What Does It All Mean?

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What does Brexit mean for the European Union? One can try to predict the consequences, but one can also ask what messages the vote reveals, what it tells us about the state of integration. Is Europe a market, a project of identity-building, or one of political integration? What does Brexit tell us about each of these?

Europe the market: Brexit as a challenge, not a disaster

If the EU is really a market with frills, then Brexit is not such a big deal. There are certainly possibilities for a future UK-EU relationship in which most aspects of free movement remain, and the economic cost is limited or even absent – since decentralization does bring its benefits too. Most of the plausible future UK prime ministers seem to want this kind of relationship, and given that at least some of the Brexit voters probably do too, and pretty much all of the remain voters, it should not be unrealistic. Onwards to Switzerland-light, perhaps. That might suit the UK just fine.

And if Europe is really about the market, then this ought to be a good result for Europe too: its most important policy, the internal market, would be largely intact. Perhaps there will be some restrictions on free movement of workers, but there are many intermediate positions between complete freedom and complete abolition. Free movement is limited in many Member States today by factual considerations – language, culture, the lack of jobs, and cultures of nepotism. A few legal holes in the regime in the UK need not be any more cataclysmic for the continent or for its mobile youth than the existing *de facto* limitations elsewhere. Of course, the structure of the market will become a little messier and more ad-hoc, and there may be even more of this to come from other countries, but there seems no reason to be too distressed about this as such. Markets are inherently imperfect anyway, and a deep belief in either the reality or the possibility of market perfection speaks more of delusional tendencies than either idealism or serious policy commitment. It is not integrity of structure we should seek, but possibilities for Europeans.

The problem is whether politicians in Europe have the agility to achieve such a pragmatic compromise, particularly given the panicky reactions coming from Juncker and Schulz and others, where the speediness of the divorce seems to be the only thing that matters. On the contrary, there is plenty of time to let the dust settle, let the UK work out what it wants – probably through elections – and then talk about it calmly and unhurriedly. Markets can certainly be unsettled by uncertainty, but they will be calmed if they think that leaders are sufficiently in control to achieve reasonable results. That is more likely to be the case if everyone is prepared to take as long as it needs to achieve a good future relationship. For the EU institutions it may be desirable to get the UK out quickly - a class is easier to manage without the difficult child – but this is a situation where the interests of the continent and the interests of the Commission and Parliament are not clearly aligned. One must hope that the UK leaders are robust enough to resist the demands for a quick Article 50 procedure, and continental politicians calm and collected enough to cope with a little wait. In particular, the fact that a full Brexit would almost certainly lead to the loss of Scotland from the UK (with no doubt alarming implications for other states with difficult regions) provides a motivation for the UK to slowly come round to a nearly-member model. The EU should give them the time they need to work this out, rather than rushing them into a harder break which will be worse for everyone. Of course, there have been lots of voices saying 'in is in and out is out', but grown-ups know this is a nursery rhyme, not a description of the possibilities available, and we must hope that grown-ups finally control this process.

Europe the identity-project: it works! the young are Europeans!

But suppose the EU is about identity-building – a project aimed at changing states and Europeans into something less nationalistic and more open. This was part of how it began, and there must be some outside Brussels who would still like to see it in these terms. What does Brexit mean then? A terrible failure? A significant setback?

Or – may I suggest it – a sign of success? The passion and emotion shown by the remain voters after the result was unprecedented. Never in the UK has there been such an outburst of pro-Europeanism. Whatever else has happened, a new community of committed Europeans was born last week. Yet they existed as individuals already. It seems that for many of today's youth, and even the early middle-aged, openness to the rest of Europe is so much a part of their life, so self-evident and important, that a threat to this is existential. The easyjet generation, one might conclude, are Europeans in a way that is remarkable, quite un-English even. For not only is that openness important to them, but the ideas voiced by Brexit of exclusion, of 'taking our country back', were truly repugnant and alien.

This bodes rather ill for social harmony in the UK, revealing a stark divide in perspectives and values. Yet it seems that decades of integration have in fact made Europeans out of Britain's youth. The European identity project is a success – or at least, we know it can work.

Of course, only half voted remain. That is the other part of the story. But the generational divide is truly striking. If it is really so that young people have been formed in a different world view, then in ten years this vote would have been impossible. Whatever the outcome of the negotiations, the battle has in fact been won by Europe, by the EU, by a sort of cosmopolitanism. For it is implausible to think that Britain might now go into the kind of isolation that would lead these UK-Europeans to forget their friendships and experiences and ambitions and turn back into little-Englanders. They have been made, and so they will remain, and as one generation is replaced by another, they will inevitably shape the UK.

The timing of the vote and its result are then striking: Brexit won, just. It could hardly have been closer. The vote was just in time: we are apparently at the tipping point. For those formed in another time or space, for whom foreign is strange and Englishness is home, this was their very last chance to reclaim the land that they know and love from slipping away and becoming a place in which they feel lost and abandoned. Now they have reclaimed it, but the victory is pyrrhic, for time is against them, and time is even mightier than the European Commission.

One might quite plausibly have doubted whether new identities could be made just by contact, by removing borders. It was a noble gamble of the early Europeans to think that they could. Yet after decades of integration national languages, parliaments and cultures seem at first glance to be as robust as ever, and nationalism seems to be enjoying more of a renaissance than a dwindling away. One might easily conclude that the technique does not work: communities must be made by other means. Brexit sends a message of hope: it does work, and Europeans have been made, and the very success of the project is why we now experience this great roar of desperation from those left behind, who see the world becoming a place in which they, the product and adherent of the nation state alone, are the anachronism. The nationalist-populist wave in Europe, like extremist Islamic fundamentalism, is the huge and drawn-out death throe of a way of being for whom the future holds no hope.

Death throes can be violent. The unanswered question is whether those who feel they suffer from European integration can be consoled and brought within, for if not they have the capacity to do immediate social harm that will make the optimistic long-term story sound like cold and distant comfort. Britain has abandoned its weaker members for decades, and other European states, while perhaps less materially unequal than the UK,

have still not truly engaged with the modern existential malaises which drive public anger. One does not need to accept all the policy prescriptions of the angry voter in order to feel empathy for them, to understand their perspective, and to seek to improve their lives. Indeed, very often the self-diagnosis of the populist supporter is wrong: the EU, immigration or capitalism are hooks on which to hang disaffection that is more nuanced and diffuse. If states can seriously engage with the social, technological and economic barriers to contentment in their societies, looking beyond the rhetoric to the human beings involved, there is very much to gain. Otherwise, the promise held out by the votes of the young in the UK could come to nothing.

Europe as political union: Sometimes the centre has to give.

And finally, let us suppose that the EU is a political project. Let us imagine for a moment that its purpose, at least in part, is to create a political community of nations and their peoples, committed to acting not in isolation from each other but together, in order to strengthen their actions and more profoundly translate their will into change.

The message from Brexit for this is more demanding. The essence of a political entity is not this or that policy. It is that we commit to keeping talking, and acting together as far as we will and can. We will only do this if there is the possibility that our conversation can lead to results: that changes of public will can lead to real changes in the EU. This means that integration cannot be unidirectional. There must be the possibility of the centre ceding ground, because it is by doing so that the EU has the possibility to keep itself whole. Otherwise steam builds up until somewhere, somehow, something explodes. It is not clear that its leaders, or the leaders of many of its Member States, have understood this at all.

It is probably too late to keep the UK within the EU, but will the lesson be learned, or is Brexit the first of many cracks? It is frighteningly short-term – not to say undemocratic – to think that a hard break with the UK will prevent other countries being tempted to follow it. On the contrary, it will confirm the view of the EU as autocratic, indifferent to justice, and primarily concerned to maintain the status quo. The anger of those who feel themselves systematically ignored is unlikely to be contained by either political messages or economic consequences. Then it is just a question of time before the next rupture occurs, in France, or the Netherlands, Denmark or Italy, or elsewhere. If Europe cannot bend, then it will break.