

## Reviews

### Thinking Europe politically

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Review of Robert Menasse, *kursiivilla der Europäische Landbote*, tavallisella Paul Zsolnay Verlag, Vienna 2012, ISBN 978-3-552-05616-9

My most pressing thoughts after having read Robert Menasse's book were "Oh wow, this made me *think!*", and: "why is it that a writer has written such a book and not an academic?" I believe that this latter aspect tells us something decisive about the state of the art of the debate on the future of democracy in the European Union, and also on the state of the art of the academic debate on this topic. Let me explain this further: I read Menasse's book because I was invited to participate with the author in a public discussion on the topic of "Europe in Crisis". As the state of democracy in the EU and its multilevel system is one of my main research fields, and also because I am a concerned pro-European, I accepted the invitation with pleasure, read the book, and took part in the discussion. What happened was not only that we had a very fruitful discussion, but also for the first time in all of the interventions on the topic of democracy in the EU in which I have been involved over the last years. This time I was in the role of the sceptic, saying things like "we must see this in a more differentiated way...". I had been expecting this, but I had still considered myself an imaginative political scientist with a strong interest in the topic. But this time, I could not make claims as boldly as Menasse did. Therefore, Menasse's book made me think because it discusses well-known facts in an informed way and combines this discussion with strong, clear and well-argued political claims – claims that at the same time represent a clear statement and a vision for the future of Europe.

This effect was very different from that of an academic conference that I had attended a few days before. In this conference, several of the leading academics in the topic of democratic theory of the EU had been debating the consequences of the Eurozone crisis. It was not that I did not value their approaches or their results – it was the fact that this conference barely told me anything new on the question of democracy in the EU in times of the Eurozone crisis, let alone help to develop a vision of what a possible future might look like. I realised that it is precisely this aspect that is missing from the academic debates.

Most contributions on democracy in the EU in times of crisis seem either helpless, or anxious, or backward-oriented – or to be rehashing old ideas, getting lost in the small details, or being too pre-occupied in making their special claim for their special field and their special approach, citing the important persons and aiming at a publication in a high-ranked journal. In sum, in contrast to most academic contributions, the book provided strong impetus and lots of ideas to think about democracy in the EU, even, or perhaps because, I did not agree with all Menasse said (although I agreed with much of it). It inspired in me a great deal of fruitful contemplation and raised many questions. The following remarks therefore not only aim at presenting this remarkable book, but also at reflecting the thoughts it inspired in me.

The title of Menasse's book, "*Der europäische Landbote*" (The European Courier) makes reference to a political pamphlet by Georg Büchner, written in 19th century German state of Hessen and entitled "*Der Hessische Landbote*" (The Hessian Courier; see for example Büchner 1996). The title immediately hints at the book's purpose: it is not only a reflection on the EU and its future, it is also a political pamphlet. Split into 37 shorter and longer parts, the book then develops a number of arguments on roughly 100 small pages. Its main message, however, is one that was already spread by the European federalists during the Second World War: the European Union is and has been the way to overcome nation states, and this way is our only way to live in peace and democracy in Europe.

Menasse begins in the first part (p. 7) with the simple truth that no borders in Europe ever have been stable – on the contrary, borders, as well as wars have been shifting all over Europe in recent centuries. In the second part (p. 8-12) he then illustrates that this has been the main impetus in founding today's European Union: Europe had been devastated by wars among European Nation States for too long, the Second World War had left millions of people dead and whole countries in ruins, and finally the European state leaders followed reason and aimed at a means of guaranteeing peace in Europe. They first founded the European Community of Coal and Steel (ECSC) which united the core military industries for coal and steel, and a few years later, they funded the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Community (Euratom). And indeed, as Menasse underlines, it was all but evident to unite the former hereditary enemies Germany and France so quickly after the war in such a way. A point that Menasse does not mention, but which fits into the story, is that in 1954, three years after accepting the ECSC Treaty and three years before accepting those of the EEC and Euratom communities, the French National Assembly voted against the Treaty on a European Political Community (EPC) which would have created a Union very similar to today's EU.

European Integration, therefore, has to be seen as a revolutionary, even uto-

pian project and, moreover, as a political project that for the first time enabled a long-lasting peace between the member states. But, and this is a point Menasse does not highlight strongly enough, European integration has since its inception always had a Janus face. It was not only a peace project, it also was a project to create a huge internal market. Moreover, the beginnings of European integration also marked the momentary defeat of the federalists and their goal to overcome the nation states. With the defeat of the EPC in 1954, integration followed the trail programmed by the second integration movement – the Unionists – which aimed at an intergovernmental setting, keeping the nation states all while integrating them (see in detail Wiesner 2014b). Therefore it is not entirely true when, in part 3 (p. 12–14), Menasse argues that the EU is an elite project that followed a most reasonable Utopia – to overcome Nationalism and the Nation States. Menasse hints at his belief that only elites were able to think such an idea and put it into practice, as public opinion would never have supported the abandonment of the nation state. It is at this point (p. 13) that I disagreed with his argument for the first time: public scepticism of the EU’s democratic quality and growing Euroscepticism cannot, as he claims, only be seen as a product of the individual’s fear of losing their national identities (see in detail Wiesner 2014a, 55–60). I also disagreed with another interpretation on public opinion: in parts 4 and 5 (p. 14–17) Menasse takes up current criticisms of EU bureaucracy and argues that similar criticism is rare with regard to national bureaucracies, even if they were equally justified. While the first part of this argument is fully convincing, the second part is not: when he cites (p. 20) Eurobarometer results on the EU they state that individuals are critical of the *democratic legitimacy* of the EU bureaucracy, rather than the bureaucracy itself. We may like or dislike such widespread criticism of EU legitimacy, and we may think it justified or not – but it is to be seen as a deficit in the EU’s legitimacy and not just a criticism of the bureaucracy itself.

In the subsequent parts 7 to 10 Menasse discusses the EU commission which is often painted as the seat par excellence of EU bureaucracy and he describes it as the domicile of a transnational European avant-garde who works in favour of overcoming nation states. This is largely true as it is the official *raison d’être* of the commission, such that tradition, organisation and the selection mechanism of commission officials are all shaped by it. Having personally worked for a short period in Brussels, I can also subscribe to the statement that the city of Brussels and its EU community are a fascinating, very European, and a very open environment. However, I have some comments on his reasoning here: Menasse’s enthusiastic picture paints an image of an enlightened commission that can, as an avant-garde, teach and lead the rest of Europe – opposed to sceptical masses following nationalist ideas (p. 42). But democracy requires not only (and perhaps not even necessarily) the “enlightened citizen” (p. 42) – it requires in one way or the other government of, by and for the

people (be they enlightened or not). This means in any case that every citizen – if not every person – must be able to participate in the democratic processes. This claim is all the more pressing as the EU has not only created the well educated, mobile *avant-garde* academics but also a new mobile proletariat that is employed on European building sites without any access of trade unions or any valid national social standards (Wagner and Lilie, forthcoming).

Moreover, the attributes of successful commission officers do not prevent them from being distant from everyday reality in the member states (a frequent criticism), neither do they prevent the commission from having a political or ideological agenda. As can be seen when tracing EU policy processes, in many policy fields the commission follows a very clear political agenda which often raises questions not only on national policies or traditions, but also acquired rights and standards and in particular key achievements linked to the nation state such as social rights (Wiesner 2012a). In part 11, Menasse also hints at this problem (p. 31) but does not link it to the commission's role. But the commission in that sense is a political actor, and it acts in the way a government acts (and should act), i.e. by shaping policies. This is one of the main reasons to claim a stronger democratic legitimacy and accountability for the EU commission. Surely, as Menasse writes on p. 24, the commission officers themselves do not need to be democratically legitimised, at least no more than any national official in a ministry, but the commission in its role as *de facto* EU government requires such legitimacy. In the setting of the EU this primarily means a still closer link to the European Parliament in terms of elections and accountability, despite the recent improvements. For a long time, the commission's legitimisation was in large part derived from what Menasse fears the most: the member states and their governments, who named the commission president and the commissioner candidates. The EP voted on both the president and the new commission, after having held extensive hearings with the candidates (a procedure introduced only in the 1990s). Now, after this year's EP elections, in a battle of forces the new EP grand coalition of socialists and conservatives forced the Council to accept Jean-Claude Juncker, the head candidate of the winning party, as new commission president. For the first time in the history of European integration we have experienced an election campaign where we knew, at least with regard to the *de facto* head of government, whom we would get for our votes. This link, however, does not exist for the other commissioners who will be named by the national governments.

Democratic legitimacy in the EU, therefore, still collides with remnants of the EU's intergovernmental framework. In part 11 of his book (p. 30-43), Menasse arrives at this standpoint as well. But he also seems to confuse four aspects that, in my view, should be carefully separated: nation states, their governments, national democracies, and the individual attachments of their citizens. His argument, therefore, confuses the fact that some parts of the Ger-

man yellow press in the sovereign debt crisis polemicised against “the Greeks”, the German government’s role and strategy in the sovereign debt crisis, the fact that Germany is a nation state, and finally with what “democratically legitimate politics” stand for as such (p. 39). In other words, and to me this seems to be the most important criticism of Menasse’s argument, democracy is not to be confused with its most common form of organisation, i.e. nation states that are representative democracies. This also means that in the EU the crucial tension is not between national democracy and supranationalism, as Menasse suggests in parts 11 and 21 of his book, but between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism.

The crucial issue is, therefore – and here again I fully agree with Menasse – the role of the nation states and their governments. In part 12 (p. 43-46) he describes a meeting of the European Council in March 2010 where the sovereign debt crisis and the case of Greece were discussed behind closed doors and a decision was finally taken by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. Obviously, as Menasse says (p. 46) the democratic legitimacy of such decision-making is to be questioned, but precisely because it follows an intergovernmental logic where not only the heads of government decide but, moreover, where a logic of economic force reigns which finally allowed the French and German heads of government to decide bilaterally. Those heads of government are democratically legitimate on their national level, but they are only indirectly legitimised for taking decisions of supranational importance. In parts 13 to 17 (p. 46-59), Menasse further discusses the problems created by the intergovernmental principle, in particular, during times of sovereign debt crisis. A point he omits here, even if crucially decisive, is the fact that the governance mechanisms of the sovereign debt crisis bypass the European Parliament and have installed a parallel intergovernmental structure: the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) which provides financial help in a sovereign debt crisis and is organised in a purely intergovernmental form, and was established by an intergovernmental treaty of the Eurozone states. The European Parliament does not have a say in it (see in detail Wiesner 2012b). This setting testifies to the weakness of representative democracy in the EU and its relative lack of real world experience: imagine that in a national budgetary crisis the German federal states establish an emergency regime that excludes the Bundestag. Such a dramatic state of affairs is not imaginable in a stable democracy, but maybe in a transition country.

The Lisbon Treaty has also accentuated the conflict between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. It not only strengthened the European Parliament, and hence the supranational representative dimension of the EU, but also gave the European Council an official status and hence strengthened the intergovernmental dimension. As Menasse says, the EU consists of only two truly supranational institutions: commission and European Parliament. In today’s institutional setting, the third and fourth (Menasse only speaks of one Council here, p. 49) are intergovernmental: the Council, consisting of the

ministers, and the European Council, consisting of the heads of government which are officially separate institutions. Indeed, today both often act as bulwarks for national interests (but not of “something understood as democracy”, p. 50), in contrast to the days when European visionaries such as Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterand were at work in the meetings of the heads of state (p. 48). Menasse repeatedly states (for example on p. 57) that for him the Council (or in a more exact terminology: the two Councils) is the biggest obstacle to the European project, as it institutionalises “not democracy, but nationalism on a new political level” (p. 57).

In parts 17 to 19 (p. 58-67), as well as in 25 (p. 86), Menasse discusses nations and national identities. In a nutshell, one of his main conclusions is that they should be abolished. This is another point on which I disagree with him – even if this idea is among the most revolutionary in the book. I would rather say the point is to abolish *nationalism*, a point he also makes. Nations, as Benedict Anderson famously put it, are imagined communities (Anderson 2006), and many studies have shown that people tend to imagine themselves as part of communities, be it national or otherwise. The core question for me is whether these identifications are in conflict with the goals of democratic and peaceful common life in the European Union. If they aren't, I do not think it matters whether a person describes herself as “Finnish and European”, “European” or only “Finnish” or as neither. Here, for once, the European Commission has coined a useful slogan by claiming “Unity in Diversity”.

From part 20 onwards, Menasse continually questions the possibility of constructing a supranational democracy in the EU after having rhetorically demanded (p.33 and 42) whether it was not impossible to organise a democracy beyond the nation state. In that context, in part 24, he discusses the European Parliament and this argument must also be rectified from the point of view of a political scientist. When he claims (on p.82) that the Lisbon Treaty strengthened the EP, but “did not equip it with all rights” the question is: which rights? The history of parliaments and parliamentarism is centuries old (see Ihalainen, Ilie, and Palonen, forthcoming) and the variety of parliaments throughout the world are numerous as most of the world's nation states actually possess a parliament (see Freedom House). In comparison to both historical examples, and many other parliaments in the world, the EP is very well equipped. It can easily be compared to parliaments in presidential and semi-presidential systems (Tiilikainen and Wiesner, forthcoming). However, in comparison to the German Bundestag, as a strong parliament in a full-fledged parliamentary system, the EP seems to be weak. This is not to say that the EP should not still get more powers, on the contrary, the point is that the EU is already more parliamentarised than many of the heads of government would like as the recent episode around the commission presidency has shown. Neither is it a decisive problem that many Eurosceptics are elected to the European Parliament (p. 83), even if

it seems paradoxical that anti-system MPs sit in the parliament of a polity or a system they do not support it has, nonetheless, been the case in many representative democracies and it must be something that a stable representative system allows for, at least to a certain extent (most representative systems draw a line when it comes to crimes).

Another one of Menasse's suggestions proposed in part 26 and later, is a Europe of the regions. This, he suggests, could include the abolition of nation states and nations, as well as national parliaments (p. 88). His argument leads me to another major disagreement: why should we do so? Such a move would most likely bring with it many dangers. Despite the many deficits of nation states and their sanguine history, so far they have been the only guarantors of democracy's institutions and structures, as well as of the necessary rights and freedoms, let alone social achievements. In that sense nation states worked as a Hobbesian Leviathan. The many examples of "failing states" clearly indicate that one should be careful to think about destroying a state without at least creating alternative institutions for law enforcement.

All considered, it is indeed a complex undertaking to attempt an answer to the question of supranational European democracy. The complexity – and these are the two key points where I disagree with Menasse – results mainly from two core aspects: first, it is neither realistic nor desirable to abolish the nation states completely. Therefore, they will have to be integrated in the EU setting, creating a sort of multi-level democracy in one way or another – which in the end might be called: federalism, confederalism, or "demoicracy" (the latest idea coming from political theory; see for example Nicolaidis 2004). Second, to make democracy work, a certain basic orientation of the members of the polity with the polity and the co-citizens is necessary, whatever this may be called (mostly it is termed identity or identification). While the first condition can be met in a top-down way, by decisions taken by heads of government and put into way, the second cannot be, at least not at present. In the early days of nation states it was easier, as Eugen Weber put it, to "make peasants into Frenchmen" (Weber 1979) by forcing them into the disciplinary institutions of school and the military.

I therefore fully subscribe to Menasse's idea of a Europe that overcomes nationalism, that is post-national, and democratic (p. 97) rather than a Europe void of national democracy (p. 98). And I happily join with the claim that we need to invent democracy anew for the European context which means, to a certain extent, to overcome the sole connection to the nation state (p. 98). In that sense, indeed, the crisis is a major political crisis (p. 93) that puts the question of how to organise the EU in the forefront of the political agenda. The questions related to this debate are indeed decisive for Europe's future, and we need a broad public debate on them (p. 95). But in conclusion, I would like to modify Menasse's point: we need more democracy in the EU, and we also

need more integration and more federalism. This implies the *relativisation* of the role played by both nation states and national attachments, but it does not necessarily mean the abolition of nation states. Rather, it means their integration into a federal, multilevel, and supranational democratic EU, maintaining the democratic achievements of nation states, such as transparency, accountability, federalism, social rights, citizen rights, or parliamentarism.

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