

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe

Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann

Podcast Contribution, Author: Stefan Bongers

Novel: Robert Menasse: *Die Hauptstadt*. [Translation by Jamie Bulloch]. Berlin, Suhrkamp 2017.

Great Britain and the EU from a European Perspective –

Robert Menasse's Novel *Die Hauptstadt*

Author:

Robert Menasse's *Die Hauptstadt* — *The Capital* — which won the German Book Prize in 2017, is a major novel about the European Union. Events, fittingly set for the most part in Brussels, revolve around an ill-fated jubilee project. A Public Relations campaign has been set up to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the European Commission, designed to increase the reputation of this institution with the public. Significantly, in this context, the jubilee is in fact the brainchild of a British official, Mrs Atkinson, newly appointed director-general of the directorate General Communication of the European Commission. Atkinson studied marketing and management at the European Business School in London and got her position because of the female quota:

Speaker:

“She herself had benefited from the policy, and – as she said – she could openly admit this without putting in question her qualification for the job.”

Author:

Atkinson was preferred over her British rival, George Morland, who is unable to cope with the fact that a woman got the position he was aiming for. He tells everybody that Atkinson is the perfect example for the idiocy of the quota and that she

Speaker:

“ (...) was such a cold woman that she suffered from freezing hands, which was why she always sat at her desk wearing an enormous muff. Women, eh?”

Author:

Atkinson in turn takes this as an example for the

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Speaker:

“typical upper-class British male horror of the vagina.”

Author:

Amusingly, Morland studied at Oxford, where he joined a club which required him to place his penis in a dead pig’s mouth. This of course recalls the former British Prime Minister David Cameron’s alleged similar experience in his university days. The conflict between Atkinson and Morland suggests a kind of British ventriloquism, since they appear locked within a gender- and class-driven conflict with each other that absorbs them more than the relationships with other European officials.

Morland works in the directorate General Agriculture. While not a passionate defender of the European idea, Morland’s personal and national interests mesh quite well with the European Commission’s goals in agriculture. His family’s status and his general snobbishness allow him to stand up to lobbyists and to support small-scale farming, which he already knows from the

Speaker:

“(…) considerable landholding in the East Riding of Yorkshire”

Author:

His successful career in Brussels compensates for his lack of success and popularity back in England, and his general blandness and blinkered attitude is epitomized by the notion that

Speaker:

“The only monoculture he found acceptable was the golf course.”

Author:

However, both Morland’s time in Brussels and Great Britain’s time in the European Union are running out. Brexit, changes Morland’s view completely as he decides on a

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policy of maximum obstruction. Ironically, this leads him to sabotage his British colleague's jubilee project:

Speaker:

"It would be good if the Commission's image was poor. For Britain."

Author:

It is tempting to read this as a comment on the general behaviour of Britain in the European Union. If anything, the British are seen as even more self-serving and navel-gazing than the other members.

So what kind of imagined British discourse of Europe runs through the novel, embodied by Atkinson and Morland? In fact, two different discourses of Europe can be identified: A committed, pro-European and London-educated discourse embodied by Atkinson clashes with a highly ambivalent approach to Europe, represented by the elitist Oxbridge alumnus Morland. His ostensible embrace of the EU, pragmatic, to put it mildly, is extremely fickle and, at the slightest offense, turns sour with astonishing destructive force. Menasse thus describes two separate British attitudes to Europe that appear to chime with the Brexit debate in a deeply divided nation.

Known as an advocate of a reformed European Union, Menasse's sympathies appear to be clearly on the side of commitment. As the German character Kai Uwe Frigge states:

Speaker:

"With E.U. money they restored Manchester, which had fallen into total disrepair, but rather than express their gratitude they see the now spruced-up façades of the city as proof that Manchester capitalism will forever vanquish all competitors."

Author:

The deep hurt caused by the UK's rejection of Europe can be felt in these lines.