

The Anti-Europeans

About: Bernard Bruneteau, *Combattre l'Europe. De Lénine à Marine Le Pen*, CNRS Éditions

By *Agnès Louis*

Nowadays, criticism of Europe has become the outlet for democratic disarray. While disintegration threatens the European Union, what are the forces opposing it, and what are they going after exactly?

Since Brexit and the migration crisis of 2015, which deeply divided people in Europe, the disintegration of the European Union seems possible, if not probable. For Bulgarian author Ivan Krastev,¹ who has devoted decades to studying EU integration, the current situation now forces us to envisage its breakup. In this context, it is important to analyze the forces that oppose the European Union to know if they are indeed likely to prevail. This is what Bernard Bruneteau, professor of political science at the University of Rennes 1, proposes in his latest book.

Between History and Essay

Combattre l'Europe is not the first book Bernard Bruneteau has devoted to the European question. *L'Histoire de l'unification européenne* ("The History of European Unification"), published in 1996, explained in a pedagogical style the gradual and eventful realisation of the European project. It was followed in 2006 by *Histoire de l'idée européenne au premier XX^e siècle à travers les textes* ("A History of the European Idea in

¹ Ivan Krastev, *Le Destin de l'Europe*, trans. Frédéric Joly, Paris, Premier Parallèle, 2017, 153 pp.

the Early Twentieth Century through Texts”). In a completely different genre, *L’Europe nouvelle de Hitler* (“Hitler’s New Europe”) (2003) was a survey of the “collaborators” who advocated the unification of the continent. Republished under the more precise title *Les « Collabos » de l’Europe nouvelle* (The Collaborators of New Europe”), the book gave rise to a misunderstanding. Indeed, it succeeded in enthusing the most ferocious opponents of the Union who interpreted it as a demonstration of the totalitarian nature of the European system. The EU linked to Nazism: We told you so! This was not, however, what Bernard Bruneteau had said. And those who misunderstood the meaning of his 2003 publication will undoubtedly have been disappointed, even outraged, by his 2018 book.

Indeed, *Combattre l’Europe* is not directed against Europe. It is primarily a book about the history of ideas, recapitulating all forms of opposition to European integration. In this respect, the book stands out for its systematic ambition. What we have here is a monograph covering the entire history of the European project from 1900 to the present day. Bruneteau strives to take into account the diversity of national resistance, pausing regularly to examine such-and-such an EU member state. From this point of view, *Combattre l’Europe* is clearly seeking to remedy a certain dispersion or “disarticulation” of the already numerous analyses focusing on forms of opposition to a united Europe. It tries to provide a new understanding of all forms of resistance to European integration, while highlighting their irreducible variety. This is a work of history, but Bruneteau’s book is also a discreet essay which, by analyzing forms of anti-European discourse, also reveals their weaknesses. As we shall see, for Bruneteau the primary weakness lies in the illiberal attitude that more or less openly underpins some anti-European arguments. This theory, however, is not delivered immediately; it gradually emerges from a detailed historical account given over nearly three hundred pages.

Europe: Too Big or Too Small?

The book is divided into three parts and follows a chronological order. The first part analyzes the early opposition to the European *idea* or *ideal*. Although the history of the European idea had already been created, the history of its early opponents was still undrafted. Thus, by giving a voice to those who—from Maurras to Lenin—excoriated the European project, Bruneteau resituates it within a broader political history. Generally speaking, the history of the European idea is written and taught

separately, which risks making it seem disconnected from European people's overall destiny. Students sometimes know certain elements, but they are unable to connect them to the broader outline of the history of Europe. Coudenhove-Kalergi and Briand, once we become familiar with them, seemed to be dreaming and reacting in a bizarre historical vacuum. The primary merit of Bruneteau's book is thus to make the creators of Europe interact with other twentieth-century actors, which makes them much more real and concrete.

As the author shows, the defenders of a united Europe had to wrestle with the nationalists on the one hand, for whom the nation's independence could not be compromised, and with supporters of the Internationale on the other, for whom solidarity between the proletarians should prevail over the defence of the European interest. Finally, there was also opposition to the European project from the "globalists", for whom the very borders between civilisations should be erased within an increasingly integrated world, and the construction of a united Europe could only hinder such a process. Even before it existed, the European community was thus accused of being too vast yet too limited, too open yet too closed. This perspective is of interest because it shows that Europe is not just the alternative to the Nation. It is also criticised for seeking to establish a kind of vast new homeland. It should be noted that, for supporters of political Europe, this criticism could, paradoxically, be justified. It is true, they would say, that the European Union is not a space where identities become diluted, but its aim is the formation of a new political community that is aware of itself and its limitations. Some of those who are opposed to Europe are not wrong on that count.

In the second part of the book, the author focuses on forms of resistance to European integration from 1950 to the Maastricht Treaty. At that time, criticism was no longer being directed against the European idea but rather the Europe that was being constructed. In this part, Bruneteau first highlights certain national specificities that fuelled opposition to Europe and gave it a particular tone and direction in each case. In France, for example, it was the traditional notion of sovereignty, as an expression of the general will, that for many people made the exercise of a multi-State power inconceivable. In the United Kingdom, however, Europe was rejected in the name of the country's imperial destiny,² while the northern countries feared for the social model they identified with. Bruneteau thus begins to outline a theory that he goes on to develop later in the book: Opposition to Europe is not always the same and,

² On the question of British resistance to the European Union, see Ophélie Siméon, "Brexit et euroscepticisme", <https://laviedesidees.fr/Brexit-et-euroscepticisme.html>

in that sense, “euroscepticism” – at least in the singular – does not exist. Bruneteau thus joins a series of authors who refute the concept of euroscepticism insofar as it crushes the cultural and ideological variety of the different forms of resistance to the Union.³ The second section of the book is also an opportunity for Bruneteau to make a precise study of the attitude of political parties and certain groups mobilised against European integration. By following the vagaries of European party politics, Bernard Bruneteau shows that this policy not only expresses the ideology of the party, but is often a means of positioning itself in the domestic political game. A party is for or against European integration in order to stand out from its competitors in a given political context. The EEC or the European Union can bear the cost, insofar as it is not assessed on the basis of an overall world vision, but indirectly suffers the consequences of party tactics.

Resistance to Europe and Hostility to Liberalism

The third and final part of the book focuses on current forms of resistance to the European Union and the single currency. One could actually start reading the book at the end, since this section is complete in itself. It stands out as a book within the book, or as an essay within the vast historical work that is *Combattre l'Europe*. Bruneteau's judgements are cautiously offered but increasingly supported in this section of the book. If we wish to know the author's position, this is where we shall discover it. The fact that Bruneteau's own interpretation is more sensitive at the end of his book is perhaps the sign of a political belief system that sharpened during the writing process. It is as if the book was not begun in order to deploy the author's preconceived opinion on the European adventure, but so that he might form or confirm his judgement.

Two major theories emerge from this part of the book. The first, which we have already encountered, is that the forms of opposition to the European Union are essentially diverse. Not only does so-called “euroscepticism” vary from nation to nation, but within a single country the motives for speaking out against Europe may be different. Some are angry with the EU for not providing them with the expected level of comfort or material well-being. This is *utilitarian* criticism of Europe, to use the author's own term. Others attack Europe as a system of domination in which the wealthy elite show contempt for the people: this is known as *protestors'* criticism and

³ See for example *Les Résistances à l'Europe : cultures nationales, idéologies et stratégies d'acteurs*, collective work edited by Justine Lacroix and Ramona Coman, Editions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2007, 286 pp.

is common among the left in particular. Others castigate the EU in the name of the national *identity* that it actively and deliberately seeks to dissolve. Such diversity can be concealed by catchphrases and slogans that are more or less shared, but it remains present within the cacophony of discontent. According to Bruneteau, this means that an alliance between all those who oppose the Union, leading to its breakup, remains highly improbable. The author would therefore say to Ivan Krastev that even though the disintegration of Europe must be conceived, it is not necessarily on the verge of becoming reality.

It is in the formulation of his second theory that Bernard Bruneteau's voice and political sensitivity are the most perceptible. He suggests that, in more than one case, discourse against Europe is the expression of an illiberal attitude that is more or less accepted. The European Union is rejected as a figure not only of economic liberalism, but of political liberalism. This theory applies to some nationalist political movements or those from the protesting left. It also explicitly targets a certain number of researchers in the human and social sciences⁴ who, under the guise of scientific enquiry, abruptly condemn the elitist origin, the technocratic foundation or the irremediably anti-democratic nature of the Union. Bruneteau's virulence is provoked in particular by the use of scientific forms for political ends. However, it is reasonable to think that his interpretation extends beyond the authors he names. For he also stresses the fact that the themes they put forward are constantly cited and exploited in the engaged media and digital networks. As a result, the book appears to be condemning an entire intellectual and political environment. In what sense does criticism of Europe thus betray a form of hostility to political liberalism?

Let us return to one of the chief criticisms levelled against the EU. Europe is accused of being undemocratic: from the outset, it has been entrusted to civil servants who may well be diligent but remain deaf to the citizens' wishes. This accusation is largely false when considered in light of the facts: Bruneteau shows that the founders of the EU were not seeking to create a technocracy shielded from political life, but rather to establish a political system protected against the drift toward populism during the interwar period, which is not the same thing.⁵

⁴ For example, B. Bruneteau is critical of the work by the law professor Christophe Beaudouin, the historian Annie Lacroix-Riz, the political scientist Marc Joly, and countless researchers who condemn the return of a "German empire" in the form of the European Union.

⁵ In this respect, his refutation of critics of the "Monnet system" is extremely enlightening. While, for supporters of Europe, Monnet is often considered a founding father, for its opponents he is blamed for the creation of a technocratic Union, deliberately removed from the people. This interpretation exaggerates both the (albeit significant) role of Monnet and his distrust (partly real) of political passions. The pages Bernard Bruneteau devotes

However, the problem lies particularly in the fact that this type of criticism betrays a rejection of political liberalism or liberal divisions of power. Indeed, when it is said that Europe is not democratic, oftentimes democracy is in fact being defined as the expression of the general will of the people implemented by a government that does what the people want. The problem with the Union, therefore, is that it divides power between the national government and the European institutions; but it also divides power in Europe between a Commission, a Parliament, a Council, a Court of Justice and interest groups that are consulted regularly. Europe is therefore a divided and weakened power, and therein lies the problem. And yet such criticism forgets or deliberately ignores the fact that liberal democracy is specifically based on certain basic divisions, particularly the division between powers that not only limit one another but are also forced to move forward in contact with one another. What seems to be at stake for Bernard Bruneteau, therefore, is not the opposition between a national democracy and a European technocracy, but between those who accept the liberal representative democracy both in the nation and at the European level, and those who oppose it, whether openly or otherwise.⁶

How To Deal With Europe's Critics?

Combattre l'Europe could be read from the end. The final part of the book clarifies the meaning of the previous sections. They allow current criticism of Europe to be considered in its full historical depth. Looking back from the perspective of our contemporary situation, it is indeed striking to see the continuity of resistance to the Union, the recurring themes and the persistence of certain slogans. It becomes a question of knowing how to interpret that historical continuity, and how Bernard Bruneteau himself perceives it. For the author does not, in the first two sections, clearly tell us what value to give to the historical precedents he recounts. For Bruneteau, is it about explaining the strength of certain criticisms by revealing their roots in a continuing school of thought? Or is it more a question of revealing the age of theories

to this subject may be linked to the opinion column written by several historians in response to the publication of Philippe Devilliers' book: "Philippe Devilliers n'a pas le droit de falsifier l'histoire de l'Union européenne au nom d'une idéologie" ("Philippe Devilliers has no right to falsify the history of the European Union in the name of an ideology"), opinion column published in *Le Monde* on 28th March 2019.

⁶ Here, B. Bruneteau comes close to the interpretation made by Ivan Krastev, who writes, for example, "What makes the rise of populist formations so dangerous for the survival of the European project is not so much the euroscepticism of these populists – in fact, some of them are barely sceptical on the matter – but their revolt against the principles and institutions of constitutional liberalism, which are the pillars that support the European Union."

that claim to have the force and freshness of new ideas? In other words, is it about proving the more or less hackneyed nature of such criticism? Or is this history aimed at better understanding the specificity of current criticism? I consider all three to be true. The strength of certain forms of resistance can be understood better when we see that they come from political representations that are deeply anchored in a given nation. For example, French sovereignty becomes clearer through the ancient idea that the Nation only exists through a fully sovereign State that recognises no authority above itself. On the other hand, however, some themes appear old and even unlikely when we retrace their history. For example, the European Union is sometimes accused of being a kind of empire under German control (or Christian-Democrat, according to some versions). When we read Bernard Bruneteau's book, we realise that such criticism is very old and is often the automatic expression of a somewhat muddled anti-Germanic (or anti-clerical) sentiment. Also, criticism of free-market Europe sometimes directly repeats some of Lenin's rather questionable slogans against capitalist Europe.

Finally, the book highlights the specificity of our situation. That specificity is primarily due to the fact that Europe exists in the present. Criticising the principle of the Union today does not only mean showing restraint, caution or mistrust, like Pierre Mendès France in the past. It means calling for the destruction of a structure already in place. Our situation is also unprecedented in terms of the new methods of communication that give a European echo to national criticisms and may give the impression of a vast Europe of discontented citizens who speak the same language beyond any borders. We have seen that, for Bernard Bruneteau, this impression is largely an illusion. However, that may not be the most important thing: above all, the distinguishing feature of the current era is the fact that criticism of the EU is formulated in a context of a general weakening of representative democracy. For several decades we have witnessed the declining effectiveness of political institutions and a loss of confidence in those institutions. Criticism of Europe has become the outlet for this democratic disarray. This gives it a particular power, because Europe is accused of a much broader unease with regard to representation. In that sense, yes, there is something unprecedented about our experience. We then fall back on the idea that we are experiencing not so much a crisis in Europe but a crisis of democracy in Europe. What exactly is it that we call democracy? And which democracy do we want? Such is the real debate within the final stage of the debate on Europe. In the end, if Bruneteau cautiously supports Europe, it is perhaps less in the name of the EU and its necessity than in the name of a certain idea of liberal democracy that he believes to be under threat today. The question to ask the author, then, is whether it is possible at the

present time to have an anti-Europe opposition that is simultaneously vigorous, democratic and liberal. In other words, apart from the forms of ideological bias exposed in the book, is there anything to retain or save of the criticisms levelled against Europe?

The book's front cover shows an axe buried in the centre of the European flag. The axe is deeply embedded, but the flag remains untrampled. This image is a fairly good depiction of the overall aim of Bruneteau, for whom opposition to the EU is strong but probably not likely to bring about its collapse. Bernard Bruneteau finishes his book by (cautiously) wishing the European Union a long life. This is not the wish of a European enthusiast who wants to believe in the EU despite everything. It is the logical conclusion of an analysis that highlights the problematic features of people's hatred of Europe, in other words, their resentment of the representative and liberal democracy constructed in past centuries.

Bernard Bruneteau, *Combattre l'Europe. De Lénine à Marine Le Pen* ("Fighting Europe. From Lenin to Marine Le Pen"), Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2018, 304 pp., €25.

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