

## **Is Europe in a Crisis of Faith?**

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The British want to leave the EU and the rest of Europe is shocked. The Europeans may have lost their faith in their common destiny. The large number of strong arguments for a membership in the Union did not convince the majority of the British voters, although those arguments have been clearly demonstrated again and again. Many political fields cannot be ploughed unilaterally. Environmental protection is a global challenge. The tough competition prevalent in the global economy will not be suspended by referendums of ageing, wealth-saturated European societies. The single European market is more resilient against global competitive pressure than an array of small domestic economies on their own. All these reasons do not seem to pervade. EU- opponents see the membership of their country as an act of self-enslavement and the Brexit as a new biblical Exodus incident. Boris Johnson – a modern Moses? The construction of Europe in this perspective is no longer a rational calculation but turns into a question of faith and it congeals into political theology.

Considering the elemental force of populist emotions, not only a few supporters of the European agreement bet on strong feelings on their part. They see apocalyptic horsemen come up everywhere. The Union would be facing an imminent collapse – and therefore the question of war and peace appears on the European agenda again. There should be made an example of the British – in the hope that nobody emulates them. European integration should reach the hearts of the people instead of placing too much emphasis on mutual interest and rationality. Some quickly resorted to the idea that Europe should be given a soul – allowing certain intellectuals to proclaim themselves as high priests of a European civil religion.

Whoever keeps these overheated actions and reactions at distance will realize that neo-nationalists as well as integrationists are losing sight of the measures. Brexit is neither a procession to the Promised Land nor is it a signal for World War Three and for certain not the beginning of the end of the political union of European states. And it will neither bring back the British Empire nor lead into a decline of the United Kingdom.

The history of European integration can be told as well (or, exclusively) as a story of crises: From the failure of the European Defence Community, over de Gaulle's empty chair policy

to the eurosclerosis in the 1970s. The new momentum acquired under the commission presidency of Delors in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the completion of the European single market, and the foundation of a Union which goes far beyond economic issues by the Maastricht Treaty mark the beginning of a series of crises occurring with comparatively high frequency: The failure of the Constitutional Treaty, bank and euro bailouts after the crisis, the prevention of the Grexit, the refugee crisis. From this point of view, crises are now the permanent state of affairs, the basic mode of European integration – and the Union came through all of them. Actually, one more crisis is no reason for exaggerated concern.

Brexit would only appear as a dramatic event if one follows a historico-philosophical teleology of European integration. A lot of people who are enthusiastic about Europe believe that the course of the world follows a defined, almost physical law. For the dominant tendency in intellectual discourse on European integration, the aim of this Weltgeist-inspired process is not the extension and productive containment of nations, but their overcoming. Cosmopolitan visionaries only know cosmopolitans – and the prelude to this development is the EU citizen, replacing Spanish, Polish or British citizenship. National identities appear as a relic from the age of destructive nationalism that has to be defeated. To these visionaries, globalization formed random structures of free and equal individuals, replacing national collectives. Most of the political parties are not willing to go that far as it might not go down well with their voters. But even there, some believe that the Enlightenment and the modern age are perfected at the moment when the United States of Europe come true. On this basis, the Brexit does not seem as a democratic decision of a sovereign people, comparable to a change of government, but as an anticipated secession.

Nonetheless, the European Union is not a group of people thrown together by fate like a nation-state, but an alliance legitimated by convenience and common values. Its continued existence is subject to political availability in a totally different way. *Nota bene*: There are lots of good reasons for European integration, for a political union of European states and peoples. Germany has even committed itself in the Basic Law to a however constructed European co-operation. But whoever overrates the present achievements to an eschatological act of well-being provokes counter-reactions. Whoever pursues the objective of an ever closer Union without explaining its purpose and marking its limits will lose at some point the trust and the approval of the citizens, even of those who disapprove of excessive nationalism, who welcome a European expansion of their political consciousness, but whose democratic self-conception is first and foremost rooted in the national sphere.

Reflecting the Brexit, some people demand a deepening of the European integration, now, that the British troublemakers leave. These statements show an odd inability to listen and learn and reflect a certain immunity against the results of votes and elections. There are, of

course, valid arguments for “more Europe” in many political fields. However, as visions of political elites shape the European discourse, the backlash against elites, seen in the entire western World, will hit European integration unchecked. Political, economic and cultural elites lose trust within and beyond the EU. Large segments of the population feel that their functional elites have lost a sense of balancing interests fairly. Egregious executive salaries or the overblown language of politicians, which does not explain anything and is not understandable, inflame these emotions. Brussels with its glass palaces and thousands of lobby offices, intransparent negotiations and its focus on economic issues is considered as the embodiment of a caste of political apparatchiks out of touch with reality. This Brussels, seen as an economy not taking account of human fates, has become the prime target of populism. Anybody looking more deeply into the European Union, into the idealism of the actors involved and the practice of politics, knows how unfair current stereotypes are. But how does the elite react in this case, thinking that the majority gets it wrong? It responds with an elite strategy – and that is in European questions rather part of the problem than of a solution: The British people, they say, did not understand what they voted for. Half-seriously, half-jokingly, they mumble about denying the poorly educated, the elderly, the hayseeds from the Midlands and the Welsh rural areas the right to cast a vote in such issues.

In the political-philosophical debates during the Euro and Greek debt crisis, it has been constantly emphasized that the European Union can only gain public approval by developing a European welfare state, restricting the impact of national governments and enhancing the European Parliament based on the model of the German Parliament. Jürgen Habermas for instance relentlessly continued making certain claims. Brexit puts those views of the crisis into question. The British model of underlining individual freedom and market economy is comparatively liberal. The European Union does not appear as a neoliberal monster diminishing the welfare state (Margaret Thatcher did this repeatedly mandated by the people by herself). It is doubtful whether Brexit supporters would entrust their economic destiny to the directly elected members of European Parliament rather than to the united governments in the Council of the European Union or European Council.

Brexit thus cannot be explained with thought patterns popular amongst liberal intellectuals for explaining the recent crises in the European Union. They are also useless for paving the way for Europe’s future as the crisis in the European Union is too complex. It suffices to study the plans for economic policy, migration policy and social policy to grasp the complexity: Parts of Northern and Eastern Europe demand a rigorous restriction of immigration into the European Union and severe budgetary discipline for over-indebted States in the Euro Area. In contrast to this, Southern Europe demands a transfer union, including the mutualization of public debt and shared social security schemes. On top of that, they ask for European solidarity in the refugee crisis. The German position, which combines structural adjustments aspiring to austerity with a more generous refugee policy

without seeking the agreement of its European partners on the latter, alienates its European partners. This position has no chance of success.

What now? We can expect that Europe will experience some further integration crises within the next years. Those will possibly create a Europe of concentric spheres: the outermost sphere includes European states which only seek access to the internal market. Great Britain will belong to this sphere. This will subject Britain to regulation on which it has no say. Finally Europe would get the banking regulation that Britain always wanted to prevent. Ironically, Brexit would thus result not only in greater sovereignty but also in a loss of democratic influence. The British knew this before they voted. The result of the referendum may be confusing from a distant point of view, but in a democracy, seemingly unreasonable decisions need to be respected as long as they are legitimate.

In a second sphere there will be states wishing to maintain the European Union in its present status. It is their greatest challenge to decide on the further destiny of a badly designed economic and monetary union without there being any consensus as to where we should be heading. The gap between the monetary and economic philosophies of the North and the South of Europe is wide. Dilatory, superficial compromises will not last forever. But neither the Northern European economic model nor its Southern equivalent could be spanned across Europe without democratic consent. It seems preferable to admit the collapse of the Monetary Union. The European Union as such will not break up.

There might be a third sphere, a nucleus of a federal European community with deeper powers in internal and external security policy and social security. The question is whether a few nations of Europe want this. This may well be the case. Those who want a Europe with a deeper federal core have to learn to accept the opinion of those who do not want to accept this idea (yet). Otherwise this concept does not work and the idea does not have any chance. Even elites can be wrong. History or the philosophy of history do not confer rights upon them. They only have good reasons which they can feed into a democratic processes. The electorate do not owe them anything.

Perhaps today, the greatest risk for Europe originate not only from anti-European populists, but also from integrationists, who are so endowed with their issue that they want to push forward even when progress is not accepted democratically. These people consider a standstill as a step backwards; they feel betrayed of their historical right if their cosmopolitan Utopias are not totally embraced. With their arrogance they fuel the anti-European resentments, which they pretend to combat.