

The rise of nationalism and the European Union's uncertain future

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It has been my great good fortune to teach the history of European integration at University College Cork for over 25 years. I have also had the very good luck to work in archives in different countries in Europe and in the United States. I have also had the opportunity work with historian pioneers researching the origins and development of the European Union, that unique political construction and pioneer of pooled sovereignty.

In my lifetime, I have seen the European Economic Community (EEC) grow from the original six in 1956 to nine in 1973 with the admission of Ireland, Denmark and Britain, and on, in the wake of the ending of the Cold War, to 28 member states.

In that time, the community has changed its name as it has evolved towards ever closer union from Economic Coal and Steel Community to EEC, and then European Community and now the European Union. Whatever it has been called, the now European Union has been credited with having given Western Europe a prolonged period of unprecedented peace, breaking the cycle of world wars –helped turn swords into ploughshares and integrate the economies of the union. Ironically, paradoxically and surprisingly, the European Union has been led –since its inception– by a Franco-German axis, or better said, alliance. Both countries fought on opposite sides in the Franco-Prussian war of the 1870s, and in two world wars in the twentieth century.

Furthermore, both countries navigated the European Union through the ending of the Cold War and its aftermath of civil unrest and civil war in the former Yugoslavia and neighbouring territories. The fall of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European empire provided the unprecedented opportunity for the European Union to extend its parameters to the boundaries of a retracted Russian influence. By 2014, there were 28 member states and that is likely to remain static for a number of years as there are major problems with the country at the top of the queue... Turkey.

Not surprisingly, the leaders of the movement for European integration post-World War II were active in the resistance or were political opponents of Fascism and Nazism. In the 1930s and during the war years, many of the men and women who shaped the future of Europe, in the late 1940s and 1950s, had witnessed the collapse of the nation state on the continent, experienced a disastrous war and, most disconcertingly, saw elites in the occupied states placing governing apparatus in the hands of pro-Hitler puppet regimes. Moreover, those quisling-like regimes collaborated willingly with the plans of the Nazis to eliminate the Jews, gypsies, gay people, and anyone who stood in their way. As early as July 1941, the Italian federalist, Altiero Spinelli, helped produce the Manifest of Ventotene in which it was written that

the nation has become a divine entity which thinks only of its own existence and its own development, without caring at all about the damage it may cause to others. The absolute sovereignty of the nation states has caused each one of them to try to dominate the other. The inevitable result of this desire to dominate is the hegemony of the strongest state over all the others.

The doctrine of nationalism, in those circumstances, provided an opportunity to return to old ways. The solution was to replace autarchy with a European federation and drive out forever

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the forces of National Socialism and Fascism by creating supra-national structures governing a United States of Europe.

Altiero Spinelli, the anti-fascist resistance leader in Italy favoured a federal solution in post-war Europe. At a meeting in Geneva in 1944, which was attended by Spinelli, the same message emerged:

If a post war order is established in which each State retains its complete national sovereignty, the basis for a Third World War would still exist even after the Nazi attempt to establish the domination of the German race in Europe has been frustrated.

What further reinforced strong sentiments of that kind for people like Spinelli was the manner and methods by which the Nazis had sought to conduct a policy of genocide against Jews and other groups of so-called *untermenschen*, those with physical and mental disabilities, gypsies and gays.

On 16 October 1943, over 1,000 Italian Jews were rounded up and transported to Auschwitz as were over 4,000 others from Northern Italy. Add to that the millions who were exterminated in the death camps from all over Europe and it is not difficult to see why there was a great resolve amongst those who experienced the evils of Nazism and Fascism never to return to the international anarchy of the inter-war years when the League of Nations was neither respected nor obeyed by German and Italy.

Another great Italian, the author, Carlo Levi, was a strong voice against Fascism and wrote a memorable work, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, which was an implicit condemnation of the Italian regime and an act of defiance in literature.

His namesake, novelist and poet Primo Levi, was a holocaust survivor and he has left many haunting lines –in prose and in verse– which raged against the unimaginable tyranny of the Holocaust. In his poem, *Schemà*, Levi writes:

Consider whether this is a man
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter

His fellow poet, Paul Celan, –another survivor of the holocaust– has left us these lines from the poem called *todesfuge*, originally called *todestango*. (It is hard to grasp the perverse truth that the orchestra at Auschwitz also had tangos in its *repertoire*.) Whatever its original name, today the poem, *Deathfuge*, should never be expunged from the collective global memory:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
We drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
We drink and we drink
We shovel a grave in the air where you won't lie too cramped

Post World War II, continental politicians and civic leaders –who had experienced the horrors of the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust– worked with urgency to transform European political and economic structures and prevent a return to the post-Versailles international system which had collapsed in the 1930s. Europe in 1945 had a number of outstanding and like-minded political leaders willing to end inter-state conflict and rivalry and, influenced by progressive political thinking influenced heavily by Catholic social teaching, drive on towards the establishment of a United State of Europe based on the principles of the welfare state. The four most important leaders were Alcide De Gasperi of Italy, Robert Schumann of France, Konrad Adenauer of Germany, and the French civil servant and architect of a united Europe, Jean Monnet. Without

labouring the point, the European structures to emerge between 1948 and 1955 were based on the principles of pooled sovereignty, first exemplified in the structures of the European Coal and Steel Community (1951) and later by the European Economic Community (1957). The six original members, France, Germany and Italy, together with the Benelux (Luxembourg, Netherlands and Belgium) had little difficulty adjusting to the idea of pooled sovereignty in key sectors. None were idolaters of the nation state. All enjoyed the full benefits of the free movement of goods, labour and capital. While not losing their respective national identities, citizens in all six countries were encouraged to cultivate their European identity. After all, the EEC was evolving towards a full political and economic union, and ultimately a United States of Europe.

It is not historically accurate to say that “the nation state” was totally discredited, or discredited in every way, by the war. The British, the Irish and the Scandinavians –Norway apart– were countries which had not experienced occupation. Britain stood up valiantly to Hitler. Ireland was neutral as was also Sweden (Spain and Portugal were not democracies.) In the unoccupied democracies, the nation state was not a spent and discredited institution. On the contrary, the opposite lesson was taken from the war; the nation state was, for example, what was perceived to have saved Ireland from invasion.

Eamon de Valera, the wartime leader, remained in power until 1948. He was, in the early post-war period, an enthusiastic supporter of integration for continental Europeans. But he did not see it as being immediately relevant for Ireland, or, at least, not at that point of departure in 1948/9. Winston Churchill, the great wartime leader, was put out of office in 1945. He remained strongly supportive of economic cooperation but not pooled sovereignty or federalism. Both the British and the Irish –for very different reasons– showed no inclination to join the Coal and Steel Community in 1951 or the EEC in 1957. But, by 1961, both had changed their respective policies and knocked on the door in Brussels to petition for membership, together with Denmark and Norway. There was never any doubt about the terms on which the British entered the EEC; London wanted EEC membership but for reasons of enlightened self-interest. The British wanted to mould the future of the community to its own image and likeness, pre-empting the emergence of a federal Europe or a united Europe. At this point, Scotland and Wales were not in a position to have a direct say in the decision to join, other than through their strong Labour representation in the Commons. Ireland, on the other hand, quickly learned the harsh realities of being a small power and a neutral. The Irish leader, Seán Lemass, made it clear in mid-1962 that Ireland was prepared to join a community heading towards ultimate political union. None of the applicants succeeded in that round. President Charles de Gaulle vetoed the membership of the British in January 1963. There was another flurry to obtain membership in 1967. But the British, the Irish and the Danes had to wait until 1 January 1973 to secure membership.

Thirdly, the EC had to confront the challenge from the British seeking to derail any effort to move towards federalism and social democratic influences.

Unlike Ireland where a referendum on membership of the EC was held in 1972 with a 91% “yes” outcome, the British did not get an opportunity to do the same. The new Labour Government of Harold Wilson called a referendum in 1975, 67.23% said “yes” to the question “Do you think the United Kingdom should stay in the European Economic Community (Common Market)?” The strength of the “yes” vote was all the more remarkable because of the split within the cabinet. Ministers canvassed on both sides. Many Conservatives would also have voted to remain in the EC.

The next enlargement brought in three countries which had emerged relatively recently from military dictatorship. Greece, ruled by the colonels between 1967 and 1974, joined in 1981. Spain, following the death of Franco in 1975, had successfully made the transition to democracy. Portugal, following the coup in 1974, had followed a similar path. Both joined on 1 January 1986. I will make three observations here. Firstly, the arrival of all three countries into the community was seen as a way of making the democratic process in each country irreversible or, at least, strengthening democratic institutions. Secondly, the larger the membership of the community became the greater the danger of losing sight of the original objectives. Widening jeopardised the deepening process.

The British Prime Minister between 1979 and 1990, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, was first and

foremost an English nationalist. She conducted a successful campaign during her first years in power to have the EC adjust Britain's VAT repayment to Brussels. "I want my money back," she demanded, and she got it to the eternal shame of the other member states.

But she had more of a struggle after 1985 with the new President of the Commission, Jacques Delors. The latter gave a new momentum to the process of European integration, completing the internal market and laying the foundations for a single European currency. He saw through the Single European Act in 1986 and the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. Delors was there for the fall of the Berlin wall and for the accession in 1995 of Austria, Finland and Sweden to the community.

Delors' nemesis was Mrs Thatcher. She was, first and foremost, an English nationalist. She conducted a successful campaign during her first years in power to have the EC adjust Britain's VAT repayment to Brussels. "I want my money back," she demanded, and she got it. In 1988, Thatcher's Euroscepticism was at its most pronounced in a speech in the College of Europe, Bruges.

She said that "working more closely together does not require power to be centralised in Brussels or decisions to be taken by an appointed bureaucracy." She said her first guiding principle was that willing and "active cooperation between independent sovereign states" was "the best way to build a successful European Community." To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging and would jeopardise the objectives we seek to achieve.

She wanted France as France, Spain as Spain and Britain as Britain, each with its own customs, traditions and identity. It would be folly to try to fit them into some sort of identikit European personality. "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level, with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels," Thatcher declared.

When Delors called for the European Parliament to be the democratic body of the community, the commission to be the executive and the Council of Ministers to be the Senate, Thatcher told the Commons in reply in 1990: "No, No, No."

In her book *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World*, Thatcher wrote in 2003 that "such an unnecessary and irrational project as building a European super state was ever embarked upon will seem in future years to be perhaps the greatest folly of the modern era."

But in the end, her extreme views on Europe contributed to her fall from power on 28 November 1990. However, free of the burdens of office, she was even more frank with her biographer, Charles Moore, who argued that she wanted Britain to leave the EC following the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992: "Advisers had persuaded her that she should not say this in public since it would have allowed her opponents to drive her to the fringes of public life." She did not really care too much about what was thought of her on this topic.

Delors, in contrast, gave a new momentum to the process of European integration, completing the internal market and laying the foundations for a single European currency. He saw through the Single European Act in 1986 and the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. Delors was there for the fall of the Berlin Wall and for the accession in 1995 of Austria, Finland and Sweden. The popular press in Britain, known as the red tops, had a field day at the expense of Delors. These slides show his unpopularity. Building on the success of Delors, who stepped down as President in 1996, his successors helped bring about the introduction of the Euro in 2001/2 –perhaps the single most important driver of further European integration and the pooling of sovereignty in the area of banking and fiscal control. Some 19 of the 28 countries are now members in a Europe that has spread from the west to deep into the east. But as the introduction of the Euro has demonstrated, the European Union has deepened as well as widening in recent years. The prevalence and persistence of international financial crises has helped to deepen further the integration process. Ireland, which confronted a major financial melt-down in 2008, witnessed at first hand that rescue packages came at a severe price –not merely in terms of imposing rigidities and austerity on Irish people, but also by forcing– as part of a recovery package –Ireland to undertake reform of banking, business and government reform. Pension were cut, wage increases frozen, the civil service was down-sized, recruitment to the public service was prohibited. Just as EEC membership had obliged Ireland to introduce equal pay for women in the mid-1970s, so, too, were Irish

governments obliged –as a consequence of the crisis– to introduce such unpopular measures as property tax, charges for water and salary cuts. Such swingeing measures were unpopular and the backlash helped bring down Fianna Fáil and their Green Party coalition partners in 2011. But the measures worked, as the Irish economy in 2015 is growing at the rate of 6.5%.

Why were the Irish so passive in the face of such unprecedented cutbacks in the standard of living for so many people? The answer is that they were not and the change of government in 2011 demonstrated that they were far from being passive or fatalistic. Perhaps one of the reasons why the Irish public had not collectively targeted the European Union for its woes, is that reasonable citizens knew that the economic crisis following the departure of the Celtic Tiger was substantially home-made and home-grown. Membership of the EU provided a way for the Irish economy to recover while local politicians could blame Brussels for having to introduce property tax and water charges. Another reason why Irish citizens have not simply blamed Europe for its woes is because membership of the European Union in Ireland is rooted in the sovereign will of the people expressed on many occasions in referenda through the ballot box when Ireland first sought to join on 8 June 1972 and then on every occasion when there was a major change to the Treaty: Single European Act, 26 May 1987; European Union (Maastricht), 16 June 1992; Amsterdam, 3 June 1998; Nice 1 and 2, 7 June 2001, and 19 October 2002; Lisbon, 12 June 2008 (rejected), and 2 October 2009 (accepted); Fiscal Treaty (2012).

However unpopular the EU might be in Ireland today –with a revolt over water charges, dissent over austerity and the emergence of the strongest ever showing for independents in the opinion polls, at 31%– it cannot be argued convincingly that the Ireland’s relationship with an ever-evolving EU is not rooted in democratic choice and popular sovereignty. But there is a growing scepticism over the future of the European project. It has strayed a far distance from the idealism of the late 1940s and early 1950s. There is a real danger that that idealism, which sought to guarantee no return to the destructive nationalism of the 1930s, has been replaced in part by a European project based on defence of the *status quo*. The humanitarianism which drove people like Altiero Spinelli, Alcide de Gasperi, Robert Schumann and Konrad Adenauer is no longer the main driver of the community. At least, that humanitarian legacy is in conflict with more conservative forces which wish to reduce the European Union to a coalition of nation states –and not a union in the true sense of that word. That was the vision of Charles de Gaulle –a Europe led by France without the presence of a pro-US Britain. In an extreme form, those nationalist sentiments are echoed by Marine Le Pen and her French National Front Party. On 22 April 2012, she polled 17.90%, or six million votes, in the first round of the presidential election. Unlikely to succeed in the next presidential election, she will certainly increase her vote. There are echoes of similar rightist sentiments in Italy particularly as represented by the Lega Nord in the northern part of Italy where the league is the largest part in the Veneto and Lombardy, and the second largest in Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, the third largest in Liguria, Marche and Umbria and the fourth largest in Piedmont. But for all the huffing and puffing, the league is unlikely to takeover national government in Italy, no more than Le Pen in France or the far right in Germany where the centre is deeply entrenched. But that does not mean that there ought to be any complacency in the European Union. The far right is a growing threat and its presence requires eternal vigilance in Belgium and in the Netherlands, in Spain, Portugal, Austria and Greece. Casting a swift eye over the former communist bloc countries, now members of the EU, Poland and Hungary have worrying groups of extreme nationalists. Although it would be alarmist to suggest that those forces collectively might dislodge the moderate centre of political gravity at the core of the EU, those parties are far from being an irrelevance in international politics. Madame Le Pen’s party won 23 seats in the last European Parliament Elections. She helped form a new far right group in the European Parliament known as Europe of Nations and Freedoms which will have at least 36 members. The National Front, Austria’s Freedom Party, Italy’s Northern League, the Belgian Flemish Interest Party, the Dutch Party of Freedom, and the far right Polish Party as well as a former British member of the United Kingdom Independence Party. Le Pen has refused admission to Greece’s Golden Dawn and the Hungarian Jobbik Party which has made anti-semitic statements.

While the practical impact of Madame Le Pen’s new grouping is likely to have limited impact, the organisation of the far right in the European Parliament is a new departure and it shows

greater and growing cohesion between parties of the right in Europe. In a 751-member parliament, this new right grouping is not likely to sway many votes. The Christian Democrats have 221 seats and the Socialists 191. But their populist rhetoric and easy solutions for dealing with increasing numbers of emigrants, migrants and refugees reaching the shores of southern Europe will gain momentum. But the voice of radical, far right nationalism in Europe today is far from being the threat that it constituted in Europe in the 1930s with the rise of Hitler and Mussolini.

The danger in the contemporary context is that the policies of austerity imposed on wayward countries like Ireland, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, etc. feeds latent nationalist sentiment and helps the recruiting drives of the radical right in many European countries. So, whenever there is economic austerity, perceived to be imposed by Brussels, by the European Central Bank and by the IMF, xenophobia and anti-semitism rises as does also anti-Islam fervour. In Hungary, for example, the right-wing government has a long-standing claim for the retrieval of "their" land held by the Rumanians and other countries. There is an opposition party in Hungary even further to the right of the current government. When austerity measures were imposed in Hungary, irredentist claims for a lost territory became more pronounced. Without wishing to repeat myself, the far-right benefits politically from austerity policies perceived to be imposed by outside institutions. The cry soon goes up that Jewish bankers are behind the economic oppression of whatever country faces the acute need to reform rapidly and radically.

Judging by the jingoistic popular press in Britain, which is very hostile to the European Union and to British membership of the EC, their sustained attacks on Brussels and on European centralisation, may give cause for concern. The British Prime Minister, James Cameron, had pledged to renegotiate Britain's terms of membership of the EU and to put the issue of membership before the electorate. But if there were a real danger of a British exit, Brexit, from the EU, one might have expected the UKIP party of Nigel Farage to have done better in the recent British General Election. They got two seats in the unforgiving first past the post system where their candidates sometimes polled twenty and thirty per cent of the popular vote. Will Cameron win a referendum to keep Britain inside the EU? There has not been such a referendum since 1975. So, the British Prime minister is in uncharted waters. Or is he? A rampant Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) won 56 of the 59 seats, wiping out the Labour Party in Scotland. The SNP is pro-EU, but not necessarily as part of the UK. The Liberal Democrats, reduced from 57 to eight seats, is also pro EU. The Labour Party, dropped 26 seats to hold a mere 232 seats to the Conservative Party's 330 seats, a gain of 24. On these figures, even if the Conservative and Labour Parties have a large share of Euro-sceptics, Cameron should win a referendum on continued membership of the EU. His difficulty is that he needs to be able to show to the electorate that he has got substantial concessions from Brussels in the autumn of this year. That is highly unlikely. He will not reproduce the "triumph" of Margaret Thatcher in the mid-1980s when she banged the table until she got her way. Cameron will have to face a British electorate without much to show for his efforts. He brings with him to the fight his pro-business and pro-EU convictions. Rationally, Britain must choose –out of national self-interest– to remain in the EU. But a referendum is a Yes or a No. The distortions in results guaranteed by the first past the post system in a general election does not obtain in this contest.

Finally, this brings me to a crisis which may well ignite anti-immigrant sentiments in Britain and have a distorting influence on the forthcoming referendum vote on Europe. The press photographs and TV reports on the blockading of the Calais train tunnel have received widespread coverage in Europe. Tourists and lorry drivers have been inconvenienced by the growing numbers of immigrants/migrants/refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, from Eritria, Syria and other countries which have begun to move *en masse* across the Mediterranean on the most makeshift boats –the pawns/victims of people traffickers and organised crime.

To say it is a humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented scale is to know little about the history of displacement in the twentieth-century world. But it is certainly a migration unexperienced in Europe since the 1880s and 1890s when there was a great surge from the east of people fleeing religious and political persecution. They came in their thousands as political refugees and economic migrants seeking a better way of life in a part of the world known to be prosperous and tolerant in the main. Now, over one hundred years later, there is an even greater migration surge

reaching the southern shores of Europe to Italy, Greece and Spain in the first instance. This new wave of migration will test the progressive, humanist and shared religious and political values of tolerance on which the European Union was founded –born as it was out of the embers of fascism, Nazism and dictatorships.

Ireland has agreed to take about 600 Syrian and Eritrean refugees. Other countries have been more generous. But the numbers to be accommodated now is in the tens of thousands. The EU response has been severely criticised by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. But burden sharing in countries, some of which have experienced the rigours of austerity over the past few years, will prove hard to persuade their respective electorates to accept that the admission of large numbers of refugees is just and justifiable.

Memory and, more and more, political education may govern the response to this new humanitarian crisis by the EU. But it is all too easy for governments and citizens alike to suffer from historical amnesia at this time of crisis. Of course, austerity has fanned the flames of radical nationalism and xenophobia in Europe. This will produce ugly echoes of an intolerant and authoritarian past within some EU countries. But it is unlikely that a growing current of strong economic nationalism will result in mainstream xenophobia or racism. Many countries will confront a rise of the radical right. But that is not likely to dominate the politics of the majority of European countries. But the containment of the radical right is not helped by a European Union which appears to perform like a group of beleaguered bankers and businessmen than as the inheritors of a project rooted in the xenophobic nationalism, the racism, the Nazism and the military authoritarianism of the 1930s. The European project was born out of a collective determination to say “never again” or “*nunca más*,” to the racism that begot the militarism that in turn begot the Holocaust.

That is why the contemporary policies of the European Union will be all the stronger and enlightened if European political leaders educate themselves in the history of their continent and never allow the memory of what happened under Fascism and Nazism to stray from the forefront of their minds. The slogan on the banner, carried in Rome to commemorate the Nazi deportation of Jews from that city on 16 October 1943, captures a great truth: “*Non c’è future senza memoria*”, there is no future without memory.

The poet Primo Levi records this same truth in the final stanza of his poem “For Adolf Eichmann”:

O son of death, we do not wish you death
 May you live longer than anyone ever lived.
 May you live sleepless five million nights
 Any may you be visited each night by the suffering of everyone who saw,
 Shutting behind him, the door that blocked the way back,
 Saw it grow dark around him, the air fill with death.

The Irish government agreed in 2015 to receive 4,000 refugees. Some 2,622 were to come from Italy and Greece, where most of those fleeing war in Syria in particular are resident. At the beginning of November 2016, just 69 from Italy and Greece have been relocated in Ireland, according to the Department of Justice as quoted by the Irish Examiner columnist, Michael Clifford.

In this regard, the Irish government faces many unanswered questions:

- Why is there no apparent sense of urgency in Irish government circles regarding this humanitarian disaster?
- Why is there a delay in bringing refugees to the country?
- If Germany took roughly one million refugees last year, why cannot Ireland live up to its public commitment to receive the remaining 3,931 of the 4,000 it promised to take in 2015?

