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European Solutions?

Wolfgang Streeck

For the European public, this is the summer of the refugees, or migrants. We – “Europe” – cannot let them drown, but if we rescue them, the smugglers may put more people on more and even shoddier boats, and more of them may die. Nobody, certainly no government, enjoys having to take a position on a question like this. So everybody, in Southern just as in Northern Europe, wants a “European solution”. The problem is, of course, that all expect that solution to reduce the number of migrants they have to take, Germany no less than Italy or Spain. “Fair distribution” means we get fewer of them and the others, whoever the others may be, get more. Not a good omen for the restart of politics in the fall.

Less visible, but certainly more fateful for Europe, is the approaching Brexit crisis. The UK will be out on 29 March, 2019, whatever the outcome of its negotiations with the EU. Whatever happens will be deeply disruptive, and not just for the EU. In Britain both parties, the Conservatives and Labour, are divided roughly in the middle. Among leaders and members, one half are still Remainers of sorts. If they cannot stay in the EU, as a minimum they want to stay in the Internal Market. While Labour’s anti-Brexiteers somehow seem to cling to a vision of Social Europe, their Tory counterparts dream their old dream of Europe as a free-trade zone. Together they may hope to overturn the May government and, perhaps, call another referendum, held under threats of economic disaster.

Differences between the two parties’ pro-Brexit forces are more pronounced. Among Conservatives, the vision of a de-Europeanized UK is one of close partnership with the United States, Trump notwithstanding, and some sort of revival of Britain’s leadership in the Commonwealth. Among Labour, a “full Brexit” (for supporters from the Labour Left, see <https://www.thefullbrexit.com/>) is hoped to bring a recovery of popular sovereignty and with

it the possibility of an independent, perhaps socialist development path for the UK. Obviously the two positions are incompatible. Both factions oppose their respective party leaders, May being more under pressure than Corbyn who has as yet been able to avoid taking a stand on the more divisive Brexit issues. To keep her party together, May has dropped the language of “one nation” (more equality, better training for workers etc.) with which she became Prime Minister. As of now this rules out an alliance, however tacit, with Corbyn. Corbyn, on his part, has abstained from mobilizing among traditional and non-traditional Labour supporters for a sovereign left agenda unfettered by the EU’s Internal Market regime; for using post-Brexit freedoms to place regained national sovereignty at the service of ordinary working people; and for ending the “Brussels excuse” of governments failing to keep their election promises. (For a post-Brexit left political program see William Mitchell and Thomas Fazi, *Reclaiming the State: A Progressive Vision of Sovereignty for a Post-Neoliberal World*. London: Pluto, 2017.)

Up until now, public debates, to the extent that there are any at all, are on the supposed losses, especially in case of a “hard Brexit”, for the economies of the UK and of “Europe”. British Remainers, Labour and Conservatives, predict the worst for everybody, hoping to swing the mood in Britain in their favor and instill fear in European governments. The EU, in turn, predicts the worst for Britain while downplaying the losses for the other European economies. Up until now, of course, the British economy is doing fine, thank you, to the extent that this is possible in a global capitalist crisis.

In any case, the issue is more than just economic. For the EU it is to keep discipline in its ranks and discourage member countries from demanding more sovereignty, including a right to exit from the euro or the EU. Thus the preferred outcome for the EU is another referendum, with British voters caving in. There is also a Plan B, consisting of a “soft”, i.e., negotiated exit allowing Britain to remain in the Internal Market, but only after extensive public humiliation. For both the present British government would probably have to be overthrown,

but exactly by whom? France in particular seems to believe that to keep the EU together, the UK must be severely punished for wanting to get out, whatever it costs; this seems to rule out a negotiated divorce. At the same time, many national governments, in particular that of Germany, are afraid of even more economic turbulence in the era of Trump, especially in trade. They want to be nice to the Brits but they also want to remain friends with the French, and they certainly don't want to encourage others to break ranks. Can there be a compromise between the different interests of different countries? Right now, everything looks like a hard Brexit, one without a settlement, which few people want and for which nobody seems willing and able to make preparations.