The Brexit referendum from a European perspective

Peter Schwarz
13 June 2016

Reading the commentary in the international press concerning the referendum on a British exit from the European Union, one gets a sense of a ruling class that has totally lost its bearings. It took some time before the international media realised that on June 23 a vote is to take place in the United Kingdom that will have wide-ranging implications for the whole of Europe. But now, an atmosphere of panic reigns.

"Behind the scenes, trepidation over the 'unthinkable' is spreading," writes *Der Standard* from Austria. Switzerland's *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* warns, "When Europe wakes up on the morning of 24 June, it will find itself on a political map that has changed radically overnight like nothing since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989." And *Äripäev* from Estonia worries that a decision for a Brexit could have consequences similar to the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, which triggered the global financial crisis of 2008.

The Danish *Jyllands-Posten* describes British Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to allow Britons to vote on remaining in the EU as a "major strategic blunder, a political gamble with unjustifiable risk." Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes of a "light-minded play with the Brexit." Italy's *Il Sole 24 Ore* complains, "A Brexit would open Pandora's Box and unleash a flood of accusations and possible new attempts to leave… Regardless of how the vote result turns out on 23 June, we have already lost everything."

However, there are also voices playing down the issue. *Rzeczpospolita* from Poland hopes that a Brexit would strengthen Poland's role within the EU. "Therefore," it states, "let us not view a Brexit as a catastrophe, but as an opportunity to bring our own ideas forward in this restructuring."

Belgium's *De Standaard* seeks to soothe concerns: "But in the end, the question of whether a Brexit was worth all the hysteria will be posed. There will be complicated regulations with the Union, full of clauses and protocols. Valuable political energy will certainly be wasted. But the chance that Britain will remain in the EU is great, even if it leaves."

Until now, nobody appears to have seriously considered what the impact of the EU's second largest economy leaving would be on the rest of Europe. The thinking in Europe's capitals, as in the British campaign itself, is dominated by pragmatic considerations and narrow interests.

This does not apply only to immediate economic risks, which are being cited by the Remain camp as an argument against an exit—the threat of a collapse of the British currency and a panic on financial markets and the stock exchange; the possible loss of jobs at international corporations; the uncertainty over negotiations with the EU, which could hardly be completed in the two-year time period provided; etc. It applies above all to the long-term political consequences.

What would be the impact of a British exit on the relations between Germany and France, which fought three wars against one another between 1870 and 1945, dragging the entire world into the abyss in the process? Britain has up to now played a major role in mediating and containing the rivalries between the two former arch enemies within the framework of the EU.

Some comments assume that Berlin and Paris would draw closer together in the event of a British exit. But given the massive economic superiority of Germany, this is unlikely. As France's *La Tribune* put it, "One thing is certain: an EU reduced to 27 states could become entangled in contradictory positions, and the German-French tandem could be the victim of

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collateral damage from a potential Brexit."

What will happen if a "yes" to a Brexit provokes a Europe-wide chain reaction and encourages the strengthening of right-wing, nationalist forces? Could civil war flare up once again in Ireland when the EU's external border runs between the south of the island and Northern Ireland? And what will happen if Scotland pushes for another referendum to leave the United Kingdom?

All of these questions are not only being ignored or downplayed by the Brexit supporters, but the advocates of remaining within the EU have no answers to them. On the contrary, their perspective is just as reactionary as that of the Brexit supporters.

Regardless of its outcome, the referendum will accelerate the tendencies that have made the European Union the most hated institution on the continent.

And this not only because a slim "yes" on the question of Europe would "haunt society like the living dead," as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* put it, but because the supporters of the EU are in the process of transforming it into a police state and military fortress.

The few concessions the EU brought—the elimination of border controls, the possibility of working and studying in the country of one's choice, a guarantee of certain democratic rights—are being done away with in the name of combating terrorism and deterring refugees. At the same time, an Orwellian police and surveillance state is being established.

Germany's *Die Zeit* recently reported on the options currently being discussed behind closed doors in Brussels on the means for holding the 27 member states together in the event of a Brexit. The first option is focused on closer police collaboration, or, as *Die Zeit* formulated it, "the strengthening of security by increasing cooperation in the exchange of intelligence information, and measures against asymmetric warfare."

The shift of the EU's focus from an economic to a military alliance is also being discussed. The notion driving this is that the European powers, whose relative economic position has declined significantly on a world scale, can only together "challenge great powers like the United States or China," as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote. Given the growth of nationalism in Europe, which is finding particular expression precisely in the Brexit referendum, the emergence of such a military bloc seems unlikely.

The EU will also continue and intensify its role as the driving force of social attacks and deregulation in the event of a Brexit victory.

France's *Le Monde* is already calling for action to be taken to resist German-British dominance in the event Britain stays. It wrote: "A victorious David Cameron would want to impose his political agenda on Europe…a 'Brexin' (remain) could strengthen the economic convergence between Germany and Britain, Europe's two largest economies… If it is not to be sidelined, France has to prepare a real plan B for the euro zone and the EU 28. If Britain stays in the community, the French must be the first to press the initiative."

The light-mindedness, political short-sightedness and brutality with which both the opponents and advocates of a Brexit push ahead with the sealing off, destruction and militarisation of the European Union is not an individual, but a class phenomenon. It is characteristic of a ruling class whose social system is historically outmoded. The ruling elites are incapable of looking to the future and are concerned only with their most immediate privileges and interests.

The Brexit referendum proves that no faction of the ruling class can offer a way out of the blind alley of the capitalist crisis. The widespread opposition to social attacks, xenophobia, war and the strengthening of the state apparatus must be turned into a conscious political movement that rejects the EU and calls for the unification of Europe on a socialist basis by fighting for the United Socialist States of Europe. The British Socialist Equality Party, with its campaign for an active boycott of the referendum, has taken an important step in that direction.

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