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The European Union: A Critical Guide by Steven P. McGiffen **Tridip Bardalai**

European Union as well as the process of its establishment, its institutions, working procedure etc. and so on has been of great academic as well as research interest for scholars all over the world. The book which has been reviewed is the book written by Steven P. McGiffen, titled “The European Union: A Critical Guide”. The book was first published in the year 2001 and then the author came up with an updated edition in the year 2005. McGiffen mentioned in the preface as well as in the concluding chapter of the book about his two-fold ambitions behind the writing of this book: the first one to provide a basic guide about how EU function and other one being, to give a critical perspective of the EU as a whole. McGiffen wanted to provide the reader a book which is a blend of both basic guide and a critical study. In his own words, “*In The European Union: A Critical Guide, I have attempted to combine the two, giving as straightforward an account as possible of the sometimes labyrinthine bureaucracy, the treaties and the economic imperatives by which the Union is governed, before tackling questions such as the dilution of democracy or the influence of big corporations*” (p.xiv).

The author divided the whole book in seventeen chapters excluding the concluding part. The chapters almost cover all the possible areas for discussion (for basic knowledge) on EU ranging from treaties, EU Institutions, law making procedures, policy areas such as environment, monetary policy etc. and so on. The first few chapters i.e. from chapter two to chapter five deals with topics like the treaties of European Union, the Institutions, how EU makes law and enlargement. In the second chapter, he starts with a brief introductory note of the Treaty of Rome and Single European Act (1987), then went on discuss about all the important treaties like Maastricht treaty, Amsterdam treaty and Nice Treaty. In the third chapter he talked about the EU Institutions then followed by how EU make laws and the Enlargement process of EU in the fourth and fifth chapter respectively. While discussing the enlargement he gave emphasis on the EU East-Ward expansion in 2004 mainly. The following chapters i.e. from the fifth to the sixteenth one, dealt with mainly technical matters such as EU’s policies regarding core issue areas.

In this book, McGiffen has levelled serious criticisms on the European Union. He has criticised almost every aspect of the European Union. One of the most serious criticisms that have been levelled by the author against the European Union is the lack of democracy in the whole set-up of European Union and it creates hindrances in the path of real cooperation in Europe. He argued that the EU provides safe haven for MNC’s and tries to provide a ground for the flourishing of capitalism. For him, the whole setup of EU is based on neo-liberal principles. Even the institutions of EU are undemocratic in nature according to the author. In

his own words, “its institutions and their basis in the Treaty of Rome and its amending treaties, remove power ever further from the people. The policies pursued by member state governments are increasingly constrained by EU rules which oblige them to impose ‘free market’ logic on ever-broader areas of the economy. Decisions are taken by remote institutions – the European Central Bank, the European Commission, the Court of Justice – which are unelected and, with the partial exception of the Commission, not answerable to anyone who is elected. This means that the ballot box no longer offers a way to bring about any fundamental change in the direction of policy. The Council of Ministers, which at least represents elected governments, meets behind closed doors and has the power, in more and more instances, to impose policies on peoples whose parliaments have never been given the chance to approve or disapprove them. The European Parliament is so remote an institution that a majority of the EU electorate does not bother to exercise its right to vote in elections to it” (p.182). Moreover, for the author, the very motive of creation of a European Union in the initial phase was mainly to create a safe haven for capitalism to grow in Western Europe. Though there were motives yet it was predominantly to create space for capitalism to grow. He states, “in the main, however, the Treaty of Rome set out to make western Europe safe for capitalism, and in particular for the biggest corporations, which wanted a domestic market comparable to that available to their American rivals” (p.180). Apart from these criticisms, there are also many criticisms like the development of big states at the expense of small states, the flaws in the charter of human rights etc and so on. Out and out, the author tried to portray a negative picture of the EU through his book.

McGiffen, as mentioned earlier, wrote the book with two ambitions in mind i.e. to provide a basic guide about how EU functions and to provide a critical work on EU. But he end up without doing full justice to any of his ambitions. McGiffen could neither provide a best basic guide nor was he successful in providing a critical work in EU. Moreover, McGiffen worked as a member of Dutch political party representing the Union Left group in European Parliament for 18 years which also increased the expectations from him of a good work on European Union as he was fully aware of everything both inside and outside of EU. But the author failed to live up to the expectations that one could have imagined. Regarding his first expectation of providing a basic guide the author was patchy. Though he mentioned in the preface that generally a critical guide don’t provide basic guide on any subject yet he tried to do that which is appreciable but still he could have structured his book in a better way. For e.g. he directly starts his book discussing the treaties behind the creation of European Union but he could have devoted a chapter on the reason behind the creation of European union, the external and internal factors responsible for the establishment of EU, important personalities who made the creation of EU possible etc. and so on. One of the reasons why this chapter was necessary because the author himself questioned the very reasons behind the creation of EU in his last chapter where he did mentioned about certain reasons behind the creation and questioned them. So he could have an illustrating chapter on it in the beginning of his book. Moreover, this could have made his book much more appealing to the readers. Regarding his second ambitions from his book, it can be said at once that he was over critical of everything and at times ill-informed also. He termed the EU as undemocratic in nature and obstacle to real-cooperation. But it is not true fully. For supporting his criticism of EU as undemocratic he gave the example of low turnout of voters in EU elections specially the EU parliament election. But the low turnout of voters in elections cannot provide a basis for criticism of any system. Though he had also mentioned about other reasons also behind his criticism against EU as undemocratic but those reason also cannot fully support his argument either. Moreover, while discussing about “The Enlargement” of EU where mainly focussed on the EU’s Eastward expansion he argued that the EU “compelled” the east European countries to join EU. This argument is very doubtful. Moreover, he just had a mention about the Turkey

case but did not illustrate it. In today's time people did criticise EU on the ground of Turkey case. The author could have a critical analysis of this issue in that chapter as he wanted to give the readers a "critical guide" on EU. But he skipped it and this can be an indication of his "biasness".

It would be wrong to term the book as useless. Many of the criticisms that the author had levelled against the EU are based on valid reason also. The author has raised question on the utility of EU's Common Agriculture Policy, Common Fishery Policy, Monetary policy etc and so on. Those criticisms are valid in today's time also as critics do criticise EU mainly on those ground also. The EU had to suffer a lot and still suffering because of many blunder with its monetary policies. As the author indicated through some of his chapters about the "Double-Standard" of EU policies regarding various issues like environmental issues, giving aid to developing countries, human rights issues etc and so on are valid in many senses. However, these positives cannot be used to overlook the negative as well as ill-informed presentations of criticisms by the author in the book. The author as mentioned earlier was over critical and was also one-dimensional at times.

To end on a positive note, one of the best parts of this book is that it is written in very simple language and easy to follow. Moreover, the summarising boxes in certain chapters, the index and the references that the author has mentioned in the book are useful. Especially the reference section of the book can help one who is having an interest in knowing about EU more, immensely. Though overcritical and at times ill informed, still this book can give the readers a different taste of literature on EU.