Europe Is Us:
Brexit Will Not Take Place

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ABOUT THE ASH CENTER

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The grotesque saga of Brexit, an elusive public policy with shifting objectives but devastating costs, confirms an unpleasant reality: economic interdependence keeps majoritarian will, even that of a sovereign people, in check.

David Cameron's irresponsible use of the referendum, which squandered what little credibility he had in Europe and sowed seeds of chaos that Theresa May has been unable to contain, has reduced the so-called leadership of Conservative Britain to humiliating posturing to save what's left of the Brexit agreement.

Often interpreted as an expression of popular demands for sovereignty, Brexit, in fact, reflects a highly unstable public opinion: as of 2018, more than 100 constituencies that had voted *Leave!* claimed to want to stay. The *Leave!* campaign, deliberately sold as a populist movement, was largely the creation of political entrepreneurs like the iconoclastic Dominic Cummings. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's relative silence on the matter has effectively advanced the cause, while algorithmic biases continue to manipulate public opinion (see the movie *Brexit)* and Russia continues to fund and spread pro-Brexit propaganda with the goal of weakening western alliances (see articles in the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, and the report of the United States Senate). Every day now unveils a bit more of the misery of a deeply divided small nation, which, in its effort to "take back control" has run into the passive resistance of the great Union, its market standing guard at the gate.

It is ironic that the political benefits of interdependence, such as peace and social predictability—which the UK, as a champion of free trade, promoted and helped enshrine in EU economic policy—should now inflict such a lesson in "soft commerce" (A.O. Hirschman) on the country.

Interdependence, however, is not only economic: it creates bonds, common projects and rights that oblige us to each other and exert a powerful "civilizing effect" (Elias, 2000).

It is precisely these transnational rights and the freedoms they afford that the EU has defended during the Brexit negotiation process. These include the freedom of movement and social rights of EU citizens who live and work in the UK such as,

for example, 300,000 French residents in the country, or the right to a sustainable peace for the British citizens of Northern Ireland. Indeed, it was EU funds and expertise that allowed Northern Ireland to secure the Good Friday agreement (1998), resolving a "colonial" conflict that lasted more than a century. This peace would be jeopardized should the economic and political borders between Catholic and Protestant communities, patiently erased thanks to European know-how on reconciliation, resurface with the British separation from the EU.

Almost seventy years (!) of European construction[1] have created a body politic, and Brexit represents a kind of amputation—a sharp cut through the social and economic fabric, and the emotional ties we have created throughout our common history with England. At a level deeper than we think, these bonds have formed a European "We" of which millions of British citizens are a part: women, workers, mothers, and retirees holding gender-equal social rights developed by the European Court of Justice; young people from the Erasmus program university exchanges, having woven abroad with their comrades "habits of the heart" (**Bellah et al. 1985**), which, though humorously portrayed in the film, serve to "anchor the (complicated) laws and institutions (of the EU) in the heart of citizens," according to Rousseau. These travelers "came back from this beautiful journey full of reason, claiming the right to stay in Europe . . ."[2]

This "we" also has some historical depth, beginning with the 1904 *Entente Cor-diale* agreement between England and France and reinforced by the experience of resistance during the war. London, the city of *Blitz*, of the *Appeal of June 18th* by Gen-eral de Gaulle and of the *Remain* vote, endures as a powerful symbol of the freedom and the values Europe holds dear. These moments of solidarity lie at the core of the transatlantic partnership that has ensured the security of Europe since 1949 within NATO and was reinforced after the disgrace of the Balkan wars by the 1998 Saint-Malo agreement, signed by the United Kingdom and France, which created the European defense policy branch (ESDP or European Security and Defense Policy). Finally, recent threats (terrorism and "Russian risks," such as hybrid war and cyber-interference in

1   Since 1951, date of signature of the Treaty of Paris establishing the ECSC (European Coal and Steel Community), predecessor of the European Commission.

2   At the end of March 2019, petitions to the British Parliament collected five million signatures, and one million people paraded through the streets of London.

domestic democratic processes) renew prospects for security cooperation, both internally and externally, between the United Kingdom and Europe, Brexit or no Brexit.

The bonds between the EU and the United Kingdom are profound and reflect common values that cannot and will not be removed by a stroke of the pen. These values will continue to define a European identity on the international scene. Brexit therefore calls for a pragmatic analysis. Bound by commercial, legal, and strategic interests and the normative power of the EU in its neighborhood, procrastination, and negotiation will continue to temper the centrifugal political passions that occasioned Brexit.

THE MACHIAVELLIAN EQUATION OF FREEDOM

Still, Brexit raises the question, fundamental in democracy, of political freedom, which itself calls into question the political community within which freely agreed-upon choices are made.

Is it the nation, this political structure that, since the 19th century, has been the cradle of modern democracy? Nations present the comfort of historical legitimacy, but their smallness and limitations lead precisely to the loss of self-determination that Brexit exemplifies.

Or is it instead the greater European "we"—a federalist ideal that gives preference to large-scale democratic institutions capable of managing "systemic" global interdependencies?

Every democracy has to make a difficult trade-off between "authenticity" and "effectiveness" (the feeling, among citizens, of being adequately represented, which requires on one hand, a relatively small scale and, on the other hand, the ability of the political system to control effectively international interdependences, which requires, in general, a larger scale) (Dahl and Tufte, 1973), Whether a collective "Euro-pean people" that balances these concerns and legitimizes the big democracy that many Europeans call for could emerge remains uncertain.[3] Much has been written

3 For example: S. Hennette, T. Piketty, G. Sacriste, A. Go, "For a Treaty of Democratization of Europe," Seuil, 2017 and the resulting manifesto.

about the so-called *Eurodemos,* but such a political ideal does not exist yet, at least not in terms similar to those defining national identity (which is itself ambiguous because it can be "open" or "closed"). Even the European Federalists, such as Spinelli and Colorni, conceived the European people as the *Avant-garde* of the European Union, not a widespread sociological reality. This is how we can understand it today, because those who identify with Europe and feel comfortable with a European identity, are, in effect, a certain elite, the winners of globalization (young people, with a high level of education), while those who are older and less educated fear it.[4] This is not unreasonable since relative inequalities have risen in Europe over the past 40 years as a result of free-market forces. These inequalities fuel a discourse of suspicion—yesterday, of the "Polish plumber" (France of 2005), today of the "Muslim refugee" (France still, as well as Orban's Hungary, Kascinsky's Poland, Germany's AfD, Italy's *Lega Nord*, and others)—which, as manifestations of economic and cultural populism, flourish in the political framework of the nation.

Why, then, does the perception of the nation as the place of political freedom remain?

Very simply, because in a union that has become unequal, it is! If, like Machiavelli, one defines political freedom as the desire not to be dominated, then the nation remains crucial.

Citizens look to their nations to protect them, through (social and military) security policies, against risks that Europe pretended to mitigate but has visibly increased: relocation of jobs, increasing poverty, the erosion of public services and their rising price, free movement of terrorists and human traffickers in the passport-free Schengen zone. Moreover, EU membership has imposed specific costs on certain populations within nations, without offering any opportunity for compensation: austerity measures that ravage the lives of young people and pensioners from Spain or Greece, "shock therapy" that brought Eastern Europe into the big market, only to discover that it discriminates against Eastern European consumers with lower-quality food products, and so on.

4   75% of 18–24 year olds agree that safety is located in the EU. This opinion diminishes with age, representing 66% of those 25–34 and only 44% of those over 65s; cf. Brexit, inequality and the demographic divide (Source: London School of Economics and Political Science Blog).

States, for their part, rely on the principle of national sovereignty as a resistance point against the imperial tendencies of the Union. As in any other international organization, it serves as a principle of equality between member states, and has proven particularly handy for resisting the asymmetries of power revealed by crises. During the euro crisis, for instance, when the views and interests of the most powerful nations such as Germany prevailed, other member states criticized their views of the debt as rigid, moralizing, and self-serving—particularly in the banking sector.[5] During the refugee crisis, while Germany was proving (unilaterally) generous in welcoming a million refugees, the "small states of Eastern Europe" (Bibo, 1993), whose experience of "lim-ited sovereignty" within the EU bitterly reminded them of Soviet imperialism, rebelled against what Viktor Orban has called the "moral imperialism" of Western nations. They leagued within the Council of Ministers, in the Visegrad group, to overthrow the supra-national refugee plan proposed in 2015 by the Commission, and have defended since then hard visions of security and borders in Europe.

THE POLITICAL TRAGEDY OF EUROPE

Federalists loathe this "new inter-governmentalism" (Bickerton et al., 2015). They call for new treaties and federal institutions, the only means according to them, to provide solutions to the transnational issues that overwhelm Europe. But the problem is not institutional, because the EU already has many federal institutions. The European Par-liament and the Court of Justice and the Commission are the best known, but the euro crisis added some, with the Banking Union and various solidarity funds. Admittedly a shortcoming of this form of federalism is that it remains "executive," as Habermas observes — that is to say, dominated by the governments and not the citizens of Europe. Arguably, however, the chief problem lies not in a lack of institutions or democratic representation, but rather in the neo-liberal political consensus between governments (right, left, and center) on economic policies in Europe. From the original aberration of EMU (a monetary union without fiscal union, unable to absorb asymmetric shocks)

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5   Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

to the management of its foreseeable crisis and the ensuing crisis of democracy in Europe, the song remains the same: fiscal austerity (Economic and Monetary Union), austerity budget (EMU crisis), fiscal austerity (populism) . . .

From this point of view, the tragedy of Europe is to have become a great democracy as it shifted politically to the right, with the "end of history" leaving little ideological alternative in Europe. Right-wing parties have dominated European elections since 1999, while the left-wing parties have become haunts of "Brahmins," cultural elites who benefit from globalization thanks to a high level of education, a variable that is now the best predictor of inequality.[6] In the digitized, global society, a good diploma is the coveted key to wealth, as the admissions scandal at top colleges in the United States shows. The left's complacency about a status quo from which it benefits has kept it supporting policies unfavorable to the interests of the losers of globalization, leaving the "little people" (the *plebs*) orphaned. This has left open a window for political opportunists claiming to represent an alternative. Pitting *the people* against all the elites who benefit from globalization, whether cultural or economic, is a politically potent tactic—particularly in Eastern Europe, where the social cost of adjusting to the market has been huge, but criticism of the new idol of "transition" has been inaudible (Ivan Krastev, 2017).

As long as the proponents of *imaginary republics* fail to understand that we must build Europe by addressing the anxieties of nations, we will have populism, this incomplete politicization of Europe, which all too easily pits "elites" (European loyalists) against "the people" (national loyalists), masking the sociological diversity of "the people" and inventing its unity by designating external scapegoats (foreigners, refugees, immigrants, etc.) while conveniently never naming the root cause of inequalities—the unconditional surrender to the laws of the market.

6 "Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right: Rising Inequality and the Changing Structure of Political Conflict," EHESS, Paris School of Economics, 2018.

POWER AND CIVILITY

A well-ordered democracy begins at home, and requires equality. But the trans-national democracy currently in formation in the Union is redeploying at multiple levels of governance, and we need to better understand [them and] their interactions to fully grasp our own democratic model.

The European project, let's remember, was born from a shared desire for democracy among nations diverse in their institutional features, but similar in their ambition to protect individuals from the economic risks that had driven Europe towards political catastrophe. All the founding members were social democracies that had established a welfare state. It is a model that the whole world envies, although globalization has severely curtailed it (e.g., fiscal dumping, dislocation of labor). Europeans must therefore retrieve the power and the financial means to, once again, ensure social justice—which now includes climate action and climate justice—by taxing capital and negative environmental externalities at the transnational level.

Only Europe is currently able to do this vital work by democratic means, for cultural and historical reasons, due to the existence and legitimacy of its welfare states, and also because of its own remarkable institutional trajectory towards transnational democracy. It has powerful and effective supranational institutions, which have not hesitated, in the past, to resist the interests of transnational corporations when they hurt the interests of European citizens. In 2012, for instance, the European Parliament (EP) rejected the draft treaty on counterfeiting known as ACTA because of its failure to balance the economic interests of multi-nationals and the individual freedoms of European citizens. European competition policy, implemented by the European Commission offers another inspiring example. Although this policy is an instrument of market regulation, it offers a powerful lever for taxing multinationals (as with the infamous GAFA) and returning to states the financial means of their power, as illustrated by the Apple decision (2017). Likewise, EU climate action policies offer means for reinventing the social state of the future (Laurent, 2014). They are the result of complex inter-actions between the green democracies of Northern Europe and the supranational governance of the EU, and they constitute what Australian philosopher R. Eckersley calls **"the** green state."

Are we the only ones who do not understand the power that lies in our hands? It might be because we still lack a theory (and a long practice) of multilevel representation (at age 62, Europe is a political baby). In the great European democracy, our representatives are both elected to European Parliament (which we will elect in June, so, *let's vote!*) and as national members of Parliament, whose job it is to (better) control the work of our government in the Council of Ministers and demand accountability for it. For example, each national Parliament could raise the question of why glyphosate (a chemical component present in the herbicide *Roundup*, produced by Monsanto, an American multinational recently bought by the German firm Bayer) has been re-authorized in Europe in the Council of Ministers, when public opinion, the French, and the European Parliaments, opposed it.

Finally, we still underestimate how much European civil society—embodied in our NGOs, voluntary associations, and the generosity of individual citizens, and much more hospitable than states[7]—is the force that civilizes our nations. It opens them up to each other, to the foreigner, the refugee, the migrant and corrects the racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism that still thrive too often under the guise of state populism, and draws the prospect of a cosmopolitan European democracy, open to the world.

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7   G. Leblanc; F. Brugère, *The End of Hospitality*, Flammarion, 2017. See also the very interesting online consultation of the movement "We Europeans": https://weeuropeans.eu/en.