# Book Review: The European Union: An Introduction by Mark Corner

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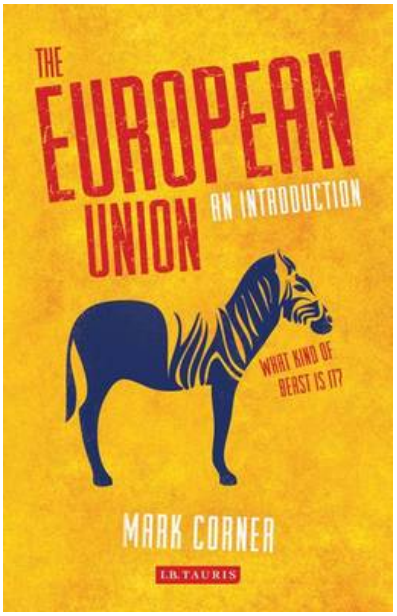
*In this accessible read, Mark Corner looks to provide an essential introduction to the history and modern workings of the EU. Although a good starting point for understanding the activity of the EU and its institutions, the book is strangely silent on some of the most important challenges facing Europe today, writes* ***Ioannis Papagaryfallou.***

**The European Union: An Introduction. Mark Corner. I. B. Tauris. 2014.**

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In his latest book, Mark Corner, lecturer at the University of Leuven and an external speaker for the European Commission, purports to offer a common-sense introduction to the European Union (EU) and its institutions.

What in principle differentiates his book from other similar introductory texts to the EU is that he chooses not to obfuscate the problems he is discussing by employing the abstract criteria of political and international theory, but he rather prefers to target a general audience mainly interested in what the EU is doing in practice. Instead of criticising the Community for not meeting all the criteria of statehood, Corner celebrates its character as a unique and historically unprecedented combination of intergovernmental and supranational institutions which vie for influence, without, however, losing sight of the European citizens. Although the book's central argument that the EU should not be judged by criteria relevant to states is a *prima facie* plausible one, Corner's essentially utilitarian approach to European integration necessarily leaves out of the picture issues related to the promotion of a common European identity and the more general moral foundations of European politics.

In his examination of the major European institutions the writer focuses more on their activity and less on their ontology. In other words, the practical achievements of the Commission or the Court of Justice are considered to be more important than their theoretical standing and exact place in the Treaties. With regard to the Court, Corner observes that its central position within the institutional structure of the Community does not necessarily reflect the intentions of the Founding Fathers of the EU. However, what he suggests is that by effectively protecting the single market the Court has justified its own attempt to augment its power and status. The Commission is also applauded for fighting against economic protectionism, and for being a *sui generis* institution which cannot be found within states. For Corner, those who want to transform it into a simple civil service ignore its unique characteristics and important responsibility for implementing the Treaties. The supranational character of the Commission and the Court is balanced by the intergovernmental constitution of the Council of Ministers and the European Council.

Of special interest is the analysis of the Community's external relations which include both security issues and non-security ones. To begin with, Corner rejects the widespread misconception that the EU is an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm. To the extent that 'soft' power cannot be entirely dissociated from other forms of power, it should be realised that the Community's status as the largest economic bloc in the world enables it to exercise considerable political influence abroad without necessarily resorting to force or the threat of force. Despite his rejection of the idea of a European super-state, the writer makes the valid point that Europe's military emancipation from the United States is both desirable and unavoidable under current circumstances.

To begin with, in the aftermath of the Cold War, Europe ceases to be at the top of the list of American priorities and is replaced by Asia. Secondly, the Community's expansion into Southeast Europe means that, in the unlikely event that military tensions occur within its borders, they should be handled by the Europeans themselves and not by NATO. What is more, in an age of recession and economic crisis, it clearly makes sense for European states to co-operate in the development of military technology. Strengthening the military bonds among European states does not involve abandoning the right to deploy national military forces and giving birth to some form of super-state. The book's most decisive objection to Euro-federalist aspirations is that the hope to create a United States of Europe brings nothing new to the conduct of international relations, since it simply reproduces power politics on a higher scale. On the other hand, accepting the existing institutional structure of the EU as a historically unprecedented form of sovereignty-sharing among independent states could hopefully contribute to the emergence of similar regional organisations in other parts of the world and the pacification of international relations.

Although a good starting point for understanding the activity of the EU and its institutions, the book is strangely silent on some of the most important challenges facing Europe today. For example, for a book intending to shed light on how European integration affects the lives of ordinary citizens, the choice not to discuss the economic and other reasons behind the ongoing Eurozone crisis is at least surprising. The writer's concluding observation that, without facing the current economic and environmental woes, the Community is unlikely to survive, is not adequately supported by the previous analysis.  More importantly, by taking for granted the existence of a natural harmony of interests between the Community and its leading members, Corner fails to see how what Ulrich Beck has critically described as a false German universalism is today dividing Europe.

The belief that what is good for Germany or France is also good for the Community as a whole undoubtedly reflects the experiences of the post-World War II generation, but it is very much at odds with the mood of our times. Equally missing from the book is an engagement with the idea of Europe as a normative power which, according to writers such as Ian Manners, challenges Westphalian conventions in fields such as human rights and social solidarity. Promoting the necessary forms of social change in Europe presupposes realising that the interests of the strong do not automatically coincide with those of the weak, and that the sacrifices that the first should make to placate the second require abandoning historically bankrupt conceptualisations of the national interest.

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