

## **REVIEW: NETWORKING EUROPE**

*Elizabeth Holt*

Eberhard Bort and Neil Evans (eds.), **Networking Europe: Essays on Regionalism and Social Democracy**, Liverpool University Press, 2000, £17.50, ISBN 0-85323-941-X

During the 1990s a series of annual seminars took place in Freudenstadt, subsidised by the German Social Democratic Party's generously endowed Friedrich-Ebert Foundation. The 26 papers collected here are a selection of the work presented to the seminar, ranging from general surveys of the future of the Union, through gender politics, to racism, cultural tourism and the new politics of devolution in the UK. This is an avowedly eclectic approach. It asks historians and political scientists to reflect on any or all aspects of regional structures which interest them. In the light of the debate which is now beginning to surface on the role of regions as a – if not the – constitutional element of the EU, this could look like a missed opportunity. But the Freudenstadt academics are to be forgiven. For most of the 1990s, the idea of a Europe of the regions carried little weight. We know, in the wake of last December's Nice Summit, that times have changed. Regions are refusing to lie back and think of Europe, even if Member State governments, keen to keep them in the constitutional equivalent of the missionary position, would prefer it that way. Post-Nice regions are starting to sound more and more like Peter Finch in the film *Network*: 'We're mad as hell and we're not taking it anymore.'

In this collection, 'Europe' is by no means the whole of the EU. The debate restricts itself essentially to Germany, Ireland and the UK. As we might expect, it puts strong emphasis on the new politics of devolution in the UK and its economic and cultural implications. The 'regions' discussed here turn out to be the 'nations' of Wales and Scotland and the historic 'province' of Ulster. Given the importance of the EU Structural Funds in all three areas, it

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would have been useful to find more discussion of the interplay between regional public policy on, for example, employment and the views of those shaping regional policies in Brussels and Strasbourg. Jacques Delors's vision in the early 1990s of the power, prosperity and influence that would be unleashed for Europe once it successfully combined economic growth, job creation and social solidarity seems not to have attracted the attention of Team Freudensadt. The tensions between northern and Mediterranean Europe, so characteristic of the period covered by this work, are similarly not explored. The lack of an index is a serious omission. It makes it hard to follow themes and issues across different contributions, although the editors have provided an analytical introduction. This is helpful and cannot have been an easy task. Yet like most introductions to such books it sets out the different problems rather than advancing broad explanatory propositions.

Much of the book is about aspects of 'Celtic nationalism' and the European Union – this could have been the title – with a comparison provided by some useful pieces on regional policy within the German federal structure. It suggests, probably rightly, that Europe's 'big idea' is that there is no 'big idea'. What distinguishes Europe is its astonishing diversity in cultural and political terms. Despite the increasing inter-penetration of markets and the free movement of labour, European regions remain deeply provincial, shaped by their particular traditions and circumstances, with little knowledge at the periphery of the centre. Regions remain intensely absorbed in their own identities and nowhere more so than in the UK, where the regional and the national are so historically confused, if not divided. The danger of this strong inward-looking tendency is that at its worst it descends into bitter feuding. 'We still absolutely hate each other. We are in spectacular blind hatred', as the playwright Frank McGuinness remarks of Ulster in Bort's essay on the power-sharing process. The thought that a new 'Europe of the Regions' could create community solidarity by social investment and an alternative political focus remains a pious dream in such a violent and atavistic political culture.

But the UK is nothing if not varied. Turning to Scotland, the post-devolution ideal of a new strand of social welfare politics, in which economic growth and social justice both matter, looks very familiar to EU policy-makers. It's an ideal which is looking more feasible by the day and not just in Scotland. Before the single currency lobby adopted it for north of the border, 'Scotland in Europe' was a slogan of the SNP. The European Committee of the Scottish Parliament is keen to make its presence felt as a new element in the equation. As Surridge, Paterson and Brown show clearly, the constitutional issue of

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devolution was inextricably linked to the more radical social agenda of the Scots pitted against the 'middle England' policies of Thatcher and Major. The European 'social market' model, in which 'regions' play a greater role than central government would have allowed in the past, was obviously attractive in Scotland. For the most part, however, such issues are peripheral to the collection, which does not really explore the potential of the regions to loosen control by their national governments through closer links to Europe.

The first section of the book takes a broad view of pan-European developments and includes some well-known figures. Neil Ascherson brings a welcome interest in the new states of central and eastern Europe and the remarkable role of the Poles in generating new cross-border markets. Tom Nairn, in a characteristically waspish and acute piece, looks at the 'micro states' like Monaco, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and Andorra, noting their continued vitality as tax havens and wondering how this fits in with a wider European fiscal uniformity.

The second section of book is on the role of gender within regional Europe and is largely self-contained. Clearly there is much that can be done in this area at the regional level. Beate Weber shows what is possible when a committed local politician uses regional funding and power to look at inequalities in areas such as transport whilst Gotlind Braun looks at the realities of life for the female German pensioner (still far from comfortable but better than the UK). From this we move on to Irish female migration and so forth. Interesting though these individual contributions may be, the logic is clear. The organisers of the Freudenstadt seminars have their own academic version of 'networking Europe' which is to assemble lots of different people together who have lots of different ideas and priorities. This has its value but the danger is that the reader is left not really knowing where to go or what to think.

More could have been made of the congruence between Europe and the regions in terms of 'bringing government closer to the people'. The European Union remains profoundly concerned about its perceived isolation from its citizens and voters, a concern that becomes more acute as time passes. The riots at Gothenburg in June and the 'no' vote in the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty are concentrating European minds wonderfully. President Prodi's new White Paper on EU governance, published in July 2001, reflects the worry and bafflement that assail any European leader. No, make that any leader, for the sense of popular disengagement and disillusionment with

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politicians is just as evident in national elections. All leaders ask the same questions. Why won't they trust us? Why don't they even like us anymore?

Regional government prides itself on being closer to the people than national government. Regions have an opportunity to promote distinctive policies in such areas as transport, employment, urban and rural development and tourism by working more closely with Brussels and by learning from each other. Here, David McCrone's 'Imagining Scotland' is a substantial contribution. Nation states will inevitably stress the inter-governmental dimension of European institutions and are increasingly doing so. Regional policy offers the possibility of much more fruitful levels of co-operation. It can deliver the practical impact which empowers smaller units – be they historic German regions or cultural nations such as Wales or Scotland. This collection really does show how wrong Margaret Thatcher was about the Germans in the EU. It reveals the scale of what we can learn from the longer established German experience of 'devolution'. But then, she was wrong about devolution too.

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