

PREVENTING VIOLENT POPULISM: Europeans need to have the difficult conversations.

Like most other Europeans, I wonder what is going to happen with this 'Europe' that we constructed over the past 60 years. Maybe 'Brexit' was not so surprising from a population that for years linguistically identified 'Europe' with the countries on 'the continent' - as if British history has not been deeply intertwined with them. More perplexing is the shift from 'euro-scepticism' to '*break up Europe*' in other countries. And the association of that agenda with what are deemed to be 'populist' and even outright 'right-wing' parties. What is going on?

In the following reflection, I argue that the drivers of discontent are legitimate and have not been taken serious enough for a long time, including by myself. But in pinning the blame on 'Europe' or 'Brussels', whatever its shortcomings and errors, we identify the wrong cause or culprit. Exiting from and even destroying the European project therefore is a remedy worse than the disease. Emotions on the key issues are running high however, and it has become very difficult for those on different sides of the argument to have constructive debate and conversations. If we don't stop and reverse this polarisation, we will find ourselves with deepening divisions that some will manipulate for their agendas, and that risk ending up in violence.

1. Drivers of discontent.

Three big drivers of discontent stand out: immigration, economic depression, and anger with the political 'establishment'. While some in the UK may have voted from opposition against the centralising political project for a federalised 'Europe', this doesn't seem to have been a motivation for most. The 'anti (central) government' sentiments that have been part of American politics since its independence, are not a major driver in European politics.

Each major theme has its own narratives and sub-stories: Discontent with 'immigration' comes with the theory that immigrants 'take our jobs' and drive down wages. Not such a problem during times of economic growth, but a stronger argument in times of depression. It has a more powerful shade: too many people from other races, cultures and religions, that are alleged not to share 'our values', and are becoming a threat to our 'Christian identity'. 'Multi-culturalism' was a nice idea, but it has failed. A third dimension more recently surged forward in the public imagination: the threat of terrorism, notably 'Islamic terrorism'

The 'economic hardship' narrative is understandable, particularly in those countries that have suffered from the economic recession and harsh 'austerity' measures for a decade. But it also strikes a strong cord in the many geographical areas that over the past 20-30 years have become economic backwaters, with no major industries and limited job opportunities.

The sense of economic neglect, and the perceived helplessness against an influx of people that are foreign not only in 'nationality' but also in 'identity' and 'values', all contribute to the loss of trust in the established political parties, and a backlash against the 'political establishment'.

The constant stream of critical and negative news by the media can only aggravate the discontents.

These narratives all carry a deep sense of frustration and powerlessness, that has been building up over many years. They have now become intertwined and transformed into a powerful mobilisation, that is given voice and legitimacy by individuals and parties that we call 'populist' and 'right wing'.

2. Is the European project another 'March of Folly'?

After centuries of warfare, 'Europe' started as a peace project, underpinned by increasing economic interconnectedness, that also found ideological support in the doctrine that free trade and liberal capitalism are the fastest road to prosperity. It gradually evolved into a political project, though in the 60 years since the Treaty of Rome didn't make similar substantive progress as a social project.

Like other Europeans, I have my doubts about decisions that have been made, and can find retrospective justification for it. For example:

- The rapid expansion from 6 to 28 members is understandable if we consider the violent history of our continent. But for all practical purposes it simply feels to have been '*too much too fast*'.
- Continuing to 'negotiate' with Turkey about eventual membership (and using the issue in the panic politics following the mass refugee influx in 2015) is utterly absurd. There is simply no political support for it among European populations, and the Turks are understandably feeling deceived.
- While in many practical ways the Euro-currency works for those who use it, the dangers of a common currency without common monetary and fiscal policy were well pointed out before its introduction. When Greece eventually joined the Euro in 2001, the other countries knew that the statistics of its government-finances were doctored to meet the requirements on public debt and budget deficits. They couldn't say too much as Germany also had 'stretched' the rules to pay for the cost of re-unification. Greece joining the Euro was another 'political' decision.
- I am not an economist (and don't believe 'economics' is as hard a 'science' as economists pretend) but I am doubtful about endless austerity measures to deal with the economic crisis.
- And of course, we all have doubts about an over-expensive EU-bureaucracy of privileged civil servants, and the ridiculous cost of a European Parliament, remote from its electorate, that travels back and forth between Brussels and Strasbourg more often than the British colonial administration in India moved between Delhi and Shimla.

But given our predilection for 'negative news' and 'deficit thinking', it is easy to take for granted and not to see the enormous benefits, directly but often more indirectly, that EU membership has brought to many of us, certainly economically. When everything went more or less well, from 1956 to 2008, there was broad public support for the European project. Are we going to throw all this out as soon as we hit the first rough patch? Was the European project such a 'March of Folly' as the euro-sceptics want us to believe? On this one I prefer to take a more Chinese long-term perspective: It's too early to tell.

3. Do we have the right culprit?

Discontents with the nature and rates of immigration, with losing out economically, and with a political establishment that feels very out-of-tune with ordinary people, have been around for many years. New is their merger now into a large '*enough of this*' vote. Three of the factors that make this possible are powerful new narratives, clear messages ('Take Back Control', 'America First') and 'new' public figures to incarnate and spread them.

To appeal easily and widely, the narratives need to designate a clear culprit: In the US that have become the Mexicans ('bad bad people') and 'terrorists' – increasingly generalised to 'Muslims'. In Europe we have, for the moment, a bigger culprit: 'Brussels'.

But is 'Brussels' responsible for all our woes? The 'Moroccan scum' that Geert Wilders in the Netherlands rails against, did not come to Western Europe as an EU scheme. It were our national governments who set up the 'guest worker' schemes in the 1950s to do the jobs that we ourselves refused to. Illegal immigrants in the UK tend to be employed by UK nationals: That is not the result of a 'Brussels' rule, but of the greed of free-riding UK 'citizens'. Nor is 'Brussels' responsible for the large numbers of migrants that have come to the UK from the Commonwealth. Our structural 'labour' problem is related to demographics, employer calculations about profit, and our distaste for certain jobs: Even Brexit minister David Davis now had to admit that migrants for the low-skilled, low paid jobs in the UK, will be needed for many more years.

Nor is the structural failure of the NHS (largely run by immigrants) as a public medical service (rather than a medical accountancy firm) of Brussels' making. Other EU member states manage the financing of their national health care differently.

One of the factors that make the UK an attractive place for illegal immigration is that people are not obliged to be able to identify themselves. British libertarians, including the Tories, have systematically opposed the introduction of an ID card – not Brussels.

Germany has maintained a strong manufacturing sector; the UK has lost much of its. Does that not come more from Thatcher than from 'Brussels'? Just as the 'de-industrialisation' in large parts of the US is the result of private sector bosses (more influential than ever in the Trump administration) re-locating their production plants to cheaper places in the world.

The economic depression in Europe since 2008 is not caused by 'Brussels'. Remember where it all began: the lending-frenzy of the financial sector, the toxic mortgages in the US, financial instruments that even the 'financial experts' couldn't understand – and the exposure of many banks who had all been stuffing themselves at the banquet of speculative capitalism. Two great catering services for which are Wall Street and 'The City' in London. The City Corporation is an offshore island outside the control of the London authority, and a central node in a web of tax-havens that offer escape to wealthy individuals and corporations from the rules of our societies.

The public debts of many EU member states, that force cuts in government spending, come from bailing out the banks whose executives, traders and brokers were paid excessively for *their* 'March of Folly'. Reforms were initiated on paper after the crash, but have not been fully implemented. Many banks *'too big to fail'* remain vulnerable, but the top of the banking class is again paid more than handsomely. Neither Labour nor the Tory's have been able or willing, to establish some 'control' over these *'freedom-for-money'* gamers. Should that happen, then actually only 'Brussels' can establish a level playing field within the EU.

4. Do we have the right remedy?

Large-scale migration, and zones of de-industrialisation in developed economies, are consequences of globalisation, not EU policies (the EU has been a major investor in many economically depressed areas of its members). In that sense, Trump's withdrawal of free trade agreements is more 'to-a-point' than it may seem, though it must hurt interests of the economic elite that has now encamped in the White House?

What we really need is a serious conversation about '*globalisation*': Globalisation has been sold to us for its benefits to consumers. But we are also producers. British consumers may enjoy cheaper lamb meat from New Zealand, but it puts British shepherds out of business. Look at the labels in your clothes: almost all of them are made in Asia, even if they are traded under European brands.

Incidentally, I understand that when Nigeria signed up to free trade, it opened the doors to cheaper textile imports, leading to the collapse of its own textile manufacturing, on whose jobs millions depended. Is there not a theory that economic deprivation can be one contributing factor to radicalisation?

Perhaps we should be less obsessed with '*my direct financial profit right now*' (another Thatcher legacy?) and think a bit more wisely about our *collective* economic strength and resilience. If the Swiss can do it, why not others.

We also need a serious conversation about what I call, without any inclination to Marxism, '*speculative capitalism*', where the pursuit of profit through financial games (called '*instruments*') has little connection to the exchange of real goods and services. If we refuse to exercise any serious control also over the unbounded capital markets, our national governments cannot effectively manage monetary, fiscal or investment policies.

We in Europe need to have more serious conversations, about

- What 'Europe' was all about, what it has done well and not so well so far, and where its institutions may need urgent reform.
- How our democratic system and shareholder capitalism encourages damaging short-term thinking, and how to counterbalance that without undoing their merits.
- Immigration, connecting the topics of labour needs, 'dirty' and 'decent' work', race, culture, and values.

We need to discuss whether contemporary Europe is derived from a '(Judeo?) Christian' identity, or rather built on the values of the Enlightenment, such as the testing of hypothesis and reasoned debate. That is where the question of 'integration' needs to be situated.

We need to discuss 'free speech', its necessity and its limits. We do impose limits: In 14 European countries I cannot deny the Holocaust; I cannot walk over to another table in a restaurant and start insulting the people there, or cry 'fire' in a cinema hall, under the protection of 'free speech'. A movement like 'Sharia4Belgium' may go too far for me too (Christians and Jews have historically been protected minorities in Muslim countries, but were not, as far as I know, allowed to openly call for the change of prevailing politico-religious governance and culture in those societies).

In these conversations, we need to assume responsibility for political and economic choices our national governments made over the past decades, and for their consequences. The EU is strong on universal human rights. But 'Brussels' nor the migrants have created the culture of (politically correct) '*tolerance*' in the Netherlands or of '*multi-culturalism*' in the UK, that are now the object of fierce backlash.

5. Difficult conversations.

This will be difficult conversations, because we are no longer used to real 'listening'.

I for one, need to acknowledge that I am fairly at ease with the growing openness and diversity of Europe in my life time. I have lived in 5 EU member states and have good friends in many others. I am married to a British national of Indian origin, find it handy to compare prices in the Euro-zone, and

enjoy not having to show papers at most borders (I do carry an ID card). I have also lived in other continents, including in predominantly Muslim societies, and constantly work with people of other races and cultures. But I need to listen better to how many of my EU co-citizens, who may have lived less mobile lives, and experience and see the changes in our environment differently.

When I go back to Antwerp where I grew up, even I note how the city now is far more 'colourful', and has 'ethnic' neighbourhoods. My estimate of racially white people residing in an area of east London where I also have family and friends, is about 5% - part of them possibly of east European origin. My connections there make me feel comfortable, but I am conscious how, for many of us, this may feel 'too much'.

I go to rural areas in Europe for their natural beauty, not to appreciate the economic backwaters they may be.

Most of my work is in war and post-war situations. After the attack at Brussels airport, I said to friends and family in Belgium: "*My world now has come to you*". Sadly, violence in the world is less of a shock to me. I definitely don't want Brussels to become another Baghdad. But I do know that the unprecedented peacefulness in Western Europe since 1945 is a historical privilege, for which the 'Europe' project deserves much credit.

Personally, and more widely, we have not been attentive enough to the feelings of discomfort, frustration and anxiety that these rapid changes create for many of our fellow citizens. We haven't taken these sentiments seriously, or dismissed them as 'racist', 'backward', 'intolerant' etc. Now we may find that our co-citizens with different perspectives are no longer prepared to hear ours.

At the moment, we don't seem able to have these conversations. The socio-political developments, and the folly of referenda where the fate of the nation is decided by simply majority (constitutional changes typically require larger majorities) have created deep polarisations in our societies. 'Leave' and 'stay' voters in the UK avoid the topic in conversations with 'the other', or the relationship may go sour. If you enter a debate on immigration, your risk being called a '*racial traitor*' or a '*white supremacist*'. Yet there is a universe of nuance in-between.

Finding common ground becomes hard when reason is supplanted by bare opinion. Before, we accepted that we are entitled to our own opinions, but not to our own facts; now we enter a world where there are '*alternative facts*'.

When narratives polarise and conversations break down, when truth lies with who shouts loudest, where there are clear and simple ('other', 'foreign', 'alien') culprits to blame for all our woes, and ties connecting us across divides get thinner and thinner, societies accelerate on the road to violence.

Nationalism has been a major source of warfare between European countries for centuries. A divided Europe can only leave us weaker in the globalising and rapidly changing world order today. A big winner so far is Putin's Russia.

More worryingly, I wonder about similarities with the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s: 'America First' resonates with 'Germany, Germany above all else'; Hitler was also a 'new' figure from outside the political establishment promising to make Germany 'great again'; and then too we had clear and identifiable culprits: Communists, homosexuals, and Jews. The authoritarian far-right has always found fruitful soil in economic depression and widespread frustration and discontent. More or less visible, neo-Nazis and proto-fascists in Europe are exploring and exploiting the opportunities. Far-right extremists already make up 25% of people referred to the government's counter-radicalisation programme in the UK.

Seriously engaging in genuine conversation with our fellow citizens who hold very different views, while opposing the authoritarian manipulations, is a difficult balancing act. But we must, if we don't want to end up as 'deeply divided societies' too. Peace builders and dialogue facilitators working in divided societies elsewhere: we need you at home!

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