ANOTHER NAIL IN THE COFFIN

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So Britain is out. These lines are being written only a few days after the fateful vote, and although at this stage we know the result, nobody can as yet fathom the consequences. This provides the media with ample opportunity for speculation, debates, opinions – exactly what they delight in. More important things are being overlooked, as always in such a situation: a broader view, for example, or a somewhat longer perspective, not necessarily long-term (because in the long term we're all dead, as John Maynard Keynes once famously observed), but certainly in the medium term.

There can be no doubt that Britain's leaving is a blow to the European Union. In fact, it is made even more severe by the state the EU is in at present. A couple of years ago it could have been argued that while the question of 'in or out' may be vital to the United Kingdom, it was of only limited consequence to the European Union. Not so anymore.

It is hardly necessary to recount the setbacks the EU has suffered during the last few years: the Euro crisis in the wake of a global depression; the Greek bailout; the failure to stop Russian expansion in the Ukraine; the muddled response to the flow of refugees across the Mediterranean and, even more dramatically, through Greece and the Balkans in the summer of 2015. In none of these cases did the EU seem to be able to meet the challenge swiftly, let alone resolutely.

To a large extent, this must be put down to faults in the way the EU is organized – structural weaknesses in the 'European edifice', as it were. At present, the EU can only be as strong as its member states allow it to be, on a case to case basis. Its weakness is therefore very much the fault of these member states.

This is where the most serious crisis of all can be identified on the European continent. It is the crisis brought about by the alarming resurgence of nationalist sentiment throughout the Union (and beyond – what we're hearing from Russia gives just as much cause for alarm). In Europe, if nowhere else, nationalism necessarily poses a serious threat. For one thing, it is the stuff that demagogues thrive on: the perfect concoction for another bout of mass mobilization and mass hysteria. After all, nationalism seems to be so wonderfully intoxicating; one cannot help but wonder if it may not even cause addiction.

On the other hand, the danger is rooted in European reality. And again, we can discern two reasons for this: first, there is hardly any European state big enough to carry sufficient weight in the modern world, i.e. on a global scale. It is true of course that campaigners for the 'Leave' vote in the British referendum took pride in the fact that the UK had the fifth largest economy in the world. Surely, they argued, we must be able to go it alone? But the German economy is even larger (fourth) and the French only marginally smaller (sixth). Would they all be better off on their own?

Even if that were the case, it would definitely not apply to the vast majority of European countries. Left to their own devices, they would not enjoy greater independence but would become helpless victims of powers far beyond their own influence. Russia comes to mind instantly, with the United States a close second and, never to be forgotten, big financial players, 'the markets' as the saying goes, or big corporations some of whose budgets dwarf those of the smaller nation states in Europe. All these powers would have to jockey for position on a continent made up of numerous small, ostensibly 'sovereign' countries. Anyone can work out for themselves what this would entail.

However – and secondly – the situation in Europe is such that there can never be any pure nation state. With very few exceptions (if any) all continental countries contain different nationalities to a lesser or greater extent. In some cases, this may create considerable centrifugal forces as can be witnessed in the United Kingdom right now. In other cases, there are ethnic minorities to be considered. In Eastern Central and Southeast Europe, nationalities and ethnic minorities are inextricably interspersed, making any clear-cut 'national' solution essentially unobtainable: an inexhaustible source

of conflict which can lead, in the worst case, to ethnic cleansing or even genocide. The sorry tale of Yugoslavia's break-up in the nineties should serve as a dire warning not just of what is possible, but also of how easily and how quickly the hitherto unthinkable may come about.

Nationalist parties are on the rise all over Europe: from Hungary to Slovakia to Poland, from Austria to Germany to France and the Netherlands. What is more, the nationalist mode of thinking and arguing is gaining ground everywhere, taking over more and more time and space in what is called the public debate. Great Britain is a good case in point. The opposition of *we,* the British, versus *them* on the continent has become accepted to an extent that it is simply taken for granted even by well-informed and otherwise thoughtful commentators. For an observer from the continent, this is either laughable as the implied uniformity of 'them' simply does not exist, or it is deeply disappointing considering the astonishing lack of insight and reflection displayed in such utterances. In any case, the opposition is silly. But there it is, gaining ground and conviction.

The nationalist mode of reasoning, we have said, is a constant threat to Europe, united or not. It is the Ebola virus of European politics. It is destructive, lethal even; and it seems to be exceedingly contagious, all but impossible to contain. It lies at the heart of all the other problems bedevilling the EU: member states are acting in what they perceive, quite narrowly, to be their own 'national interest'.

It seems that Europe can only thrive if it has a supranational structure in place which is able to override national interest. Without such a structure, there will never be any stability. This is borne out not only by demography, but also by experience. The long fruitful period of peace (if only relative) before 1914 rested on what was then called the Concert of Europe, i.e. the informal co-operation of the major powers in and adjacent to Europe plus, of course, the supra-national edifice of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (for all that was worth – that's an altogether different question). After 1945, the division of the continent and the ensuing Cold War imposed a rigid discipline on the nation states on either side of the Iron Curtain.

Since the end of that war, Europe has been called upon to assume responsibility for its own affairs: nobody else to blame. One would have expected that it would look to its own experience for guidance.

Unfortunately, while these words are being written in the summer of 2016, it seems that we have slipped farther back than ever in our short history of unification.

It has to be said that Britain has contributed to this setback, rather than working against it. The result of the referendum in itself may only be another nail in the coffin of European unity; but it is not the only one, and the nails keep being hammered in. The British – or rather, the majority who voted for 'Brexit' – have succumbed to the nationalist virus; and thus, they are assisting in its spread. They may have voted in the hope of getting away from it all, of putting their country in some kind of quarantine. But in all likelihood, such hopes are bound to be vain. If Europe fails, Britain will suffer. That should have been another lesson taught by experience.

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