political, financial or industrial “systems”—
to borrow a word from Bryson—rather than
with images of individual human subjects is
the corollary of a culture in which each of
us “shares” her private mementos with hun-
dreds of “friends,” and “friends of friends,”
and even that capacious Facebook gang,
“everyone.” Imagining how our lives appear
from the vantage point of some vaguely
benevolent, impersonal system—and photo-
graphing them accordingly—is getting to be
second nature for many of us. Is it the task
of art or of documentary to make photographs
reflecting on this situation?

Meanwhile, the desire to be a member
in good standing of either the art or docu-
mentary school—and to keep them neatly
segregated—seems to be what fuels Morris’s
inquiries, just as it did the declarations of
the documentary photographers in Dumbo
last summer. Much as he and they think of
themselves as iconoclasts, they’ve actually
accepted the old bifurcation in the history
of the medium: if you’re claiming to show
something of “reality,” you don’t get to
call yourself an artist. The photographers
in Dumbo thought they had solved this
problem by renouncing reality; Morris’s so-
lution has been to fight for every inch of it.
There’s no hint in Believing Is Seeing that
the boundaries of these two old fiefdoms might
be eroding.

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Zoned
by HENRY FARRELL

European integration is boring, even
when it is exciting. Over the past eigh-
ten months, crisis has piled upon
in the European Union’s single-
currency area, the so-called eurozone.
The European project of creating an ever
closer union among its member states may be
about to crash, crippling America’s economy
as well as Europe’s. The Washington Post’s
Ezra Klein has argued that Europe’s decisions
over the coming weeks will probably deter-
mine President Obama’s re-election chances.
Even so, it is hard to read about EU politics
without wanting to fall asleep.

One of the many virtues of David Mar-
quand’s The End of the West, a book that
carefully documents the gap between the
EU’s ambitions and its achievements, is that
it explains exactly why EU politics are so
tedious. Dullness sometimes has political uses.
This is not an insight unique to European
bureaucrats—Keynes thought in the 1940s
that the International Monetary Fund and
the World Bank would be shielded from
public criticism because they tackled such
“boring” subjects. But Europeans have taken
boredom to an extraordinary extreme.

Over the past several decades, appoint-
tees and anonymous technocrats have made
decisions that have reconfigured European
markets and upended European politics.
These decisions were made through pro-
cedures such as “comitology” and “codeci-
sion” that are completely opaque to ordinary

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The End of the West
The Once and Future Europe.
By David Marquand.
Princeton. 204 pp. $24.95.

Europeans. They result in rules such as
the Regulation on Registration, Evaluation,
Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals,
with names that ooze tedium but carry wide-
reaching consequences. For example, the
regulation on chemicals requires improved
testing procedures that will cost US firms
billions of dollars. A more recent EU techni-
cal directive requires all airlines flying into
the EU to reduce emissions that may lead to
global warming, changing the international
regulatory debate at one stroke.

European voters pay little attention to
these regulations, even if they sometimes
have important effects. Decisions cloaked
in technicality are hard to understand.
What is hard to understand is boring, and what is
boring does not get sustained political atten-
tion. Hence, Europe has been transformed
by processes that are incomprehensible to all
except a tiny coterie of insiders and experts.

It is tempting to see the procedures of
the EU as a long-term conspiracy to bore
the public into submission. The truth is
more mundane. Europe’s leaders fell into
technocracy by accident rather than design.
As Marquand discusses, the founders of the
EU’s ancestor-organization, the European
Economic Community, had been scarred
by World War II, and had strong and im-
mediate reasons to prefer integration over a
resurgence of revanchist nationalism. They
built institutions from above to modernize
the European economy and foster closer
relations among its members. As integra-
tion normalized relations among states, mak-
ing war inconceivable, the sense of urgency
gradually leaked away, and concerns about
integration that were nontechnical were
postponed. Incomprehensible bargains on
technical-seeing issues became the default
mode of EU policy-making.

Marquand shows how this was reinforced
by European integration’s beginnings in
technical-issue areas (such as agricultural
subsidies and the removal of trade barriers).
Disputes over these issues did not arouse the
deeper passions of most citizens, and were
usually resolved by complicated trade-offs
and side deals. This zeal for kludges extends
beyond regulation. Most notoriously, the
European Parliament moves back and forth
between Brussels in Belgium and Strasbourg
in northern France, while its secretariat re-
sides in Luxembourg. This arrangement is
ugly, cumbersome and extremely expensive,
but it is the product of complicated bargains
that cannot be unraveled.

Over time, Eurocrats found that technoc-
racy had its advantages. It allowed the
EU institutions gradually to increase
their influence, policy area by policy
area, without much public attention
and even less public accountability. Marquand
felicitously compares this process to a gradu-
ally expanding inkblot. It was amorphous and
unlovely, and it never stopped spreading.

Citizens did not understand the inkblot,
but in most countries they were prepared to
absorb it. When their politicians told them
that European integration was a good thing,
they believed them. Those politicians did not
always understand the EU much better (ex-
cept when they were trying to extract money
from it or prevent it from extracting money
from them). But they, too, were prepared to
sign on. Being publicly anti-European was
not as damaging to a politician’s reputation
as being publicly anti-Semitic, or hostile to
motherhood, but it was disreputable none-
thelss and mostly confined to the left and
right fringes. The center-left and center-
right were nearly unanimous in their sup-
port for Europe, but when politicians were
pressed to explain why they supported the
EU, they found it hard going.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s
the EU phlegmatically marched on through
crisis that would have sunk a traditional in-
ternational organization. In A Grand Illusion: 
An Essay on Europe, published in 1996, the
historian Tony Judt feared that the EU would
fail the test of bringing in the countries of
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Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the cold war. He was wrong—all these nations joined despite subdued grumbles from France and a few other member states. The reunification of Germany caused new stresses (some feared that it would lead to a huge imbalance of power within Europe), but it was again accommodated through institutional changes.

Indeed, these challenges seemed to give new energy and purpose to the EU. Two treaties—the Maastricht Treaty and the Treaty of Amsterdam—laid out ambitious goals for the EU: more powers for the European Parliament, a common foreign policy and, most important, an “economic and monetary union” to be based around a single European currency. However, it was swiftly abandoned in favor of more dollops of incomprehensible verbiage. Proposals for genuine public input turned into public showcases and publicity events that were contrived to provide a spurious patina of legitimacy for the treaty.

In 2005 the Constitutional Treaty was rejected by majorities of voters in France and the Netherlands. The member states summarily abandoned it in favor of the Lisbon Treaty, which repackaged most of the Constitutional Treaty’s proposals in even more technocratic terms. This treaty, too, was initially rejected by Ireland’s voters (Ireland, uniquely among EU member states, requires that major treaties be approved by referendum).

Marquand suggests that Ireland’s voters had realized it was time to “humble their overwhelm- ingly Europhile elite and rein in the Union structures in which it was enmeshed.” But survey evidence suggests that Ireland’s voters were unwilling to sign on to proposals that they did not understand and that politicians were incapable of explaining to them. When Ireland’s prime minister admitted he had not read through the treaty that he was asking people to vote for, those voters were not surprisingly nonplussed. Although Ireland eventually voted through Lisbon in a second referendum, the failure to convince the Irish public, just like the failure to con- vince the French and Dutch publics of the ad- vantages of the Constitutional Treaty, pointed again to Europe’s political problems. When national politicians were asked to explain why citizens should support Europe, they de- scended either into platitudes or technocratic gobbledygook, while strenuously avoiding asking the public what it actually wanted, for fear that it would give the wrong answer.

As Marquand observes, most politicians who moved to the EU’s headquarters in Brussels were corridor politicians, more ac- customed to making deals with their counter- parts and with sophisticated interest groups than with the broad public. EU politics became corridor politics, structured around back-room agreements and the gradual and inexorable expansion of technocratic power, rather than any real concern with public legitimacy. This created a vicious spiral—as the EU became ever more technocratic, it became ever more alien to the public, making engagement with citizens even less likely. Even the proposed solutions to Eu- rope’s disengagement were technocratic. Europe’s leaders tried to address worries about the EU’s lack of democracy by giving the European Parliament complex powers over regulatory issues that few voters under- stood or cared about.

Marquand argues that the euro was the last great triumph of this style of policy- making. It is unlikely that Europe’s citizens would have voted for it, if they had been given the chance. Two-thirds of German citizens opposed the creation of the eurozone, while French voters blamed the euro for rising un- employment. The euro itself was an un- again compromise between German politicians’ demands for a monetary regime that would replicate Germany’s anti-inflationary biases, and French politicians’ desire to encourage economic growth. The resulting “Economic and Monetary Union” was all about mon- etary union, and had remarkably little to say about the economic coordination that was needed to underpin it. What discussion there was focused on the Stability and Growth Pact, which set constraints on each member state’s fiscal policy, namely not allowing na- tional deficits to exceed 60 percent of GDP and holding budget deficits to no more than 3 percent of the same, purportedly avoiding moral hazard. But the pact was jettisoned by Germany and France when it proved incon- venient to their domestic political dynamics and economic needs.

What is remarkable is that the euro has lasted in its current form for nearly a decade.

at this point that the traditional European model of integration started to reach its limits. Maastricht and Amsterdam were ambitious, but they were also fudges, ambiguous compromises reached late at night by politi- cians who often did not understand exactly what they were agreeing to, and repackaged in clauses, subclauses, sub-subclauses and addendums—by-reference to earlier texts, a warren of nested qualifications that only a lawyer could love. To progress, the EU had to become a genuinely political entity, one whose accountability would be grounded in democratic engagement with a broader pub- lic. But the only tools that it had to construct this polity were technocratic ones, which had all along neglected constitutional concerns. The EU has been trying to deal with this mismatch between tools and aims ever since, and failing. It has suffered from an acute case of political myopia.

As EU integration became ever more obviously political, Europe’s citizens became ever more uncertain that they wanted more of it. Maastricht and Amsterdam were followed by the narrow and technical Treaty of Nice, which changed voting structures to reflect the addition of member states. This treaty was initially rejected by Irish voters in a public referendum (they later had to arrange a do-over). It was followed by a proposed Constitutional Treaty, which was supposed to provide the EU with a legal identity of its own, but which failed. Initial promises to provide a clearly written constitution that citizens could understand and embrace were

What is remarkable in retrospect is that the euro has lasted in its current form for nearly a decade. It was a confidence bubble, which could sur- vive only as long as no one prodded it very hard. In order to reassure markets that monetary union was irreversible, European leaders refused to create any way for coun- tries to withdraw from the euro. There was no bailout mechanism that could help states in trouble, for fear that this would create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, the European Central Bank was forbidden from buying government debt or acting as a lender of last resort like the US Federal Reserve. European leaders’ approach to crisis prevention was to pretend that a crisis could not happen, and ostentatiously to forswear crisis management tools in order to make the pretense real.

This worked for several years. Markets ignored the euro’s political ambiguities, be- lieving instead that the richer members of the euro would support the poorer ones in hard times. The interest rates that different euro members had to pay to borrow money con- verged, so that profligate Greece had to pay only slightly more than tightfisted Germany to raise money on international markets.

Once the eurozone started to get into trouble in early 2010, the confidence bubble
rapidly deflated. It had already become clear in October 2009 that the Greek government had lied about the size of its deficit, and would have great difficulty paying back bondholders. However, markets expected Germany to bail Greece out, and the German government initially made soothing noises, hoping that if it seemed willing to support Greece, markets would calm down, and it would not have to deliver.

Unfortunately, it soon became clear that Greece’s problems were not going to go away. Germany was more willing to hand over vague reassurances than hard cash. German taxpayers, who had endured a decade of meager wage growth and had never much liked the euro in the first place, resented having to pay taxes to bail Greece out. When they were finally dragged to the negotiating table, Germany and its allies imposed high interest rates on their loans to the Greek government, and demanded that Greece reform its economy and impose harsh austerity measures on its citizens.

To prevent the problem from spreading further, Germany and the other member states, with the help of the IMF, also created a €750 billion bailout fund in May 2010. When it became clear that Ireland and Portugal were in economic difficulties, they were in effect forced to borrow money from this fund, and to impose their own austerity budgets. Germany and other northern member states wanted to impose conditions that were as harsh as possible, so as to reassure their citizens that money was not being wasted, and to prevent weaker member states from applying for bailouts in the future unless they had no other option.

None of this has worked as the big member states hoped. Instead, the eurozone has been racked by continual crises. Each new policy measure proposed to solve the problem has failed within weeks or months. This summer, a second Greek crisis provoked the member states to inject more money and demand that Greek bondholders accept a 20 percent haircut on the money that they were owed. This, too, turned out to be insufficient. Not surprisingly, it turns out that harsh austerity budgets hurt economic growth. Projections suggested that Greece would reach a debt level of 186 percent of GDP in 2013, tapering off to a still-un sustainable level of 152 percent by 2020. This prompted another eleventh-hour deal in late October, under which bondholders would have to accept a haircut of 50 percent of the value of their bonds, in exchange for 30 billion of “credit enhancements.” The bailout fund would be leveraged by a factor
of four or five to increase its clout.

As with past initiatives, markets reacted positively at first, only to turn sour when analysts began to work through the implications. This most recent proposal could perhaps have served as a palliative, but it could never have solved the fundamental problems of the eurozone, which are political, not technical. Without fundamental political changes, these problems are likely to occur again, and again, and again. And indeed, politics have come back with a vengeance. When George Papandreou, the prime minister of Greece, feared that the fallout from the deal would be unsustainable, he tried to call a referendum. Opposition from within his own party, and from other European leaders, led to the referendum’s swift cancellation. Papandreou was forced to resign in favor of a former vice president of the European Central Bank. Silvio Berlusconi, Italy’s discredited and disastrous prime minister, has also been forced to resign in favor of a temporary technocratic government, to be led by Mario Monti, a former European Commissioner. Elected government is temporarily giving way to government by quasi-viceroys, whose main qualification is their technocratic competence and acceptability to the EU’s institutions and larger member states.

The End of the West was written before the deficit crisis. Nonetheless, it provides a crisp and relevant analysis of the difficult choices that Europe faces. As Marquand says, the current crisis involves the “revenge of politics over economism.” Europe is caught in a “no-man’s-land between federalism and confederalism—and between democracy and technocracy.” Because they could not get the politics right, European leaders left the politics out, hoping that the usual gradual accretion of policymaking authority would provide an acceptable substitute.

This was a grievous mistake. Yet the EU’s efforts to fix it have been as riddled with hedges as was the original arrangement for economic and monetary union. Europe’s richer states want the deficit problem to go away, but they are not ready to make the necessary fundamental political commitments. They have tried to obscure this lack of commitment in various ways, but the illusion is wearing thin.

More hedging will not work. Markets need the certainty of politically credible guarantees if they are to be genuinely reassured. Politically credible guarantees require that European governments come clean with their citizens about the need for new arrangements. Marquand makes it clear that Europe cannot survive for very long in an ambiguous zone where it is being shelled from all sides. The EU either needs to move backward, trying as best as it can to unravel the weave of intertwining commitments that it has created around the eurozone, or forward, toward a truly federal Europe.

While moving forward is immensely difficult, moving backward could be an unmitigated disaster. It would threaten to precipitate a sovereign debt crisis, starting with Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain and Italy, then afflicting France and other wealthier states. This crisis could, in turn, spark a worldwide economic conflagration that would dwarf the Great Recession of 2008–09. Back then, sovereign states were able to bolster demand and support shaky financial institutions. Now the credibility of states themselves would be under attack, and it is difficult to see who could succor them.

The economics of moving forward are relatively straightforward. In the short run, Europe needs to recapitalize its banks and get rid of the European Central Bank’s monomaniacal obsession with price stability at the cost of financial stability. In the longer run, it needs genuine fiscal federalism and an institutional framework that allows detailed budgetary supervision and prevents member states from deficit spending when times are good, while allowing it when times are bad. It is the politics that are hard. The long-term reforms would require treaty changes at a time when the European Union is highly unpopular. Citizens of the stronger member states see it as a money sump, siphoning away their savings and pouring them into the pockets of profligates and ne’er-do-wells. Citizens of the poorer states see the EU as the iron boot heel of austerity politics, grinding their face into the dust for the sake of abstract principle. More European integration is a tough ask.

Here, Marquand rightly emphasizes that institutional change has to go together with real, Europe-level democratic reforms. These reforms would not eliminate national politics, but they would superimpose a new layer of politics above it, which would involve far less bargaining between member states and much more direct representation of the interests of European citizens, through a directly elected European president and a European Parliament with proper budgetary powers and the ability to call unelected officials to account. This would provide the accountability that European technocracy has sedulously avoided. As Marquand says, European citizens need to be able to “throw the rascals out.”

These reforms, together with honest discussion of the likely consequences of a collapse of the eurozone, might persuade citizens to adopt a stronger Europe. They would at least promise citizens a real voice over future economic decisions, and regain control over areas that have been lost to the Eurocrats. Finally, they would reassure markets that politicians’ guarantees of mutual assistance were credible because they would be backed up by the assent of the publics who had elected them. Accountability can have economic as well as political benefits.

Such far-reaching changes would not be easy, but even as they scrounge for a short-term solution, some European leaders are trying to map out a path toward them. Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany’s finance minister, and Alain Juppé, France’s foreign affairs minister, have recently floated the idea of a stronger and more federal Europe. Marquand identifies Germany’s Constitutional Court, which has been skeptical of the EU in the past, as a force blocking the development of EU-level democracy. Yet the court may be beginning slowly to qualify its position—its president, Andreas Vosskuhl, emphasizes the need for public debate over Europe and has suggested that a German national referendum might pave the way for a European democratic constitutional order.

Europe is moving very quickly from abstract arguments over whether the public should be consulted to realizing that the public must have a say. The Greek referendum would have forced European politicians to try to convince voters that the EU is a good thing. Whether they want them or not, politicians will have other chances over the coming months. Forthcoming elections in France and Germany will likely center on EU-level issues. Greece and Italy, too, will have to hold elections. If the EU is to survive, politicians will have to acquire new skills very quickly.

Most obviously, they will have to learn how to speak clearly and plainly about Europe. They will furthermore have to learn how to listen to their citizens and change proposals in response to their demands. They will have to learn to argue with one another in public over Europe-level policies and Europe-level reforms. Such direct political contention would do far more to bring Europe home to citizens than any number of well-meaning initiatives to correct the EU’s democracy deficit. It is through arguing about politics that we learn how to participate and pay attention. For a long time, the EU has cultivated the art of being boring. It has succeeded all too well. Now it must learn how to be interesting again.