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Awkward Island (a Welsh-Eurasian Perspective on “Brexit”)

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Ahead of the British referendum on EU membership (“Brexit”) on 23rd June, I am regularly asked how I shall vote. I usually answer by quoting an English bard: “a plague on both your houses!” Like many other British citizens, I am deeply unhappy about the direction in which politicians with very little democratic legitimacy (how often have Martin Schulz and Jean-Claude Juncker been seen campaigning in Britain?) have led the European Union in recent years. The Brussels bureaucracy is monstrous. Austerity policies, imposed above all by Germany, have generated unnecessary suffering, especially among southern members. Ghosts of the Cold War have been insidiously revived in the east. NATO continues to expand (most recently with the admission of Montenegro) and military spending is rising. The European Union’s inability to deal with the “migrant problem” is the most obvious symptom of its current dysfunctionality. It is easy to condemn right-wing populist leaders in countries such as Hungary and Poland when they invoke European Christian values to justify building fences to keep out asylum-seekers. But I do not have much more sympathy with liberal elites in the “old EU” who proclaim a decent *Willkommenskultur* for refugees, while failing to address honestly the social and economic consequences of this immigration for the more vulnerable sections of their own populations. To integrate millions of newcomers is a real challenge, but the present conjuncture is undermining larger processes of integration: policies of social inclusion consolidated over generations since the Second World War. It is high time that the masks of hypocrisy were removed, above all in the migration debates.

As 23rd June approaches, the question of immigration is looming ever larger in the debates in Britain. Following the accession of most former socialist countries to the EU in 2004-2007, the relative success of the British economy under “new Labour” led to a massive influx of East Europeans. Their presence has been controversial from the beginning in the areas where they are most visible. Inevitably they come under even closer scrutiny when the economy takes a downturn. That is the logic of market economy. The government can tinker with welfare entitlements, but so long as Britain remains a member of the single market, it can do nothing

to change the ground rules that guarantee freedom of movement and the right to work.

This seems to be the crux of the matter. I am a beneficiary of this elementary freedom, since I was able, upon receiving a job offer from the Max Planck Society, to relocate from Britain to my present position in Germany with minimal bureaucratic inconvenience. Shouldn't such mobility be encouraged for everybody? But whereas I was fortunate enough to be able to make genuine choices, the options available to the vast majority of those moving to seek work in Britain or other rich countries of Northern Europe are very limited. They come, often at enormous risk, because no satisfying jobs are available to them in their homeland. (This is not to mention those fleeing oppression, also a very substantial number.)

Karl Polanyi saw labour as one of three "fictitious commodities" (the others were land and money). By fictitious he meant unnatural: something that cannot be produced for sale was being treated as just another impersonal commodity. In notes scribbled in 1937 he described the "treatment of human labour as a commodity, to be bought and sold, like cucumbers" as a "grotesque perversion of common sense" (quoted in Dale 2016: 168). This occurred for the first time in nineteenth century Britain, and it led directly to Fascism in many European countries in the first half of the twentieth century. Hardly surprising, then, that (together with other commentators) distinguished anthropologists of Europe are beginning to warn of the rise of new forms of Fascism before our eyes (Holmes 2016).

Far from constituting a credible emancipatory alternative to inward-looking nationalisms and the rise of Fascism, Europe in the guise of Brussels (not to mention the Central Bank in Frankfurt) carries the greatest responsibility for the present chaos. If (as seems likely at the time of writing) the British decide by a small majority to remain in the EU, this is not going to have the slightest impact on the neoliberal policies that have wreaked such havoc in recent decades. (Yes, I know that for many social scientists the term neoliberal has passed its sell-by date; but it is still the best term we have to characterize policies that have deeply regressive implications, both between member states and within each one of them.)

But just when I am despairing of the EU, I look at Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and the other Little Englanders urging their countrymen to vote for the "independence" of Yookay (a coinage of Raymond Williams in the days when Europe was still an attractive option for a left-leaning Welshman). Given our interconnected global political economy, could anything be more absurd than to campaign for a recovery of "sovereignty"? Could anything be more distasteful than the populist rhetoric that targets foreigners as the *causes* of Britain's decline?



The establishment had a clear line. But although the leaders of the three largest political parties, economists, scientists and artists, have all been overwhelmingly in favour of remaining within the European Union throughout the referendum campaigning, the Yookay people has decided otherwise. As an anthropologist one is tempted to rejoice in the fact that, for emotional reasons, the population has voted against its material interests. So much for rational choice theory! Anthropology is a small discipline which has traditionally sympathized with aspirations to independence and self-realisation. Such rejection of elite opinion is a rare occurrence – surely it should be heartily welcomed?

All the more so as, quite apart from populist trends within the discipline, there are compelling political and economic reasons for welcoming today's news. The situation of the EU is catastrophic, the European ideals of the 20th century have disappeared without trace. Instead Europe is governed by a neoliberal hegemony, led by Germany, whose Constitutional Court has in this very week ratified the monetary policy of Mario Draghi. For an optimist, from this angle, Brexit could lead to a complete rethinking of European institutions and a return to basic democratic principles. The resignation of David Cameron should be followed promptly by that of Draghi, along with those of Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz!

And yet I feel very uncomfortable the morning after. I have no sympathy for Cameron but the price for the victory of the anti-EU forces was very high. Anyone who has followed the popular press in Yookay in recent weeks will know what I mean. "Independence Day" was the simple headline of yesterday's *The Sun*. This newspaper's anti-foreigner prejudices have evidently had an impact everywhere, though there remains a lot of regional variety. Even in my home country of Wales (in contrast to Scotland), I must note with sadness that a majority voted "Leave". This is not really surprising. In the densely populated valleys of South Wales a largely proletarian population reads *The Sun* rather than *The Guardian* (which was almost alone throughout the campaign in offering its readers a very different perspective on the world). This was not a referendum about Welsh identity. It was a populist protest against neoliberal Europe, whipped up by journalists and politicians like Boris Johnson – a buffoon who used to amuse himself in the 1990s as a Brussels journalist with endless defamation of the EU. Such dangerous clowns are coming to power, and not only in Yookay ...