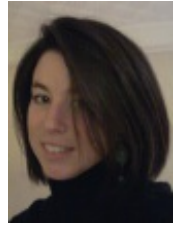


Book Review: The Oxford Handbook of the European Union

by Blog Admin

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*The EU is becoming increasingly important and present in the lives of Europeans, at the same time as myths and misunderstandings about the institution and its role are on the rise. With contributions from over sixty specialists, **Giulia Pastorella** finds the **Oxford Handbook of the European Union** to be a key survey of scholarly work on the 'unidentified political object' that is the EU. She finds it to be a comprehensive guide to the EU, its institutions, and history, which will be of interest to EU specialists and non-specialists alike.*

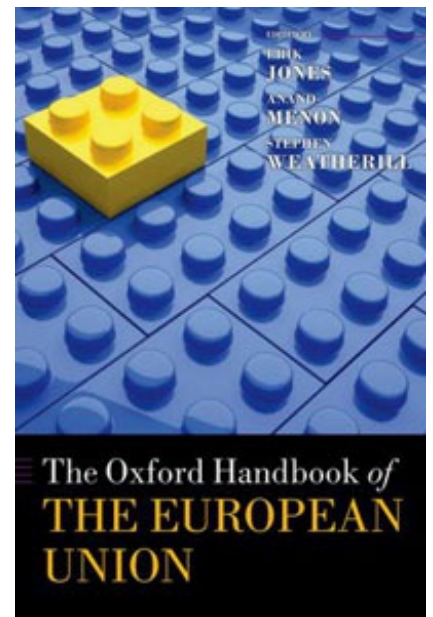


The Oxford Handbook of the European Union. Edited by Erik Jones, Anand Menon, and Stephen Weatherill. Oxford University Press. 2012.

Find this book

The volumes belonging to the series of *Oxford Handbooks* are advertised as 'a sophisticated and comprehensive introduction to a topic and a useful desk reference for scholars and advanced students alike.' The *Oxford Handbook of the European Union* reflects and fulfills those ambitions.

It is the intention of the editors Erik Jones, Anand Menon and Stephen Weatherill to bring together a variety of perspectives on the EU, from economics, law, history and international relations. In a sense every discipline has its own place in the volume, and, more fundamentally, in the explanation of how the EU was formed, evolved and is working today. This is a refreshing attitude, given the tendency of EU scholars to often talk to themselves, in strict EU jargon, and one that will allow readers and students coming from the various disciplines to find themselves partially on familiar grounds.



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The handbook starts, predictably and yet logically, with an overview of the different theoretical approaches to the study of the EU. In each of these chapters, the authors defend their approaches, which comes across quite forcefully. To their credit, however, the authors generally admit their partiality and try to reconcile different competing schools of thought: realism, neo-functionalism, constructivism and the like. The rest of book follows the standard structure of EU textbooks: history, institutions, and competences, but also has the somehow unsettling surprise of having no dedicated chapter on the success story of EU enlargement. This is of course treated in several chapters throughout the book, but one would think that the topic would have been an obvious candidate for a stand-alone chapter.

Another surprise, but this time a rather positive one, is that member States are treated rather unusually in two different ways. The first looks at cleavages (with chapters on large vs. small, old vs. new, rich vs. poor, coordinated versus liberal market economies, leaders vs. followers) and the role played by those cleavages in contributing to the current set up of the union. The second section dedicated to Member States is also the last one; it looks at the interaction between them and the EU. Such division might seem arbitrary, but it actually allows the contributors to focus on issues that are all too relevant nowadays, such as Eiko Thielemann's chapter on burden-sharing, which looks at *solidarity between the member states* in the context of the Eurocrisis as well as of its historical roots. In fact a feature of most of the chapters is to refer to recent events to give more life to the 'old debates'. Waltraud Schelkle thus, in the context of the rich vs. poor cleavage, looks at whether poorer countries are more crisis-prone, which has become a refrain of the Eurocrisis, and then discards such theory.

A refreshing choice is to dedicate a chapter to the men and women who 'made' Europe. Very often, as a student of European Studies myself, I have had the impression that the EU was just the sum of its institutions, and that those institutions had a logic of their own. What the section on Major Personalities shows is that there were public figures behind the institutions, and people behind the public figures. And such an approach is not only aimed at glorifying the usual suspects of European integration. Desmon Dinan's chapter on the 'non performers' Malfatti, Thorn and Santer, (disappointing presidents of the European Commission), and the 'problematic partners' De Gaulle and Thatcher, reminds us that European Integration has not always been the subject on uncritical agreement between leaders.

Given the current situation in Europe, the chapter titled 'Political Concerns' is perhaps the most interesting. Predictably, some classic problems of the EU are explored, such as the ways in which the EU legitimizes itself. Vivien Schmidt thus concludes that the quality of democracy in the EU is 'both worse than it seems to some but better than it appears to others' (p672). Adrienne Héritier considers issues of transparency and effectiveness of the policy-making processes, and helpfully recommends ways to improve them. Klaus Goetz considers that both legitimacy and effectiveness can be positively affected by a more efficient use of institutionalised political time. Sara Hobolt, Erik Jones and Joxerramon Bengoetxea look at the EU from the citizens' perspective. They consider respectively the causes and effects of public opinion, identity issues and rights bestowed by EU law. While all these articles are interconnected as they explain political concerns in terms of the relations between policy makers and citizens, it is less clear how they tie in with the remaining articles of the chapter, dedicated to regional and supranational integration. These would have probably found a better place in the last chapter of the *Handbook*, which is dedicated to the EU and its Member States.

The 60+ contributors to the *Handbook* are renowned specialists in their fields, coming mainly from academia but also include the Secretary General of the Office of the Ombudsman. In light of this, the volume could have benefited from including more practitioners, to make some of the parts on policy making process more concrete. However, the choice of academics is in line with the intent of the book, which is to provide a survey of the scholarly endeavours that have tried to explain the 'unidentified political object' that is the EU. In fact, the authors present each issue through an argument of their own, which turns the volume into far more than a neutral textbook. While this collection of different positions might be slightly unsettling as each article becomes a universe of its own (with its own scholarship tradition behind it) and this might be detrimental to the flowing of the book as a whole, it also gives a more poignant and sharp edge to it which makes it a more entertaining read.

Many similar works are presented as a 'must have', 'one stop shop', 'essential reading' and so on. *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union* manages to be all of those, without becoming too abstruse thanks to an accessible style and clarity of presentation. In a time when the European Union is becoming increasingly present- or at least increasingly visible – in the lives of Europeans, it is crucial that some of the common misunderstanding concerning the functioning and history of the EU are dispelled. The Handbook can help the educated reader to achieve clarity by providing a very complete overview of what the European Union is and how it works. Of course, such an extremely comprehensive 800-page volume can be daunting as a first read for non-specialists, but the Handbook can be an interesting and informative read for them too.

Giulia Pastorella graduated in 2011 with a Double MSc in European Affairs from the Institut d'Etudes Politiques (Sciences Po – Paris) and the London School of Economics, winning the LSE European Institute Leonard Woolf prize for Best Dissertation and LSE European Institute Michael Oakeshott prize for Best Overall Performance. Giulia is currently a PhD student at the LSE European Institute and a part-time teaching fellow at Sciences Po. She is a Research Officer at the LSE European Institute, working on a book on national stereotypes. [Read more reviews by Giulia.](#)