

Brexit: A Symptom of Harmful Neoliberal Measures Which Have Undermined the EU

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The seemingly never-ending spectacle of Britain's attempted exit from the European Union is part of a broader malaise affecting this association of European states. The EU is in growing difficulty and much of this is unfortunately due to its own making. The EU has become destabilised from within through a not altogether dissimilar manner to the Soviet Union, whose economy had been stagnating from the 1970s under Leonid Brezhnev's inflexible policies, before the complete collapse eventually arrived in December 1991.

Since the EU was founded under its present name in November 1993, its leaders in Brussels have pursued increasingly harmful neoliberal programs, with the results of these actions truly coming to bear this decade. In many EU countries, living standards for the majority of their populations have stagnated, or even slightly declined, over the past generation.

As a consequence of austerity measures implemented against the advice of economists, growing numbers of people have become bitter and disillusioned. Austerity itself cuts away at economic development, which is no secret. This has in turn led to potential voters flocking in greater numbers to far-right parties and other once isolated groups, undermining the EU's structures.

As was intended from the outset, the neoliberal drive has damaged the foundations of democracy across different continents. Wealth has accumulated in the top bracket of human society, with the bulk of populations cut adrift and isolated.

In 1978 Douglas Fraser, the Scottish-American union chief, said that US businessmen had "chosen to wage a one-sided class war in this country, a war against working people, the unemployed, the poor, the minorities, the very young and the very old, and even many in the middle class of our society".

Governments have become largely unresponsive to the opinions of their electorate, and instead serve wealthy and powerful interests to a greater degree than prior to the neoliberal age.

People's aspirations for the future have been dashed due to the particularly harsh, discriminatory nature of these financial strategies. Out of desperation or isolation some have indeed turned to supporting fascist groups, previously fringe organisations - leading to the decline of traditional parties such as Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), whose support has sunk to its lowest ever level, while the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has seen [its popularity rise steadily](#).

The far-right has also enjoyed an upsurge in backing in other countries such as France, the Netherlands, Italy and Austria. The symptoms for this disturbing trend can again be traced

to the neoliberal assaults upon general populaces: Big tax cuts for the rich, growing privatisation, deregulation, abolition of trade unions, bank bailouts, offshoring of production. The richest 26 people in the world now [own the same wealth](#) as half of the entire human population.

In France, the Yellow Vests movement comprises a broad mix of French society; and to dismiss the marchers as extremist is far from the truth. The Yellow Vests' protestations are a reflection of the destructive austerity and neoliberal programs which have been affecting a large part of the French population. Emmanuel Macron has sometimes been labelled by his critics as "a president of the rich" since his election victory in May 2017.

Although this title may be a rather simplistic one, president Macron's background in elite finance with Rothschild & Co, through which he became a millionaire, has not endeared him to the French working-class. Nor have Macron's financial "reforms" improved his standing, which are heaping further pressure on the beleaguered French electorate – borne out by Macron's low approval ratings which have hovered in and around 30%.

Another factor strengthening the support of extremist parties is the influx of immigrants to Europe, who some feel to be a threat to their nation's stability and identity. Many of the migrants are, however, escaping wars and famines caused by a combination of often Western-led military intervention – such as in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) – along with people fleeing climate change events like drought, floods, oppressive heat, etc.

Those countries producing the highest emissions each year (China, America, Russia) should surely be required to take in the greatest number of climate refugees. The level of people fleeing inhospitable weather conditions in future is expected to rise to millions, as the climate crisis deepens.

Among EU states, Germany has taken in the greatest total of migrants at more than one million people. Yet the Germans have a declining fertility rate along with an aging population – and is therefore a country that requires the extra numbers with German companies in need of more employees. Many of the migrants which Angela Merkel accepted since 2015 have found employment, more than half of them [in skilled roles](#).

The major decisions in Europe are made by an unelected Troika: the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These institutions are unaccountable to public scrutiny and work in virtual secrecy, which again infringes upon democratic ideals.

People have become disillusioned too by the failure of parties on the left, most recently in Latin America this century. Left-wing administrations such as in Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina based their economic policies on a rise in commodity prices like oil, which was merely a temporary phenomenon. They failed to diversify their economies away from fossil fuels, or to seek a sustainable structure dependent on manufacturing or agriculture. Leftist governments have also been dogged by corruption, particularly in Brazil where the Workers' Party could simply not keep its hand out of the till.

Britain's impending exit from the EU is another symptom of the malady afflicting Europe. Large sections of populations, particularly in England and Wales, have suffered like others from neoliberal programs – and Britain, once the home of the Industrial Revolution, has experienced the effects of de-industrialisation much like those in America. The process of moving production overseas to Third World countries, in order to increase profits, was

accelerated during the tenures of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

The British public's decision to leave the EU in June 2016, by an overall margin of 52% to 48%, was if anything a protest vote about the direction their state was taking - with rising levels of inequality and homelessness in the United Kingdom, along with declining standards in health and education.

However, the social crises plaguing Britain are more closely related to Thatcher-era policies that favoured the rich, which was later carried on with vigour by prime ministers like Tony Blair and David Cameron. Britain's problems were more of a domestic nature, rather than that which could be blamed on EU policies. Those in Britain who feel their exit from the EU will somehow improve living conditions are likely to be misled.

Britain was never wholeheartedly part of the EU, as seen by her refusal to adopt the Euro as a currency. Britain's position as an island nation separate from the European continent, which for centuries kept almost entirely independent policies and territorial possessions in far-flung areas of the world, meant that British governments contained somewhat different outlooks to their European rivals.

The UK's exit vote was an unexpected blow to the EU, shaking Brussels to its core; as Britain still represents a major power, despite its decline over the past century.

It is difficult to see what good can come of Britain's departure, as it is likely to leave both London and Brussels more vulnerable than before. Brexit will result in Britain turning towards developing closer relations with America, as it becomes somewhat estranged from the European bloc.

The long process of Britain departing the EU has constituted an unseemly affair. Leaders in Brussels are undoubtedly bitter about the loss of a sizeable European country from the union, and do not wish to lose face in providing Britain with a smooth passage. Were the EU to have allowed Britain in withdrawing easily from their organisation, it may have encouraged other European states with disgruntled populations to pursue the same path.

Theresa May and associates also proved incapable of following an unwavering path towards Brexit, as infighting and self interests prevailed among her Conservative cabinet members. The prospects do not look much brighter under May's successor, Boris Johnson, who has a history of committing high profile blunders. Shortly before the Brexit vote took place, Johnson drew vague comparisons between the EU project and past policies pursued by Napoleon and Hitler on the European mainland.

Johnson has recently pursued ill advised actions such as suspending parliament, an act which has since been ruled by the British Supreme Court as "unlawful". It has placed Johnson in an uncomfortable place, leading to calls for him to consider his position as prime minister.

An agreement between Britain and the EU for Brexit can certainly be reached, but a combination of preserving prestige, mutual antipathy and political incompetence have led to a precarious situation.

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