

## Collapsing Constructions: Reflections on British Exit

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We shall have to wait and see whether German ‘Europeans’ will learn anything from the outcome of the British referendum. There is not much hope of this. In their first reactions, they claimed that the land of Shakespeare and Adam Smith, Newton and Hobbes, Händel and Marx had never really belonged to Europe – unlike ourselves of course. It is obvious here to anyone not caught up in the German fog that similar votes would have had similar results in a whole series of countries: Denmark, Netherlands, Austria, Hungary and Italy, not to mention France. The European Union as we know it, the institutional framework of ‘European integration’ as Germans imagined it, is experiencing its *Götterdämmerung*. And anyone who does not believe this risks being buried by its collapsing constructions.

Will the German political class understand that it might have decisively accelerated the collapse of its Brussels cloud-cuckoo land? British public opinion followed with amazement and dread how the Merkel/Gabriel government used their ‘Europe’ to destroy the economy of Greece and humiliate the country, rescuing German and French banks in the name of rescuing Greece and the ‘European idea’. It also followed more or less closely the spectacle of Germany’s go-it-alone policy towards refugees: the opening of German and European borders to fill Germany’s demographic gap, presented in the absence of an immigration law as a humanitarian rescue operation to be undertaken by Europe ‘with no upper limit’, with fixed quotas for all member states, accompanied by moral condemnation of all whose labour market and demographic conditions were not the same – followed by a 180-degree turn which included offering the perspective of European entry to the dictatorial Erdogan, and prosecuting on the orders of the chancellor a comedian who had broadcast tasteless poems about all this on a local tv station.

It was clear enough that there was a popular instinct in Great Britain that it is better not to belong to a club in which something like this is possible. The Remain camp accordingly based its position exclusively on economics, and not on love for any kind of ‘European idea’. It is well known that British thinking inclines to empiricism, judging ‘ideas’ by how they prove themselves in real life. The fact that the Leave camp won, despite widely predicted and persistently threatened economic disadvantages, is remarkable in a world in which the only thing that counts today is supposedly economic gain – and won among the Anglo-Saxons at that. Those who refuse to be trapped by this logic are then deemed irrational, from the German point of view, if not incapable of thinking. Perhaps people are just fed up with being morally instructed by a German-led continent, for instance on the issue of the closing of the Channel Tunnel to illegal immigration?

The British, in contrast to the Germans, do not have a need for unconditional love. It is enough for them if everyone learns their language and clumsily speaks it. Other emotions and affects could therefore prevail rather than fear of a withdrawal of European love – emotions and affects that are widespread outside of Great Britain, though until recently they have remained latent here. They have been released by the idolatry of so-called globalization on the part of ‘elites’, who make the ‘openness’ of their societies to the stressful fluctuations of the world market a criterion of both economic and moral judgement. The cultural depreciation of local traditions and those who cling to them by an upper and middle stratum who view themselves as cosmopolitan, who value their country and its people according to their ‘competitiveness’, is very widespread in European societies. It is part of the economic revaluation of all values in the wake of a capitalist advance accelerated by neoliberalism. As a result of the shift of the *Zeitgeist* to the opposing camp, which has forgotten the difference between internationalism of solidarity and one of finance, those who resist this are often left with no other language at their disposal than that of the nation and its good old days. Branded as ‘populists’ who have not intellectually grasped the world’s new ‘complexity’, and semantically dismissed as ‘anti-European’, they hide away in their Gallic villages – until an election or a referendum summons them out, with the encouragement, for lack of any other, of demagogues who are often shady, as a result of which they are eloquently condemned by Schultz, Juncker and co. as dangerous backwoodsmen, or even, in the words of Sigmar Gabriel and his ilk, their former representatives, as a ‘rabble’.

With Brexit, however, they were for the first time the majority in an EU country, and this they could soon be anywhere, and not just once. At some point then even slower wits will learn that the European Union as a model of the future is now already something long past (the very slowest, the drivers of the Brussels and Frankfurt centralization machine, will never learn, but then this will no longer be necessary). Attempts at a giant state seem today a modernization project that has become unmodern, since it has proved incapable of moderating the opening up of the world in such a way as to do justice to the different local abilities, interests and needs on such a diverse continent as Europe. The end of the EU’s ‘social dimension’ in the 1990s was also the end of the EU as a body protecting its populations against neoliberal restructuring and re-education. Since

then, the EU as a prospective superstate has fallen into the hands of accelerators of neocapitalism and the German export industry – with the help of national elites, to whom it is unimportant whether Disraeli's 'one nation' becomes two nations again, so long as its own playing field expands in accordance with its ambitions. It is above all in the Mediterranean space today that the EU, in the form of a currency union, is acting as a machine for rationalization and impotence, as an instrument of levelling down by 'ordoliberal' market economics, or at least it is seeking to do so, though at present with decreasing success.

Size and diversity, and the relationship between them, are in times of globalization the most important variables in any political architecture, particularly in Europe. For the Scots – forerunners perhaps of a new modernity, as they once were in the days of the Scottish moral philosophers – Great Britain was already too large before the Brexit vote, as it refused them the freedom to find their own way in the global world. For this reason, those who want to keep the EU as it is should have no illusions about Scottish intentions; small countries, who have recently won their autonomy from a large country – the Baltic states for example – are unwilling to immediately return to the management of a still larger one. Wales, Catalonia, Corsica, the Basque country, if they should ever become independent, would join the EU above all to exercise and protect their autonomy. Now that the EU has failed as a great state in waiting, being unable to protect the interest that little people have in the political control of capitalist advance, the future may well belong to small-scale, flexible, relatively homogeneous, responsible action and freely negotiated cooperation, in political units that seek and fill niches. The smaller nation states of Europe today could give a foretaste of this, whether in the EU or not: Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, countries in which collective goods, collective identities, and collectively formed will are more concrete, perceptible and achievable than in a European superstate (and which will all continue, except the Netherlands, to have their own currency for a long time to come). Perhaps the attempt by the late prime minister of Nordrhein-Westfalen, Jürgen Rüttgers, to have his *Land* join the Benelux treaty, immediately nipped in the bud of course by Berlin, was not so confused as many people at the time made it out to be?

Is there a realistic path to a Europe of variable geometry, of self-determined and flexibly adaptive cooperation between small state units, without Schultz and Juncker as godfathers? The separation agreements to be negotiated with London could be helpful for the construction of an 'EU lite', a second, slimmed-down EU with less than full membership in the Brussels 'ever closer union' apparatus, as a platform for horizontal collaboration with equal rights via international treaties and conventions, with the subsidiarity principle taken seriously for a change, rather than being watered down by Brussels functionaries, protecting autonomy while mutually contractual (as advocated by Fritz Scharpf, *Governing in Europe*): without the European Parliament, which is no such thing, without the European Court, which freely creates and dispenses a constitutional law impossible to rectify, without non-transparent summit decisions, without open and secret policy updates by the European Central Bank. Such a framework could also be attractive for many present full members, who would demand that it should be open to receive the orderly migration of all of them, not just the British. 'Brussels' can see this, and fears it as the devil does holy water – which is why its representatives are pressing for the British departure to be sealed as rapidly as possible, leaving no time to consider an institutional framework for a second, alternative, contemporary European integration.

Will the EU, and Germany as its leading power, recognize and use the opportunities that the British decision offers for a renewal of Europe? The Brussels functionaries and their supporters in the national states, not least in conformist German opinion, want to make an example: to punish London in any case, and thereby show the Danes, Dutch, Hungarians, etc. what's what, so that they don't also get funny ideas. Above all, they want to prevent the British exit letting the debate suppressed for decades about the *finalité* of European integration – what is it really supposed to lead to? – from breaking out again. One superstate for all, one single political and economic regime from Hammerfest to Agrigento, from Cork to Turkey's eastern border, in which, as attested by proud European integrationists, 80 per cent of valid legislation is made in Brussels, and nation states must be satisfied with carefully marketing their cultural inheritance? If this overdue question is still not answered after Brexit in the way that new conditions demand, and this is what we have to fear, then an increasingly disintegrating Europe will proceed to rot. The constructions have at last begun to crumble, and if their controlled explosion is not begun soon, they will collapse and kill off Europe.