

They Do What They Want, But Do They Also Know What They Want?

Christoph Möllers
Humboldt University Berlin, Law Faculty
[\[moellers@rewi.hu-berlin.de\]](mailto:moellers@rewi.hu-berlin.de)

Eurosceptics of all kind feel vindicated by the Brexit. However, their reasons do not only differ, they are actually inconsistent: For leftists like the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras the vote expresses the failure of a socially unjust political order devoted to austerity and market liberalism. Considering the anti-regulatory bias of the Leave campaign and the strict austerity policy of the newly re-elected conservative majority, this seems like a rather paternalistic interpretation. Many on the left-wingers refuse to accept that there are democratic majorities for inequality. They prefer to treat the voters as the victims of a wrong consciousness instilled by politics or the media.

For right-wing nationalists it seems to be more plausible that the Leave campaign has won. However, this alone does not necessarily make their point of view coherent. It is an irony of the growing right-wing nationalism that it is - contrary to Herders' assertion of the nation as an individual - so well coordinated on the European level. All European nations should be united in their equal rejection of Europe. Nigel Farage gloated after the referendum that it will be the beginning of the end of the European Union (EU). But why does he care after the British have decided to leave? His reaction shows that what the right-wing EU-opponents are really against is not the EU. They want to establish anti-minoritarian xenophobic regimes all over Europe. In a dark sense the extreme right is deeply European, perhaps more European than left and centre.

The fact that the EU is being criticised by politically opposite camps, is both good and bad news. The good news being that the EU actually is the centrist organization that its advocates praise. As such it cares for the legitimate need for compromises between its members. Yet, this is exactly why – and here comes the bad news – what happened to the EU in Britain could happen to it in whole Europe: it can be grounded down easily between the opponent political camps. It is important to see that the result of last week's vote should less be ascribed to the already EU-sceptical conservatives, but rather to a paralysed Labour party. The European left-wing will soon have to decide whether it wants to further distance itself from the EU as an agent of neoliberalism, or to take seriously its

achievements in various fields ranging from the protection of the environment to anti-discrimination. This ties in with a crucial current debate in the social sciences, a discipline traditionally dominated by the left, which could become unusually relevant for an academic debate. If the European left-wing decides against the EU, this could lead to the Union's end without having much of a positive effect on the left political project.

A third interpretation of referenda on the European Union traditionally reflects the point of view of the EU-technocracy. As after the referenda on the European constitution held in France and the Netherlands in 2005, the technocracy might adopt the view that the vote was really not about Europe, but about domestic politics. That this time nobody dares to say this in public is a testimony to how careful and defensive the European technocracy has become – which is not a bad thing either.

In any case, all three explanations share one flaw. They suggest that if the British want to leave the EU, there must be more to it than just their legitimate opinion that from a British point of view, the EU does not fit to Britain. Be this as it may (the country is obviously split about their relationship to the EU), while the vote indeed made a statement about the EU, it does not allow any necessary conclusion about the state of the EU. Unlike many – EU-advocates included – assume, the British rejection of the EU is not only the expression of Britain's strong political identity. Great Britain, in this respect most similar to the Ukraine and Turkey, is a nation on the European periphery that cannot agree on the question whether to be part of Europe or not. Unlike Scotland, England may be regionally homeless, and this is certainly not a sign of strength. Regional integration becomes more and more a necessary condition for conducting foreign policy, even though it can have the price of reducing control in domestic politics. Without a regional framework, a middle-size power soon becomes the object of the power politics of true great powers. Or, how Mary Beard, publicist and ancient historian, put it: "The issue is not "winning back control" as spun; but what "control" means in joined up world and how we ensure it."¹ How much this question was missed out in the British debate will become obvious should the British aspire, as Boris Johnson now carelessly states, a status comparable to that of Norway or Switzerland. Both countries accept most parts of EU law without being able to participate in the decision-making process. And both pay relatively more money for it than the United Kingdom did. The project of regaining sovereignty would be turned upside down.

This does not change the fact that the British people have come to a decision and that it would be presumptuous to question its obligatory effect. Second-guessing of the decision could be even more devastating for the British democracy than the decision itself.

¹ Mary Beard on Twitter (June 25, 2016, 0:41 AM), <https://twitter.com/wmarybeard/status/746609323380449280>.

Nevertheless, one does not have to like the referendum just because one respects it. The vote can hardly serve as a model for democratic procedures. Too many aspects seem dubious. Besides the remarkably high impact of factually wrong allegations, its feudal style has been striking, in which upper class-boys carry on personal rivalries in national politics. Is this really more functional than the good old continental European party system? Especially irritating is the fact that a simple majority sufficed for such an important decision. Decisions made by a simple majority obtain their legitimacy from the fact that they can be modified by a simple majority. This does not seem possible in the case at hand. Nevertheless, the true enemies of the EU can now be recognized by their hurry to use the political momentum for their case, while someone like Boris Johnson, who does not have any deep political aversion against the EU that could drive him, has to get things sorted out first. The quest for an informed decision about the value of the EU could learn a lot from the observation of the consequences of Britain's exit. In the aftermath of the vote, the British seem to be far less enviable than before – even for Euro-sceptics. To stylize them into being part of a new avant-garde of sovereign democracies on the level of Canada and Australia, as has been done, seems rather absurd and can be easily refuted by studying European geopolitics and history.

Does this mean – so we read – that the EU can go on like before? Well, there is no right answer to a wrong question. In the last years, the EU has changed immensely. It never went on “like before”; though nobody would claim it handled its current crises successfully. Banking regulation is still weaker than in the United States, the debt crisis remains unsolved and, facing migration, Europe is lacking a common regime. However, those problems do not necessarily get worse with the Brexit. And it is cheap if critics agree on the failure of the EU, without being able to agree on how an EU should be constructed that does not fail. As long as one side wants to have strict banking regulation, while the other one tries to protect its domestic financial institutions, as long as one side wishes a European fiscal system, while the other insists on domestic control over the budget, as long as one side wants a common refugee policy, while the other one refuses to accept any immigration at all, it will be pointless to speak of the failure of “the EU” to solve its problems. If there is one thing to be learned from sovereigntists it is that the EU cannot permanently outsmart its member states.

This is why one should not be deceived when politicians now demand that the EU has to change – preferably the way they always wanted it to. Exactly because the EU consists of democratic states, it will not change unless the member states agree on it. But they do not, and neither do their voters: the British, who want to protect the City from banking regulation, or the Germans, for whom their moral convictions concerning immigration are more important than a European consensus. The much lamented EU elites have either lost political influence so heavily that they - like the European Commission - rather function as privileged bystanders in the crises, or they are so powerful because they represent the

member states that follow their own interests only. The European Central Bank as the result of a failed institutional compromise between France and Germany is point in case. In the same logic, the British could not wait to welcome employees from the new member states after the eastward expansion of the EU and voluntarily refrained from using transitional rules. That precisely this migration boost – not the refugees of 2015, which barely arrived in Britain – was one of the main motifs for people voting “leave” last week, is a typical sign of the weakness of the political will Britain shares with most of other member states. It belongs to democratic autonomy as the daily bottle of Scotch to individual freedom. That the member states are unable to agree on so many important questions is not the fault of the EU. It is the EU. For the same reason one should not believe those who claim to like “Europe”, but not the EU. For the time being, The EU is the imperfect political form of Europe. To be dissatisfied with it is one thing. A different thing is to make a smooth transition from questioning the EU’s policies to questioning its existence. What is the point in insisting to solve problems alone that cannot be solved but in common?