

Four Impious Points on Brexit

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Popular Sovereignty

The Brexit referendum confronted us with a “return of the repressed.” It represents a momentous eruption of popular sovereignty. The people have spoken. Liberals cringe: “Ugh, this is the voice of unreason.”

What the British people have decided is undoubtedly unwise in economic terms. It is also of questionable value, geopolitically considered. But this does not matter. It sticks. This is how the political asserts itself *vis-à-vis* the economic.

We did not expect to see this happen in Britain where the people are reputed for their pragmatism and good judgment. This explains why Brexit is, above all, a major ideological blow to economic liberalism.

Not surprisingly, a debate has already started whether the people are really needed in a democracy. Germans, whose constitutional fondness of the people has always been narrowly circumscribed, have already resumed whispering that referenda are of no good at all. The people are bearable only if mitigated by means of representation. But is this really the attitude with which you win the hearts and minds of disaffected ordinary folk?

Migration and the Neoliberal Left

If I read some of the major sentiments driving the opposition against the EU correctly, then they were largely nurtured by the scare of increasing immigration. It may be open to debate whether the fears were well-founded with regard to internal EU migration. I would guess that the presence of Poles or Slovaks gives rise to less visible and noticeable cultural cleavages than the migration that originates from former nations of the Commonwealth. But I may be mistaken about that.

In any event, there is one important lesson to be learned here. Anti-immigration sentiments are the political fertilizer of the right. The political right uses evil sentiments in

order to drive their populist cause. In the face of evil sentiments feeding into a sinister political strategy, the liberal and left-wing opposition is inclined to resort to the moral high ground and to blame ordinary people for their racism, their xenophobia, their narrow-mindedness or their nostalgia.

Such a reactive attitude is reinforced by the tendency of the predominantly neoliberal European left to distinguish itself from the right by embracing open borders. But this stance is a position of last resort. It is indicative, alas, of the fact that the left has become devoid of ideas.

The warm embrace of migration by the neoliberal left suggests that, from their perspective, migrants seem to have assumed the role left vacant after the demise of the industrial proletariat. In a sense, migrants count as the last class of history. Immigration is considered to be important, for it will give rise to a universally inclusive society.

Indeed, the neoliberal left believes that inclusion is the standard panacea available for the resolution of social ills. As if there was need for additional evidence for this point, my dear German colleague Maximilian Steinbeis, for whom I have the highest respect, just proposed, on the day after the Brexit decision, that Germany should now offer Britons moving to Germany a fast track to citizenship. As if making everyone German is the solution to all problems!

No doubt, there is greatness and validity to the idea that we extend universal respect to all human beings without regard to their ethnicity, religion or origin and welcome them in our midst. At the same time, there is nothing particularly progressive about universal respect. It is very basic and not part and parcel of a social project. On the contrary, migration reconfirms bourgeois values. Migrants pursue their private self-interest, quite legitimately so. They have to be confident that they can benefit from more, rather than less, competition. Under adverse circumstances, they have to put up with living in shadowy zones of legality and keeping a low profile. Some of them bring rural mores and strange religions to a place of the world where city-life has become the standard and humanity has made much progress towards ridding itself of the authority of priestly elites. Hence, the connection between migration and social progress is at best a weak one.

Concededly, when we are confronted with refugees, there is something deeply appealing about Christian solidarity with suffering. But the locale of universal *agape* is voluntary church work. It has never made any contribution to significant changes of social structures.

In a word, the left should refuse to have migration forced upon it as the major point of contention *vis-à-vis* the right and accept that migration controls can make good sense. Societies need to be bounded in order to govern themselves.

The difference between the right and the left lies somewhere else. It concerns whether we conceive of our social existence as a struggle or as a common effort to overcome the imprisoning features of our decentralized cooperation.

Transforming Europe into a Left-wing Project

It cannot be doubted that those who believe in the future of Europe need to distinguish themselves from the political right.

Reasonable ideas have never and will never originate from the right. Members of the Front National or the FPÖ are partisans of stupidity and clients of corruption.

New ideas won't arise from complacent neoliberalism either. Indeed, its lingering predominance is a great danger to the European Union, for it is the adherents to neoliberalism who will soon take it for granted that the time is ripe to return to business as usual. It is the ruling neoliberal class that is likely to embarrass the European Union even more.

New ideas will have to originate from the left. But one needs to be circumspect at this point. These ideas are not going to originate from the eco-neoliberalism represented by green parties. They are more concerned with sustainability (including, for many, sustaining their bourgeois privilege) than with social justice. They are also the major culprits for the false identification of social progress with open borders.

Rather, new ideas will have to originate from social democracy.

The major challenge that European societies are confronted with can be captured in the catch-phrase "from careers to jobs to tasks." The next generation of Europeans will have to live in a world where the work-life balance and the structure of work is going to be decidedly different from what it has been before. The members of this generation will have to learn the moral lesson that being employed is definitely not a meritorious achievement. Undoubtedly, it will have to be considered as a matter of luck or, realistically, as something that they owe to those who stay unemployed. Rapid technological progress already confronts us with our equal dispensability. The basic structure of our societies needs to be reconsidered from the perspective of this experience.

Hence, the new specter haunting European societies, the unconditional basic income, may be the key unlocking the door to a new form of solidarity. Europe can now become the agent drafting a new social contract. It is essential, therefore, that a European Union reverses its perverse federalist make-up. The current combination of free movement

conflicting with nationally-conceived social welfare systems is a recipe for political disaster. We cannot go on like this.

The integration project has already advanced far enough to allow us to start over again. It is now in the position to accord priority to the full package of human rights.

For decades we have deluded ourselves that the Union is new and totally unprecedented. We have joined in the chorus of those singing that it must not become a state.

If we want the Union to be more than an ailing international organization—and I think we should—we have to want it to be a state.

Obstacles

On our path towards this goal we are confronted with two major obstacles.

Our biggest obstacle is that we do not have politicians that are up to this task. A political lightweight like Jean-Claude Juncker is not, nor is an old-fashioned social democrat like Martin Schulze. “Mutti” is a weakling whose power at the international level is owed to the contingent fact that she happens to be the chancellor of Germany.

It is quite clear what needs to be done. Social democrats of Europe need to unite. The democracy deficit can only be solved by developing a party system that confronts European citizens with real choices.

It would be utterly wrong to tinker with institutions again. We have to have some idea of what kind of society we want to build on the European continent. Once we have a somewhat clearer idea concerning our objectives we can talk meaningfully about the institutions and the size of the future Union. We should not continue with the old mistake of building Europe first and then asking what it is supposed to be in the end.

The second obstacle concerns remnants of a misguided drive for imperial splendor. The Union is too large. It is composed of too many heterogeneous elements. Not only should enlargement no longer be a policy objective, the Union should have the courage to waive good bye to those lacking the courage or moral decency to create a social world for the twenty-first century.

Europe may now have an opportunity to rid itself of a few nuisances and avoid admitting more in the future. In this respect, Brexit may have established, indeed, a healthy precedent.