



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Beleaguered Pseudo-Continent: *Happy Birthday, Europe!*

Author: Chris Hann

March 13, 2017

From 6 to 27

The Treaty of Rome was signed by the 6 founding states of what was then known as the European Economic Community (more commonly in English “Common Market”) on 25th March, 1957. In March 2017, coinciding with the birthday celebrations, the British Prime Minister is expected to trigger the negotiations that will lead to Britain’s withdrawal from the organization it joined belatedly in 1973. The contraction is unprecedented and the future of the EU has become highly uncertain.

The process of British withdrawal will be overseen by the Pole Donald Tusk, who used to be Prime Minister in Warsaw, but moved to become President of the European Council in Brussels when it was already clear that he and his liberal, right-of-centre party would lose the next general election in Poland. On 9 March 2017 Tusk was re-appointed to his high office in Brussels, supported by 27 heads of state. But he was opposed by the present Polish Prime Minister, a national conservative who alleges that Tusk is guilty of improper meddling in Poland’s internal affairs. Beata Szydło was later rebuked by the President of France and told, in effect, that she should be grateful that the old EU member states were doing so much to develop the latecomer postsocialist states. In the background are proposals to institutionalize an EU of multiple tracks, in which present levels of redistribution to weaker members might be reduced. Szydło was unimpressed by this “blackmail”. She undoubtedly commands higher levels of public support in Poland than François Hollande does in France. What does this episode tell us about the legitimacy of EU governance on the eve of its sixtieth birthday?¹

Other members of the Visegrád Group did not support Poland on this occasion, but populist nationalism is rampant in this region, above all in Hungary. It is also making inroads in most countries of Old Europe and in Washington, where another Donald is busy undoing every modest liberal initiative of his predecessor. Meanwhile different forms of authoritarian rule are being entrenched by eastern neighbours such as Turkey and the Russian Federation. (For

these developments, as I have argued in earlier posts, the EU bears a major share of the responsibility. Fifteen years ago the new leaders in Ankara and Moscow were being applauded in the West for their democratizing intentions. That the opposite has come to pass is to a very significant degree a consequence of the irresponsible treatment meted out by Brussels, especially the Commission presided over by the international banker José Manuel Barroso between 2004 and 2014.)

Given this depressing global context, it is superficially still tempting to shout “Hurrah for the EU and European values!” But this would be to overlook myriad dysfunctionalities and hypocrisies. To begin with, the EU is far from congruent with geographical Europe. This larger Europe is better viewed as a macro-region of Eurasia. It is not a separate *continent*, the equivalent of Asia. In recent centuries western Eurasia has been much wealthier than the rest of the landmass. For this reason alone, it is understandable that EU Europe has positive connotations for most inhabitants of the rest of Europe, as well as those who live in other macro-regions of Eurasia. But can it really lay claim to superior values? Where “Europe” features prominently in the rhetoric of politicians, this is usually a scam of the first order. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán claims to be defending the values of Christian Europe when he builds fences and internment camps. In response, his secular liberal critics in Budapest claim that it is they who represent humanist European values. In short, Europe is claimed by both sides. But for the great majority in both camps, these rhetorical skirmishes are the latest installment in a long-running debate about who is the better Hungarian.

The most important fault line within Europe used to be the “iron curtain”. That boundary is still significant, as the latest exchanges in Brussels between President Hollande and Prime Minister Szydło made clear. But it is overshadowed nowadays by that between north and south, which has been accentuated by the construction of the Eurozone. Germany, the major beneficiary of the Euro, has enforced austerity policies which leave the Mediterranean states with little scope to address their most urgent problems, above all unemployment. These states, together with the postsocialist members in the east, bear the brunt of protecting the rest of the EU from endless streams of refugees and other migrants in search of work and a better life.

Yet for demographic reasons, additional workers are indeed continuously needed by the successful capitalist economies of the north, not least Germany. This has been the case ever since the first *Gastarbeiter* provided the workforce necessary for accomplishing an “economic miracle” in the 1960s. For decades, little was done to integrate these Turkish migrants into German society and its democracy. Most have remained Turkish citizens, and their millions of votes can play a decisive role in the democratic processes of a country considered by most Germans not to be European at all. Yet there is consternation when the ministers of an Ankara

government that has become emphatically illiberal seek to address political rallies in the countries to whose economic prosperity their citizens have made a fundamental contribution. The further complicating factor is, of course, Turkey's current contribution to protecting Europe from further waves of immigrants, following the extraordinary *Völkerwanderung* of 2015 (see my post of September 2015, based on first-hand observations in Hungary).

The upshot is that, as the EU approaches 60, it is being torn apart by profound structural divisions. The most sensitive political issue is the free movement of human beings – what Karl Polanyi termed the “fictitious commodity” of labour. We can observe a disconnect between what business leaders and economists have to say on the matter and what societies are ready to accept. The present situation is that the needs of the labour market are met not through controlled migration but through inefficient, chaotic processes that reward illegality and inevitably devalue the labour of indigenous working classes. The social impact (both short-term and over generations) of these and other market-driven mechanisms is far greater than the impact of EU redistribution through regional development policies. At the same time, the general financialization of capitalism (epitomized by the case of Britain) is polarising all European societies and rendering large sections of the middle classes more vulnerable than ever before. Given these conditions – increasing inequity, inefficiency, and illegitimacy – it is not so surprising that illiberal populists are thriving at the core of the old EU and not just on the periphery.



The "Euro Shop" in the Hungarian market town of Kiskunhalas sells basic goods at discounted prices in *Forints*.

(Photo: Chris Hann, September 2015)

European civilization

The day after the éclat between the Prime Minister of Poland and the President of France, the BBC reported that the Belgian Guy Verhofstadt, who now has the operational responsibility for the Brexit negotiations on the EU side, wishes to accommodate the sincere wishes of many British subjects to retain their current close links to the EU.ⁱⁱ Verhofstadt too possesses the credentials of a liberal ex-Prime Minister. He was apparently thinking of rights to mobility and to vote in European elections and declared he had already received 1000 letters from concerned Brits. Verhofstadt was quoted as saying in a BBC radio interview: "Many of the letters began with the appeal that "I'm a UK citizen - I don't want to lose my relationship with Europe and European civilization."

But you don't need a PhD in anthropology to realize that, if the EU provides significant sources of socio-cultural identity at all, these are for the time being restricted to relatively small elites. Liberal cosmopolitans throughout the EU need to consider how to keep the show on the road for the remaining 27 states. As a mobile member of this class myself, possessing only a British passport, conducting a research project based in Germany that is supported by the European Research Council, these questions touch me deeply. I need to understand why, in spite of the subsidies that South Wales receives through Brussels redistribution, my home town voted 60% for Brexit; and why the village in Hungary that I have studied for 40 years is overwhelmingly supportive of the policies of Prime Minister Orbán. The voices of these people cannot be ignored, or dismissed with lofty disdain as the result of media distortions and a few irresponsible politicians.

I shall return to the portentous notion of "civilization" in further posts. In March 2017, I conclude that what we have in this part of the world as the EU reaches 60 is not a beacon of light but a travesty of the civilizational hopes that many of my generation attached to Europe in our younger years.

Notes

ⁱ Laurence Peter: 'EU summit: Poland cries blackmail over subsidies', 10 March, 2017: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39232136>

ⁱⁱ 'Britons should keep EU rights post-Brexit - Guy Verhofstadt'. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-39228245>