

Beyond Brexiternity?

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“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

— Antonio Gramsci

British Prime Minister Theresa May is still trying to get her withdrawal agreement with the European Union “over the line” in the House of Commons, having failed to do so three times already. And having failed to make good her promise to take Britain out of the European Union on March 29, she has been granted by the EU an “extension” until October 31, by which time Britain must either leave the EU by means of the agreement (there is no chance of substantial renegotiation), crash out of the EU without any deal at all, or cancel Brexit altogether. None of these three options will achieve any kind of consensus; any of them could happen.

May has promised her panicking Members of Parliament, and party members who want to get rid of her, that she will quit as prime minister once she has delivered Brexit, but she shows no signs of being able to deliver anything. So far, all attempts by Tory MPs to oust her have failed, and it is even possible that she will still be hanging on this time next year. Also, it now seems unlikely that May can avoid Britain having to participate in the European Parliament elections on May 23—three years after the Leave vote in the referendum.

May’s cross-party talks are going nowhere. Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn favors a close alignment to the EU after Brexit along with guarantees to protect consumer, environmental, and labor standards, as well as the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. But May’s current survival strategy depends on keeping at bay those in her own party who don’t want these things. Corbyn’s wish for Britain to remain in a customs union with the EU would overcome the sticky problem of the “Irish Backstop,” which is designed to keep an open border in Ireland for as long as the EU and the UK fail to strike a future trade deal. But the Eurosceptics within May’s own party fear that the backstop could bind the UK permanently into the customs union, and her Democratic Unionist allies in Northern Ireland are opposed to a customs border falling across the Irish Sea, which would threaten the “unity” of the UK. In Scotland, voters narrowly decided to stay in the UK in the 2014 referendum on independence. But as the majority of Scots voted to stay in the EU in 2016, the Scottish National Party is now calling for a second referendum on independence should

the Westminster government actually implement Brexit.

The deadlock currently gripping the British parliamentary process takes the form of a constitutional crisis, in which three forces vie for legitimacy:

1. The “Crown in Parliament” represented by “Her Majesty’s” elected government, which functions as the executive and normally sets the legislative agenda.
2. Parliament as a whole, which has now exercised its ability to repeatedly vote down May’s withdrawal agreement and to assume for itself responsibility for setting the legislative agenda on Europe.
3. The pro-Brexit referendum vote of 2016, which supposedly represents the “will of the people.”

This is an unprecedented crisis, and it seems unlikely that it can be resolved either by a general election or a rerun of the referendum—or both.

The Road to Nowhere

As far as the majority of the Tory establishment and most of big business were concerned, Brexit was never supposed to happen. In his 2014 general election campaign, then Tory Prime Minister David Cameron committed his government to holding an in-out referendum on the European Union. But he did so only because he needed to appease his Eurosceptic right wing and roll back the challenge from the right of Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party (UKIP). Cameron rightly wagered that the Labour Party, under Ed Miliband’s neoliberal leadership, had become too much of a weak imitation of his own party’s fake “compassionate conservatism” to pose much of a threat. Cynically, Cameron also wagered that his “Europhile” Liberal Democrat coalition partners would emerge strong enough to block the referendum promise. Only they didn’t. In the 2014 general election the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed due to revulsion over their five-year collaboration with the Tories in implementing vicious austerity policies. Labour was also badly mangled, getting a mere 30 percent of the vote and losing nearly all their seats north of the border to the Scottish National Party. Farage’s UKIP got 12.6 percent of the vote and one MP. Cameron’s Conservatives gained 23 seats and an absolute majority.

After Cameron went on to campaign on the Remain side in his referendum and lost, he had no option but to resign. His successor, Theresa May, tried to strengthen her hand by calling yet another general election in 2017, believing that the Labour Party, under Corbyn’s allegedly Marxist leadership, would collapse even further. She miscalculated. The vote for the Labour Party rose to 40 percent, with a gain of 30 seats. The Liberal Democrats continued to flounder; the Scottish nationalists lost a third of their seats, and the UKIP vote collapsed from nearly 4 million to a mere 600,000.

May and the majority of Tory MPs, having made the referendum result a “red line,” found themselves opposed by a sizable minority of Tory MPs who argued that simply “pulling the plug” on the EU without a trade deal might prove to be catastrophic for British capitalism. Certainly, the effect of tariffs on thousands of commodities and services is one of the great unknowns, as are the prospects for London-based finance capital’s continued supremacy in EU financial markets and for businesses wanting to expand their activities in other areas, such as East Asia.

The “Democratic Deficit”

There was much truth in the Remain campaigners’ designation of the 2016 Leave side as crooks, liars, and racists. But the Leavers’ slogan, “Take Back Control,” appeared to many as a positive vision that went unchallenged by the Remainers, who could have asked—but didn’t—when precisely

did the “people” ever have “control” free of obstruction by the ruling class? The Remain campaign found it difficult to sell the benefits of EU membership to millions of people who had never seen them; instead, Remainers opted for the “Fear Factor”: “OK, it’s not that good, but it could get a lot worse.” Although Corbyn has “accepted” the 2016 referendum result and the need for a “soft Brexit,” he is faced with the fact that most members of the Labour Party favor a second referendum essentially to override the result of the first one. The anti-Brexit demonstration in London in March, which mobilized hundreds of thousands of people calling for another EU referendum, contained a lot of Labour voters as well as Greens and liberals.

Whereas the Labour leadership under Corbyn would support a referendum in order to prevent Theresa May’s Brexit deal or leaving without any deal at all, the right wing of the party, led by Corbyn’s deputy leader, Tom Watson, wants Labour to commit unconditionally to another referendum with a Remain option. As things stand, Labour is claiming to be the only party that represents people on both sides of the Leave-Remain question. Claudia Webbe, of the party’s National Executive, argues, “Our number one priority should be for a democratic socialist Labour government to deliver a sustained and irreversible shift in wealth and power in the UK.” The party remains however, as divided as it was when Corbyn was first elected leader.

There was once a consensus on the left (of the Labour Party and those further left) that the “will of the people” expressed through elections to the House of Commons was incompatible with the existing institutions of the European Union and its predecessors. When Corbyn was first elected to Parliament in 1983, as a protégé of Tony Benn, MP (1925-2014), both of them favored leaving the EU because, they argued, the transfer of sovereign powers from the British Parliament to the bureaucracy of “Fortress Europe” would undermine, if not prevent altogether, any attempt by a future Labour government to carry through a left program “For the Many, Not the Few.” Benn articulated the issue with five questions to be asked of any legislative body: “*What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you use it? To whom are you accountable? How do we get rid of you?*” Anyone who cannot answer the last of those questions does not live in a democratic system.”

For Benn, the issue was sovereignty. But 2019 is not 1983. The economic ties between the UK and the EU are now much stronger and will be painful to break. This phenomenal reflection of the emptiness of all nationalist illusions of socialism in one country is mirrored by the emptiness of its other: the EU. Who now remembers French Socialist European Commissioner Jacques Delors’ speech to the 1988 British Trade Union Congress on the coming of “Social Europe”?

The central sovereign institution of the EU is the European Commission, now headed by Jean-Claude Juncker, former prime minister of Luxembourg, with a well-paid staff of 30,000 bureaucrats. Almost all EU laws and treaties originate with the commission, which also acts as the sole executor of the EU’s budget. The commission is not elected by the citizens of Europe; rather, its members are *nominated* by the European Union Council, which consists of government heads of states. Unlike a national parliament, in which elected members can put forward bills that can then be voted on, the European Parliament can only vote on legislation already approved and submitted by the commission. The 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, stitched together by the European Council heads of state, effectively buried Delors’ social democratic dreams and upheld neoliberalism as the basis of political legislation, beyond the reach of popular choice. The treaty “allows” the European Parliament to put forward legally nonbinding “proposals” to the commission, but the commission has no obligation to accept them. If it rejects them, the commission only has to send the Parliament written reasons for doing so.

The Remainers do not, however, regard the “democratic deficit” as that important. Some argue, rightly, that in or out of the EU the power of international capitalism would prevail; and as every

good anti-Stalinist leftist recognizes, socialism in one country is a nonstarter. Remainers argue that such is the growth of xenophobic far-right populism over the last few years, we must now rely on the EU for guarantees of freedom of movement and for protection of democratic rights. Yet the EU does not appear able or willing to prevent some member states—especially Poland, Italy, and Hungary—from carrying out policies that are reminiscent of fascism, and the EU “principle” of “free movement” of labor does not apply to migrants from outside of Europe.

Nigel Farage, whose new Brexit Party would certainly win quite a few seats in the European Parliament, has threatened that his rabble of MEPs will cause chaos there. This however, is probably an idle threat, as the next European Parliament is likely in any case to be stuffed with right-wing extremists and fascists from all over Europe. The European poll is certainly likely to cause even more misery for May. Farage has abandoned UKIP, which he complains has been taken over by far-right extremists and semi-criminals. The Brexit Party candidates list for the prospective European elections includes former Tories, media celebrities, and even “revolutionary communists” turned “libertarians” from *Spiked Online*. On the extreme right, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (also known as Tommy Robinson), a 24-carat fascist street thug, is standing in Manchester as an ally of Anne Marie Waters, who is ex-Labour, ex-UKIP, and founder of the new fascist party For Britain. Many pro-Remain Tory and Labour voters may switch to Change UK, a Macron-inspired cabal of liberal breakaway Tories and anti-Corbyn defectors from Labour.

The fact is, though, that the European elections, as far as most people in Britain are concerned, have never been of much importance. The turnout in Britain for the last European elections was 35.6 percent, compared with 68.7 percent for the 2017 general election and 72 percent for the 2016 referendum. An important factor in this “apathy” is that the European Parliament is widely seen as an irrelevant talking shop devoid of real legislative power. While the proceedings of the House of Commons feature frequently in the UK media, those of the European Parliament barely feature at all—not least because rarely does anything significant or interesting happen there. Because of the dismal turnout in European elections, and because of the D’Hondt version of proportional representation, a party that gets around 20 percent of the total vote will get a sizable share of the seats even though it might only have the support of 7 or 8 percent of the electorate.

Is “Another” EU Possible?

Sadly, xenophobia has a long history in British—especially English—culture and working-class consciousness. George Orwell wrote 77 years ago,

The traditional English xenophobia is stronger among the working class than the middle class. It was partly the resistance of the trade unions that prevented a really large influx of refugees from the fascist countries before the war, and when the German refugees were interned in 1940, it was not the working class that protested. The difference in habits, and especially in food and language, makes it very hard for English working people to get on with foreigners. Their diet differs a great deal from that of any European nation, and they are extremely conservative about it. As a rule they will refuse even to sample a foreign dish, they regard such things as garlic and olive with disgust, life is unlivable to them unless they have tea and puddings.¹

While British workers have long overcome any aversion to “foreign” food, and the unions are now among the least racist institutions in Britain, xenophobia persists. The question is, can xenophobia be curtailed by staying in the EU super state? “Hate Brexit, Love Socialism” is a slogan in the left Remain camp. However, Remainers further to the right see “Corbynism” as an unfortunate digression on the road to liberal “progress”; their position is, effectively, “Love the EU, Forget Socialism.” Further to the left is the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25), founded by Yanis

Varoufakis, the former Greek finance minister on whose country the EU imposed drastic and inhuman austerity measures in 2015. The transnational DiEM25 is running candidates in European Parliament elections in several EU states—though not in Britain—as “European Spring.” Varoufakis, who is an influential figure in Britain as well as the rest of Europe, accepts that the treaties and rules of the EU are “idiotic” and “unworkable.” But at present he doesn’t think trying to change them would do much good. According to Varoufakis’s Keynesian argument, there are trillions of Euros sloshing around in the banking and financial system, which the European Investment Bank could sink into green-infrastructure projects (a European version of the “Green New Deal”). He does not think there is much chance of this happening in the foreseeable future; he appeals instead to the populist politics of “feelings,” meaning, it is important “to get people angry with the establishment, not with the foreigners.” He concedes that none of the measures he advocates would constitute socialism. “But,” he says, “it’s something far, far better than what we have today.” As regards Britain, Varoufakis, who campaigned on the Remain side during the 2016 referendum, now argues, “I think that we should respect the outcome of the people’s vote. I really despise the way that [campaigners for a second referendum] talk about a ‘People’s Vote’ as if the first one was the wrong people’s vote. This kind of toxic language does not suit progressive politics.”²

Varoufakis backs Corbyn’s calls for a fresh general election and adds that the “silver lining” to Britain leaving the EU is that a Labour government could nationalize industry “more easily.”

Getting the Tories Out?

Labour now has a program for transferring power and ownership from big capitalism to ordinary citizens, which would place a future Labour government on a collision course with fossil fuel companies, property developers, landlords, and finance capitalists. Corbyn and McDonnell are quite aware of this. The propaganda against Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party, coming not only from the reactionary right but also from neoliberals inside and outside his own party, is relentless. Added to that, Labour really does have a “problem of anti-Semitism” in its ranks and constituency. Some on the left think that the controversy is being stirred up by so-called Zionists and deny that the problem even exists, while some on the right are intent on weaponizing the denials. To this writer the allegations against Corbyn on this count are ill-founded, although whether he can effectively deal with the issue as a whole remains to be seen.

It is clear that Corbyn’s Labour Party represents to millions of people the only alternative to the Tories’ austerity regime and the only way out of the seemingly endless Brexit crisis. There is currently no aspect of Tory government policy that is not marked by incompetence, corruption, and cruelty. The Tory government has every intention of deepening the austerity measures that have been rolled out over the last ten years since the financial crash. The latest is the much-feared Universal Credit scheme, in which benefits previously paid separately to claimants—such as the housing benefit, child tax credit, and jobs seekers allowance—will be merged. As a result, almost two million people will lose more than £1,000 a year, with those claiming disability benefits worst affected. Currently 3.7 million children are in absolute poverty, and the number is rising. Some four million people are now dependent on food banks, and 1.6 million are destitute, for which they can thank Cameron’s former chancellor, George Osborne, who three years ago imposed a benefits freeze that is still in place.

Theresa May, when she was home secretary in the Conservative-Liberal coalition, targeted immigrants with what she called a “hostile environment” policy. This consisted of measures designed to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible for people who hadn’t been explicitly given the right to stay. May’s policy was to “deport first and hear appeals later.” The results became clear a year ago when the “Windrush” scandal broke, revealing that the government, having classified Caribbean-born long-term British residents as illegal immigrants, forced thousands of

people out of their jobs and homes into detention and deportation. Every other sphere of government is in the same mess, be it the National Health Service, education, environment, or infrastructure; and the monopolization of parliamentary business by Brexit has added to the paralysis.

To add to the national humiliation of the Brexit chaos, Theresa May has invited President Donald Trump for a state visit in June, which will no doubt see hundreds of thousands of people mobilized in protest. Ironically, rolling out the red carpet for Trump might help to keep Theresa May in power for a bit longer, as most of the contenders to replace her are reluctant to be seen feting such a dangerous moron. There is however an important Tory exception: Boris Johnson, Brexit supporter and former foreign secretary, who Trump would like to see in number 10 Downing Street. Such are the morbid symptoms of Britain's Brexiternity.

Notes

1. George Orwell, *The English People* (London: Collins, 1947).
2. "Yanis Varoufakis's European Dreams: Interview with David Broder," *Jacobin*, November 2, 2018.