

REVIEW ESSAY

# Ever-Further Union

## What Happened to the European Idea?

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January/February 2020



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IN THIS REVIEW

**T**he European Union may well be the most ambitious and successful experiment in voluntary international cooperation in history. It has lasted longer than most national democracies in the world today. But it is deadly dull. So it is no surprise that novelists shun EU politics. How could a writer possibly find inspiration among the soulless steel and glass buildings of Brussels, where pedantic bureaucrats, politically correct diplomats, and remorseless lobbyists hammer out market regulations?

Robert Menasse, a popular Austrian author and essayist, accepted the challenge. Ten years ago, he moved to Brussels with the quixotic aim of writing the first great EU novel. The resulting work, *Die*

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*Hauptstadt*, was published in 2017 and won the most prestigious book prize in the German-speaking world, the German Book Prize. It now appears in English as *The Capital*.

Menasse's novel is a satirical send-up of contemporary Brussels. Alongside subplots involving terrorists, contract killers, police officers, farmers, fathers, sons, and a (perhaps imaginary) wild pig, the main narrative follows the rise and fall of two absurd plans to re-invigorate the EU: an official proposes that the European Commission's 60th anniversary be celebrated at Auschwitz, and a retired Austrian economics professor—apparently the last true believer in federalism—seeks to renew European idealism by transferring the EU's capital to the same spot. Of course, neither plan stands the slightest chance of success. They are easily shot down by venal lobbyists, conformist consultants, cynical national diplomats, and, in a deliciously Machiavellian scene, a suave official sitting atop the European Commission.

Menasse gets many details of the EU just right. His cruel caricature of the technocratic, self-important, and sometimes petty bureaucratic culture of the commission is largely accurate. He skillfully renders the bland life of the expatriate in Brussels—not surprising, since his book research required him to become one. More profoundly, he captures how in modern Europe, where historical memories tied to a specific time and place have grown less vivid, people invoke the Holocaust and other epochal events without any real sense of their cultural and historical context. And Menasse has a way with metaphors—especially those involving pigs, which he invokes to symbolize a vast range of things, including pork-barrel politics, anti-Semitic rhetoric, and the wildness of human



A Brussels state of mind: in the European quarter in Brussels, October 2017

Sergi Reboredo / Alamy Stock Photo

Menasse’s literary ambitions are far from modest. He explicitly models his book on one of the great modernist novels of the twentieth century: *The Man Without Qualities*, by his compatriot Robert Musil, who published three volumes of the novel between 1930 and 1943 but never completed it. Both works are political satires set during what Menasse called in a 2016 essay “the eve of an epochal rupture”—for Musil, it is World War I and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,

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world in which historical memory and religious belief are eroding and individual actions seem to lack any sense of higher purpose. And both weave rich tapestries out of seemingly disconnected actions through a panoramic collection of archetypes: the criminal outsider, the lonely lady, the political expert, the self-important political climber, the master manipulator. As if to dispel any doubt, *The Capital* coyly mentions that Musil's novel is the favorite book of the fictional European Commission president—who, of course, has not actually read it.

Yet Menasse is no Musil. He cannot match his predecessor's edgy prose, and his comfortable and small-minded characters do not, as Musil's do, peer over the edge of an abyss, questioning whether basic moral principles, or even life itself, have any deeper meaning. And the dangers facing Menasse's Europe hardly compare with the existential threat World War I posed to Musil's Austro-Hungarian Empire.

If *The Capital* does not qualify as great literature, it is worth reading for another reason: to gain fresh insights into the way Europeans perceive the EU's future. Many argue that the central challenge facing Europe today is the lack of a common political narrative with sufficient public resonance. Menasse explores a critical question that this concern raises: In an era in which historical memories, religious beliefs, and national identities are eroding, what ideals could revive public support for European integration?

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The EU does not lack for critics. They divide into two camps: those who believe Brussels should do less and those who believe it should do more. Both assert that the EU aims to replace nation-states, but the first group resists this goal, while the second applauds it. Resisters include the Euroskeptics behind [Brexit](#) and their right-wing populist and nationalist allies in France, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. These critics see themselves as defending the nation-state in the face of a tyrannous EU “superstate” bent on imposing socialism. *The Capital*, completed before Brexit and concerns of Russian meddling in European democracy, largely ignores these views.

Instead, Menasse focuses on (and casts his lot with) the second group of critics—those who complain that the EU does not go far enough. Members of this group are generally left-wing in political orientation and view the EU as a dangerously neoliberal construction that fosters inequality, coddles corporations, and dampens progressive government policies. (That view may be reductive, but it is surely a more accurate critique of what the EU does than the one offered by the Euroskeptics.) These critics believe that Europe should move toward “ever-closer union” by enacting more generous pan-European fiscal and social policies, cushioning the harsh effects of globalization and liberalization, limiting environmental pollution and corporate prerogatives, defending human rights, and combating nationalism and right-wing populism.

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**The EU, left-wing critics maintain, was an idealistic project from the start.**

Left-wing critics of the EU receive less media attention than their right-wing counterparts, at least in the English-language press, but they are probably more numerous across Europe, and especially in Brussels. Menasse's most sympathetic and thoughtful characters belong to this group. The EU, they maintain, was an idealistic project from the start, and its fortunes have risen and fallen with the idealism of its supporters. In the 1950s, those who launched European integration were largely political moderates, mostly Christian democrats, who viewed federalism as an instrument to vanquish the nationalism and political extremism that had caused two centuries of strife in Europe, culminating in World War II. The EU's *raison d'être*, the idealists in Menasse's book argue, was to prevent another war in Europe and another Auschwitz by stripping nation-states of their power and prerogatives in favor of a system of supranational governance.

*The Capital* espouses a radical variant of this critique in the form of a rant delivered by the retired Austrian professor, Alois Erhart. Nation-states, he says, no longer stand for any common beliefs or practices, let alone for worthy ethical ideals. Farmers, multinational firms, and other venal special interests have captured policymaking. And when these narrow interests conflict, EU policy gridlocks, as exemplified by the perennial quibbles over the EU budget and by the failure of Germany to be more generous toward the eurozone debtor states, such as Greece. Even worse, Erhart charges, politicians peddle nationalism, which persuades citizens that their parochial claims are ethically justified and blinds them to their true identity as Europeans or as human beings. Even EU policy intellectuals lack a vision of the future. Instead, Erhart fumes, they are no better than the "pragmatists" who defended slavery in ancient Greece, low wages during the Industrial Revolution,



Near the European Council headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, October 2019

Toby Melville / Reuters

For all these reasons, Erhart (and Menasse) concludes that nation-states will disintegrate of their own accord, as will the EU's most powerful institutions, the [European Council](#) and the Council of Ministers, both of which represent member governments. The destruction of nation-states would also imply the collapse of national democracy as a mode of legitimation. The only remaining question is what to put in their place. Menasse argues that the EU must be transformed into a

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does not, in *The Capital* or elsewhere, dwell much on policy details. His focus is on the radical new institutions and ideas required to legitimate such changes democratically—which would result in an “entirely new, globally innovative, bold European avant-garde” political system, as he described it in a 2012 essay.

Breathless adjectives cannot disguise the fact that the details of Menasse’s postnational system remain frustratingly scarce. In his essays, Menasse rejects the idea of endowing a European superstate with a large budget, overarching regulatory power, or an army. Instead, the European Commission’s bureaucrats would somehow govern through persuasion, compelling symbolism, and stronger cultural policies—an approach modeled on the [Erasmus program](#), which allows European college students to study in other EU member states. In place of the current state-centric system, Menasse suggests that subnational regions, such as Catalonia, Piedmont, and Scotland, should deal directly with Brussels through the European Parliament. In the novel, Erhart proposes a new EU passport, with no national identification, and a new European capital in Auschwitz to underscore Europe’s opposition to war and genocide. Beyond this, Menasse’s writings reveal little about what the new institutions would look like or how they could manage the ambitious European fiscal, social, and regulatory policies he advocates.

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## HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

Despite its paucity of detail, Menasse's work has garnered praise and prizes from progressive European intellectuals, not least in German-speaking countries, where his premises are widely shared. Yet there is little reason to put much stock in his vision of Europe's past, present, or future.

What is most glaring, Menasse gets the EU's history wrong. A quarter century ago, historians debunked the belief—still found today in textbooks, political speeches, and *The Capital*—that preventing war or another Auschwitz was the primary motivation behind the founding of the EU. Such idealism may have provided the impetus for national leaders in the late 1940s to create Europe's human rights body—the Council of Europe—and perhaps the European Coal and Steel Community. [Jean Monnet](#), the idealistic father of the EU, did envision locking in peace and democracy by incrementally replacing nation-states with a European superstate that would wield its technocratic authority over atomic energy, coal, steel, and other war materiel. But when European leaders created the European Economic Community, in 1957, taking the first step toward the EU that exists today, they overrode the objections of Monnet, who viewed a [common market](#) as an apolitical betrayal of his vision. They focused instead on trade and investment in civilian goods, not to save Europe from violence but because industrialists and farmers on the world's most interdependent continent, especially those in Germany, insisted that this was the best way to assure national prosperity and bolster the effectiveness of national policies. And they constructed more intergovernmental and decentralized institutions not to abolish nation-states but, in the words of the historian Alan Milward, to “rescue” them. In the decade that followed, the politician who did the most to promote Europe's first supranational institutions—those governing the EU's Common

Agricultural Policy—was no idealist. He was an outspokenly nationalist French president named Charles de Gaulle.

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## Menasse gets the EU's history wrong.

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Over the past 50 years, the EU's member states have slowly reformed the union in order to serve national interests, and Menasse is correct that national governments and institutions such as the European Council and the Council of Ministers dominate EU decision-making today. Yet he is wrong to assume that this intergovernmental structure has led to gridlock or impotence in the face of recent crises. To the contrary, the EU has compiled an extraordinary record of successful action. It has maintained the single market, enforced the world's highest regulatory standards, policed market competition, and protected the euro in the face of the Great Recession. It has all but eliminated Mediterranean migration yet retained nearly borderless travel. It has managed numerous military missions and, more important, used trade, sanctions, aid, and diplomacy to bolster Ukraine and face down a resurgent Russia. EU leaders are now constructing a common investment-screening policy directed at China, as well as a response to democratic backsliding in Europe itself. If some of these policies are less redistributive or humanitarian than perhaps they should be, the cause is not bureaucratic obstructionism or institutional paralysis but the absence of left-wing majorities in European capitals. Far from teetering on the brink of collapse, the EU's nation-state based system remains effective and legitimate.

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Of all the views that Menasse's novel implicitly backs, the most dubious is his conception of Europe's future. Even if one overlooks the vagueness of his vision, a more troubling question lurks underneath: Would Europeans view the demolition of nation-states or the construction of a postnational European state as legitimate? Here, Menasse displays another conviction typical of the European left: a blind trust in mass democracy. The new system would be legitimate, Menasse believes, because a process of genuinely democratic transnational deliberation would surely lead the European public to adopt more cosmopolitan and solidaristic ideals. If only the European masses could be edified through such a process, they would firmly oppose nationalism and racism, support stronger European integration in areas such as fiscal and social policy, and become open to immigration—all at the expense of national governments.



Farage campaigning for Brexit in London, May 2016

Neil Hall / Reuters

This belief is far-fetched, even utopian, as the EU's own recent history has shown. Something akin to Menasse's vision, minus the insistence on regional representation, motivated the effort in the late 1990s to redress the EU's so-called democratic deficit by promulgating a European constitution. Advocates claimed that vibrant deliberation and more competitive elections for the European Parliament would encourage mass participation, voter education, deep reflection, and, ultimately,

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Europeans voted erratically, ignoring basic facts and choosing hazy nationalist ideals over pragmatic problem solving. Far from serving as a font of cosmopolitanism, the European Parliament has become a source of legitimacy and funds for Euroskeptics such as Nigel Farage, one of the British politicians behind the pro-Brexit campaign in 2016. And in national elections, populists and nationalists have surged, largely at the expense of social democrats.

One senses that Menasse the satirical novelist, as opposed to Menasse the essayist, understands that his schemes to rekindle European idealism are bound to fail. In *The Capital*, all the genuine idealists in the novel are old, lonely, demented, or dead—with no connection to the modern world. Whatever commitment European leaders may have had to preventing war and genocide immediately after World War II, today no EU citizen under the age of 75 (immigrants and some residents of Croatia excepted) has ever experienced either one. Nor does anyone today view war or genocide as a realistic threat on a continent of democratic, nationally satisfied, and economically interdependent nations.

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## **Instead of radical schemes, Europeans need a vision with sound, realistic policies.**

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Yet Menasse's idealism is hardly idiosyncratic: it is shared by most European left-wing party leaders, as well as prominent left-wing social philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas. If faith in

that this ideal serves as a comfortable fiction among European social democrats faced with an insurmountable contradiction. On the one hand, they are principled European federalists. On the other, they dislike many neoliberal EU policies. To square the circle, they tell themselves that if only Europe replaced existing states with postnational democracy and cosmopolitan ideals, everyone would surely do the right thing. The result is that these friends of Europe judge the EU even more harshly than do the Euroskeptics, further undermining European integration.

Postnational utopianism constitutes a missed opportunity, because it undermines the left's ability to combat [Brexiters](#) and conservative nationalists. Fearing an electoral rebuff similar to those suffered in 2017 by the Brexiters and by the far-right French presidential candidate [Marine Le Pen](#), almost all right-wing political parties have moderated their criticism of the EU. Hardly any right-wing party leaders still advocate holding a referendum on exiting the EU or abandoning the euro, claiming instead that they will work within the EU system in order to weaken the union—a strategy with little chance of success. If these Euroskeptics remain in power, it is in large part because the left has not proposed a coherent, workable, or legitimate conception of Europe's future. Instead of radical schemes, Europeans need a vision that appreciates the virtues of sound, realistic policies. In this context, the satirical condemnations of pragmatism in *The Capital* are part of the problem, not part of the solution. 🌐

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### **The Capital**

*By Robert Menasse*

Liveright, 2019, 416 pp. \$15.99

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