makes the past of the EU legible and relatable. And that on its own right it's a remarkable achievement that was made only possible since Kiran Patel, is one of the few historians who commands such a detailed knowledge of the historiography of different forms of European cooperation and to which he has contributed immensely with numerous publications in the past decades.

Project Europe sets out to deconstruct the myths surrounding the creation and evolution of the European Community (EC), by offering a narrative that discerns the contours of long- term developments in a coherent matter and stays away from teleological linear approaches.[3] The book asks fundamentally three questions : what has the EC really achieved, how much has it substantially changed its nature and mission along its time of operation, and how can the EU, in view of its history, respond to the challenges emerging in the current and foreseeable transformations of European society and the global context. The overarching aim is to 'to understand why a rather narrow organization that initially comprised just six western European states is today so frequently equated with Europe as a whole' (p.27). Drawing on a rich source of different archives and neglected history of European integration literature, Patel convincingly argues that ultimately there was not a single blueprint behind the EC/EU but a complex web of different and contradictory trends. *Project Europe* does not really have a starting point but engages broadly with the postwar period until the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. In his acknowledgements, Patel admits that his

[1] Timothy Garton Ash, 'Is Europe Disintegrating?' *The New York Review*, 19 January 2017
[2] Tony Just, *A Grant Illusion? An Essay on Europe* (New York: New York Press, 2011), 297.
[3] Mark Gilbert, 'Narrating the Process: Questioning the Progressive Story of European Integration', *Journal of Common Market Studies 46:3* (2008), 641-662

book 'offers an alternative to established histories that assert a clear starting point' (p.520). The structure of the book is a proof of his intentions as he sets out to navigate how European societies oscillated from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus. He does not follow a chronological order but dedicates eight chapters- that can be read on their own- on the following master frames: Europe and European integration; peace and security; growth and prosperity; participation and technocracy; values and norms; superstate or tool of nations; disintegration and dysfunctionality and the community and its world.

For Patel, three factors stand out in explaining why the EC incrementally became the centerpiece of European cooperation. Contradictory to popular belief, the EC benefited much more from the postwar peace settlement than actually contributing to it. In reality 'EC integration did at least as much to divide Western Europe as it did to strengthen it'. (p.56) Within a protected cocoon provided by the Atlantic framework of security and profiting from the task sharing with other international organizations, the nascent EC was given leeway to focus solely on an economistic project with possible spillover effects in other areas: a customs union. A second important factor was the increasing role and authority exercised by elites. As Martin Conway convincingly argues in his most recent book, the period after the war witnessed the emergence of a new culture of democracy that valued the importance of professional expertise in designing a system that brought people in the political system in a controlled way.[4] Echoing similar practices, EC relied heavily on the technocratic knowledge, mobilizing representatives of commerce and industry and it was able to become successful because of this seemingly apolitical nature. An unexpected third but extremely strong weapon in the EC's arsenal was the transformative impact the European law acquired through different rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) along with the capacity of the EC to command large financial resources of its own, which truly differentiate it from other international organizations.

An interesting point raised in *Project Europe* is the pivotal role the EC's relations with third states played in constructing an institutional ethos. It was only when applicants started knocking on the door asking for full membership or association or other forms of trade agreements, that the EC was forced to answer existential questions of what it stood for and what kind of authority could it exert outside its bounds. The cases of Greece and Spain are singled out to tell a fascinating story on how values and norms of democratic nature penetrated the EC's language and formed part of its emerging identity. In the case of growth and prosperity, the role of the EC is much more contested. Patel warns his readers not to overestimate the role of European integration in the postwar years of economic boom of Western Europe nor identify the EC with a single, size fits-all model of economic theory. Even in the turbulent period of the 1970s and 1980s when the EC held a more substantial stabilizing role, the details and workings of that role are not conclusive since there is a dearth of scholarly engagement with the impact EU trade and commercial policy had on economic performance and prosperity in the pre-1992 period.

So, what lessons can this critical history of the EC teach us about the current frustration and disappointment with EU politics? Patel as a historian true to his craft does not venture into predictions and policy prescriptions but poses two sobering and slightly encouraging reminders. Firstly, that disintegration is 'nothing new historically and is certainly not as simple as just restoring national sovereignty' (p.212). Despite the official narrative of 'an ever closer union', the trajectory of the EC has shown that disintegration and dysfunctionality were part and parcel of the political normality of integration and it can take on various forms: horizontal, vertical and sectoral, and in each case, he rightly distinguishes between dysfunctionality and disintegration. He cites the forgotten exits of Algeria and Greenland, proving that European integration has always been

[4] Martin Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945-1968* (Princeton University Press, 2020)

reversible, long before Brexit. Secondly and even before the signing of the Maastricht Treaty 'the relationship between citizens and their Community was often brittle' (p.117), rendering the question of European integration indifferent to most people. As long as it remained abstract with limited impact on everyday life, approval of EC was nothing more than lip service: 'European cooperation EC style was based on toleration rather than on genuine approval' (p.144). It was only during the transformative decades of the 1970s and the 1980s that the powers of the EC extended considerably and it on these informal developments that Maastricht's institutional arrangements rested.

This meticulously researched book begins the complicated but always engrossing task of revealing the complex webs of interconnections that brought the EC to life, and lays bare the improbable trajectory it followed with its weaknesses and strengths in a refreshingly different but historically grounded perspective. It should be on the reading list of any course that teaches EU politics and contemporary European history and on the bookshelves of policymakers across the continent.

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