

Methodic Madness

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It cannot be emphasized enough how strange is the reaction of Paris, Berlin and Brussels to the British intention, based on a popular vote, to leave the EU. The Continental, EU-sycophantic media are obsessed with the *bizarreries* and eccentricities of British Brexit politics. A favorite target is the sitting Prime Minister as she tries to build a majority for her agreement with the European Union, torn between the diverse factions in her party, the opposition, and the country at large. Vary rarely if at all is there a word of respect for a political leader afraid of her country being ripped apart by a second referendum, which she tries to avoid even at the expense of seeing herself portrayed as a ridiculous blunderer. Nor is there any recognition of the remarkable transparency of the British democratic process. Competing views come clearly into the open, in a Parliament where the head of government has to face the leader of the opposition head-on, forced to answer questions and follow-up questions in intense dialogues with the elected representatives of the nation. How much would one want Frau Merkel to have been exposed to public interrogations like this when she still was in power – a politician who excels in time-buying ambiguities put forward in intentionally mushy language prefabricated by a huge sales team of pollsters and focus group specialists.

The date of Britain leaving the EU has been known for almost two years now. Time enough, one should think, to try to keep the country in, by starting real reforms toward a less centralistic, less rigid system of intra-European cooperation instead of coercion. Meaningful concessions on immigration policy might alone have done the trick. Or, short of that, preparations could have been made for a peaceful separation, like in the 1990s between Czechia and Slovakia. The rights of British and European citizens living in the EU and Britain, respectively, could have been settled; rules on air traffic, customs procedures, tariffs could have been

agreed. Nobody knows whether the hardliners among May's party would have managed to sabotage this – but no attempt was made to find out. Also, one might have thought that German industry, as powerful an interest group as any, would have persuaded the German government to secure for it safe access to one of its biggest export markets. Nothing like it. It is only now that a “hard Brexit” is on the doorsteps that practical provisions are being contemplated, mostly however in the context of doomsday scenarios – in Britain by the government seeking a majority for its treaty with Brussels, and on the European side as a last minute attempt to tip public opinion in Britain against the Brexit as such.

Why that? Why this unbelievable irresponsibility on the part of the EU and its leading powers, in particular Germany and France? Their uppermost priority, up to now successfully overriding all other considerations, is to maintain discipline among the remaining member states, many of which have similar grievances like the British with “European integration” in its present form. Concessions to Britain could serve others as precedent for concessions to them. In the end the European superstate project, still deeply rooted in Brussels, and the various imperial designs of Berlin, Paris, or a Franco-German “European core” might have to be finally scratched. The European treatment of the United Kingdom today is nothing else than a desperate attempt to save an outdated political design from obliteration. It is a high-stake gamble, economically, politically, culturally, of a declining political class united around a neoliberal superstatism that has outlived itself – a gamble on the backs not just of the British people but also of the peoples of Europe. The hope is that by humiliating the British (and in the best of cases forcing them to confess their sins and return to an unreformed Church) others will be deterred from trying another mutiny. Recently the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) considered whether the British could, if they wanted, withdraw their resignation from EU membership. The European Commission argued that this had to be impossible, since otherwise other member states would feel encouraged to start exit procedures, in the course of which they would negotiate concessions, upon which they would then cancel end

the procedures. Sheer madness, one should think, but with a system. As Hamlet, keen observer of a rotten state, famously put it: “Though this be madness, yet there is method in ’t” (Hamlet).