

**Dermot Hodson (2023). *Circle of stars: A history of the EU and the people who made it*. Yale University Press. Hbk. 444pp. 20 b-w illustrations. ISBN: 978-0-300-26769-3. £25.00stg.**

The examination of decision-makers' personality traits significantly contributes to the study of politics, even though this approach is not very popular with political scientists. In his book *Circle of stars: A history of the EU and the people who made it*, Dermot Hodson offers a distinct perspective on the European Union's history which, unlike other historical accounts, focuses on the personalities, beliefs, shifts in opinion, and reasoning of key leaders across various societal domains who played pivotal roles during critical stages in the Union's development. Hodson's analysis is not limited to politicians but extends to entrepreneurs, trade union leaders and members of civil society.

Historical narratives of European integration have been produced in many languages and among English language ones we find those written by John Pinder (1991), Derek W. Urwin (1991, 1995), and the two-volume history co-edited by Mathieu Segers and Steven van Hecke in 2023. Hodson's work adds to these works, but with a different style and narrative which is accessible to a wider public.

Hodson analyses both those who energetically built and defended the EU and encouraged its development as well as those who attacked or criticised it. Among the little-known personalities mentioned in the book who played a critical role in the building of the EU we meet Taja Vovk van Gaal, the creative director of the House of European History's academic board, who faced off criticism to ensure the success of the project. However, Hodson also covers the role played by well-known personalities such as Jacques Delors, the Presidents of the Commission who succeeded him, as well as several government leaders. He takes careful aim at the EU's right-wing Eurosceptics, starting with Sir James Goldsmith and bares for all to see the meandering and opportunistic political behaviour of several other right-wingers, including Hungary's prime minister Victor Orbán, Poland's Kaczyński twins, the UK's former prime minister Boris Johnson and Marine Le Pen.

Hodson's narrative is divided into four parts starting from the ratification of the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht) in 1993. The first part covers successive treaty revisions from Maastricht to Lisbon as well as the Union's fundamental values and European culture. The second part analyses three 'episodes', namely: the further consolidation of the internal market comprising the liberalisation of services mainly through the Bolkestein Directive (2006) dubbed the "Frankenstein Directive" by its detractors; the liberalisation of Europe's air travel; and the advent of the "Third Way" in the EU, popularised by the UK Labour Party leader and Prime Minister Tony Blair, which sought to marry an adaptation to globalisation with the maintenance of high social standards. Hodson also discussed the Euro crisis and the emergence of anti-austerity parties which forced mainstream parties to form governing coalitions with them.

The third part of the book assesses four dimensions of "Europe in the World": Global Europe, Ecological Europe, borders, and terrorism. The fourth part deals with the four existential challenges that the EU has faced since 2016 and the end of the Euro crisis, namely: Brexit, the effects of COVID-19, the launching of the 'Next Generation EU' to stimulate the bloc's recovery, and the conference on the 'Future of Europe'.

*R. Pace*

The book makes for a compelling read because it is written in a lucid style that makes it easier to read and understand. For this reason, it appeals to a broad array of readers, ranging from those who are well versed in the heavy academic literature on the EU to those who are not. Those who study the EU or work in its institutions, are likely to profit from reading Hodson's book because it conveys a clearer understanding of the human determinants of key decisions: the good and 'villainous' history makers. Although the author has carefully picked the personalities to illustrate the case, the sheer number of individuals discussed represent a cross-section of European society.

Hodson's book has little to say about small states in the EU. The subject becomes apparent where the narrative turns to Luxembourg, one of the six founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community and whose leaders often assumed leading roles in the Commission and the other European institutions. With so many small states that have joined the EU in 2004, this gap could have been addressed.

*Circle of stars* will be challenged by those who disagree with Hodson's assessment. The book is unlikely to make a direct impact on the development of the EU in the foreseeable future. However, in its concluding chapter, Hodson summarises the approaches that could help the EU tackle contemporary and future challenges. The first of these observations is that the EU must listen to its critics and act on their concerns instead of ignoring them. The second is that, to defend European values, politicians must stop looking the other way. The third is to create the borderless Europe that was supposed to become a reality with the creation of the Single Market in 1992 and whose realization is obstructed by the EU's inability to adopt a common migration and asylum policy that is negatively restricting the Schengen Agreement. Fourthly and finally, Hodson's most resonating call is that the EU needs to defend itself strongly against unfair criticism such as the reference to its democratic deficit.

*Roderick Pace*

*Institute of European Studies*

*University of Malta*

*Malta*

[roderick.pace@um.edu.mt](mailto:roderick.pace@um.edu.mt)