



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

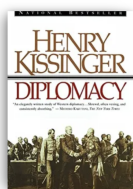
CAPSULE REVIEW

Books for the Century: Western Europe

REVIEWED BY ANDREW MORAVCSIK

September/October 2022

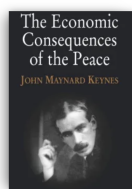
For our centennial issue, our reviewers each selected a set of books essential to understanding the past century and another set essential for imagining the century ahead.



Diplomacy (A Touchstone Book)

By Henry Kissinger
Simon & Schuster, 1994, 912 pp

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The Economic Consequences of the Peace

By John Maynard Keynes

Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1919, 192 pp

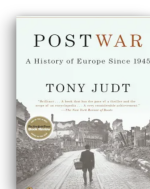
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The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century

By Sheri Berman
Cambridge University Press, 2006, 240 pp

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Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945

Tony Judt
Penguin, 2005, 960 pp

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For millennia, Europe was a warring continent that featured shifting alliances among dynastic states ruthlessly striving for regional and global primacy. Over the past 75 years, however, the region has emerged as a zone of unmatched peace, prosperity, tolerance, and stability, with a benign global presence. Today, European countries dominate lists of the most admired political systems and most desirable places to live.

This extraordinary transformation sprang from a century-long domestic political evolution toward self-determination, social welfare provision, and liberal democracy. In each area, Europe learned and applied the lessons of its turbulent history.

These advances might not have been possible without a key underlying shift in the global balance of military power. In his 1994 history of foreign policy over the past two centuries, Kissinger insisted that Europe owes its period of peace to the emergence of a hegemonic United States, which tipped the military balance in two world wars and then provided a deterrent shield that kept “the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down,” as NATO’s first secretary-general, Lionel Ismay, put it. This realist view that Europe’s stability was entirely dependent on U.S. military hegemony still circulates widely in the Washington establishment.

Military power may be essential, but in the end, it can do little more than preserve an armed status quo. To attain the deeper and permanent peace seen in Europe today—where war has become all but unthinkable, internal borders have become inconsequential, and goods, capital and people move freely—bigger changes were required.

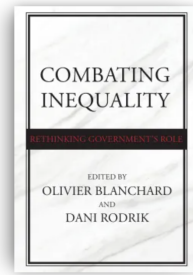
Europeans had to renounce radically revisionist leaders such as Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler—men who espoused extreme goals that could be achieved only by force of arms. Instead, Europeans learned to view the existing regional order as fundamentally legitimate and then committed themselves to intense cooperation within it.

Three social trends fueled this transformation in foreign policy. First was the spread of national self-determination. Starting around the turn of the nineteenth century, peoples began revolting against empires in order to establish their own nation-states. Even Kissinger, critical as he is of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's impatient idealism in crafting the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, cannot help but praise the president's prophetic awareness that self-determination would become the foundational norm of modern world politics. A century later, European nations are satisfied: no people dreams of altering borders or imposing extreme political ideologies by force—predatory Russian actions at the continent's eastern edge being the exception that proves the rule.

Second was the adoption of the welfare state across Europe. In his celebrated critique of the Treaty of Versailles, Keynes predicted that the post-World War I settlement could not last. In the modern era of mass politics and transnational interdependence, he reasoned, international economic stability and justice are preconditions for peace. Keynes prophesied that, given the severe economic demands placed on Germany, resentment of the post-Versailles order, extreme inequality, social resistance, and macroeconomic shocks would inevitably disillusion moderates and breed radical politics—a prediction that proved correct when the Great Depression propelled Hitler into the German chancellery.

A generation later, the Marshall Plan, the creation of social welfare states, and the founding of the Bretton Woods system—in which Keynes again played an influential role—gave Europe a second chance. Berman traced the distinctive European character of the beliefs and institutions of modern social democracy, showing how deeply they are embedded in the European politics, and contends that it is the most successful political model in the world today.

Third was the spread of liberal democracy. In the interwar period, truly democratic governments were few and beleaguered. Yet World War II discredited the fascist right, and the Soviet threat tamed the communist left. In his magisterial account of European politics and society over the past 75 years, Judt shows how democracy, combined with self-determination and social welfare, ushered in three generations of moderate politics, economic prosperity, and social tolerance. As the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant foresaw in the late eighteenth century, the result has been a seemingly perpetual peace heretofore unknown to Europe.



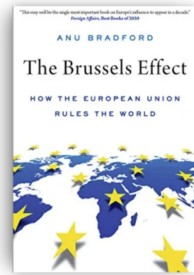
Combating Inequality: Rethinking Government's Role

Edited by Olivier Blanchard and Dani Rodrik

MIT Press, 2021, 312

pp

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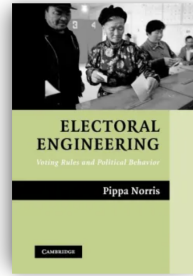
The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World

Anu Bradford

Oxford University

Press, 2020, 424 pp

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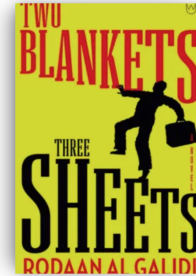
Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior

Pippa Norris

Cambridge University

Press, 2004, 375 pp

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Two Blankets, Three Sheets

Rodaan Al Galidi. Translated by Jonathan Reeder

World Editions, 2020,

400 pp

[Buy the book](#) ▾

Will Europe's unique system of peace, prosperity, and tolerance flourish in the twenty-first century? Pessimists and skeptics cite slow economic growth, the reemergence of the radical right, and tensions within increasingly multicultural societies as evidence for the fragility of Europe's peaceful order. Yet the continent's robust response and remarkable resilience in the face of the last 15 years of crises is reassuring. The euro remains in place, migration has receded, populist forces have become more moderate, Brexit has inspired no imitators, former U.S. President Donald Trump backed down on his trade brinkmanship with European allies, U.S. tech giants now accept and implement European regulations, and Ukraine's vigorous defense of self-determination—whatever its outcome—demonstrates Russia's utter inability to pose a credible military threat to NATO.

Europeans do face, however, the basic political challenges common to all industrial countries. Although, for the moment, they appear to possess better institutional means to address these difficulties than people in any other part of the world, three concerns stand out.

One is the problem of regulating globalization. A volume edited by Blanchard and Rodrik echoes Keynes's concern that governments must balance the benefits of globalization against the legitimate desires of individual countries to assure equality, stability, and regulatory protection in ways consistent with the local priorities of their citizens. But as Bradford's provocative work showed, Europe is well suited to manage this tension. It not only has supplanted the United States as the world's leading regulator but is succeeding in imposing its high regulatory standards internationally.

Another challenge is to encourage political moderation, particularly as far-right populists have grown in influence across the continent. Norris's rich classic reminds us that almost all European countries elect their governments through multiparty proportional representation systems and that such systems incentivize political moderation and compromise through coalition government. Surely it is not by chance that polarization and extremism are much more prevalent in the small number of European countries where politicians are elected by majorities in single-member districts, which generates a two-party politics—among them the United Kingdom and Hungary (and, farther afield, the United States).

Finally, as the percentage of foreign-born residents in Europe approaches that in the United States, European countries have struggled to accept and integrate migrants. Often, fiction and biography are best suited to capture the torturous physical and legal process by which migrants enter Europe, as well as the tension between their assimilation and their natural desire to retain their distinctive cultural traits. In his tragicomic memoir, Al Galidi, an Iraqi migrant to the Netherlands, captured the Kafkaesque alienation of the process of settling in Europe, an ordeal even though it was ultimately successful.

Europe must overcome these challenges because its continued success is essential to any realistic vision of a benign future for world politics. Europe matters not simply because it remains, for the moment, the major military ally of the United States, the world's largest trading economy, and the most capable source of nonmilitary influence. Rather, above all, Europe matters in the twenty-first century because its countries offer the most credible global model for progressive politics.

Since 1980, Europe has slowly supplanted the United States as the most legitimate model for nearly every essential element of modern democratic life. It now outperforms the United States (not to mention China and India) in fairness of elections; moderation of politics; provision of social welfare, medical care, and childcare; control of violence; domestic and international rule of law; minority rights; respect for the physical integrity of women; protection of the environment; regulation of technology; upward social mobility, provision of development assistance; enforcement of anticorruption measures; restraint on military intervention; and economic openness. Europe today is—to use Abraham's Lincoln's famous phrase—the “last best hope of earth.”

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