After Brexit, Eurasia

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Our "Realising Eurasia" project was conceptualized more than seven years ago, well before a hapless Prime Minister called David Cameron committed himself to a referendum on his country's continued membership of the EU. Cameron's objectives were to hold the Conservative Party together and to win the next election. His short-term success turned into a disaster in June 2016. Now, three and a half years later, the United Kingdom has formally left the EU. The long-term consequences remain unclear, for all concerned.

The word Brexit had not been coined when we launched REALEURASIA. We have had several sub-projects in member states of the EU, but none in Britain. In any case, what can an anthropologist possibly add to the welter of commentary and analysis?

Numerous social anthropologists have studied the EU. They began to do so even before it gave itself this name. Like other social scientists, anthropologists were critical of economistic foundations (the "common market"), and of the imperfections of hugely complicated political mechanisms (the "democratic deficit"). A prominent strand in the anthropological contributions has been to bemoan the initial failure to emphasize socio-cultural commonalities, and to critique the belated attempts of EU officials to promote new forms of identification at the level of Europe.[i] The implication was that, if only more attention had been paid from the beginning to values and to the construction of a shared history, then it would have been possible to transcend endless economic squabbling and *Kleinstaaterei*.

Similar sentiments have been expressed in the emotional aftermath of Brexit on 31st January 2020. I have read and heard countless German commentators emphasizing the contributions of Britain over the centuries. (The pick of the bunch was the radio journalist who asked "After all, what would European culture be without The Beatles?".) In an extraordinary public letter to the British people, President Emmanuel Macron declared that "You are leaving the European Union but you are not leaving Europe". On the same day, Strasburg parliamentarian and fellow liberal Guy Verhofstadt said that the aim must be to convince the British that "the EU is a project you'll want to be a part of again".[ii]

This would seem to be a formidable task. No one should doubt that the EU has achieved a great deal in the last seven decades: above all in ensuring peace between neighbours with brutal histories. In addition to a parliament, a court and a central bank, it has spawned integrating institutions such as the European Research Council, which is the funding body of REALEURASIA. Cooperation between dedicated EU employees and scholars in every conceivable field has had hugely beneficial outcomes. I have in mind not merely the technicalities of harmonizing national laws and regulating markets (to mitigate neoliberal anarchy) , but the promotion of transnational ideals of transparency, of liberalism in the widest sense. All this is overlooked by the populists who "bash Brussels", from Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson in Britain to Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

But why are the messages of these populists so enthusiastically received by national electorates? Why do we find, even in Germany, the major "winner" of the EU social order, especially since the Deutschmark gave way to the Euro, increasing dissatisfaction with this order? In recent years of "austerity politics," I have noted increasing scorn for the extravagance of Greeks and Italians, perceived as living beyond their means, not to mention disdain towards Poles and Hungarians, parasitical in a different way and guilty of failing to maintain the basic standards of *Rechtsstaatlichkeit*. That something is seriously amiss could hardly be ignored in the wake of the global financial crisis that began in 2007-8. Yet more than a decade later, very little has changed. Contrary to expectations in 2016, even Brexit is not turning out to be a wake-up call. Verhofstadt and the newly installed (unelected) Politburo of the EU imagine that the British electorate will one day wish to return to an EU that has basically the same shape and structure it has today.

This seems unlikely. It is just as unlikely that massive investment in programmes of cultural education will succeed in producing better Europeans. The mobile elites who speak and write better English than many native speakers on the island will no doubt continue to expand. But this will do nothing to mitigate the discontent of recent decades in other sections of national populations, an *Unbehagen* that is rooted in socially divisive neoliberalism.

The anthropological perspective that draws attention to long-term commonalities across the macro-region called Europe is important. But this does not provide grounds for Britain to rejoin a political union that excludes a large number of states that qualify in this civilizational sense. From this perspective, there is no reason why Britain should be *re*-integrated before Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have been integrated, not to mention Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.

It might be objected: if the Russian Federation were to join, then the European Union would extend to Vladivostok, and how could that be? Well, if the North Atlantic Treaty Organization can be militarily active in Afghanistan, perhaps a little geographical flexibility could be applied

here too?

But the objection deserves to be taken seriously. It would be greatly preferable to transcend Europe as a civilizational frame and replace the European Union with a new Eurasian Union. This would accomplish two things. First, it would rescue the concept of Eurasia from Russian nationalist distortions. Second, it would challenge the near-monopoly currently enjoyed by China, through its "belt and road" initiative, over concrete mechanisms of integration across the landmass. The envisioned Eurasian Union would ideally include from the very beginning *all* the states of Europe and of Asia: not least Japan, that offshore island constellation in the east that offers such intriguing points of comparison with Great Britain in the west. Perhaps this new EU could be allocated a modest headquarters (not a parliament) in Afghanistan, where the plentiful barracks and military airfields would be converted to serve new purposes. This would be a union worth working towards.[iii]

Notes

[i] See Cris Shore: *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration*. London: Routledge (2000).

[ii] Both quotations as reported by the BBC on 2nd February 2020: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-51342714

[iii] I sketched such a utopia more fully in a pre-Brexit article: "After the Euro, the Avra" *Soundings* 56: 123-36 (2014); Republished in *Eurozine*, 5th May, 2014. Since the British bear much of the historic responsibility for the suffering of the people of Afghanistan, it might be expected that they should take the lead in pursuing cooperation at the level of Eurasia. Of course, notwithstanding his "one nation" rhetoric, Boris Johnson is more likely to embrace the Atlanticist turbo-capitalism of President Trump than Eurasian ideals of inclusive political communities (of which the social democracy or "embedded liberalism" that evolved in western Europe used to be the most attractive example).