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EUROPE IN THE AFTERMATH OF BREXIT: THE VANISHING DREAM

Prof. Chung Hoang Chuong

Revisiting the European Union

In 1957, a major treaty got the signatures of 6 founding members of the European Union. They, as group, came up with the idea of an international organization that links countries with common interest, direction, and similar characters to form a coalition to reduce tension and conflict in the aftermath of World War II. This was a very inventive idea crediting the work of the founding members of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany, and Italy. From that beginning, the European Union now has 28 members less one that recently decided to exit from the group. It was known as "Brexit" when the United Kingdom decided to withdraw after a national referendum, a democratic process, to choose whether to leave or stay in the Union. "Brexit" got the majority of the votes.

Whether or not this was a good idea remains to be discussed in the future, but the feelings at this time are divided between those who think that British subjects do not really need the Union and those who believe this to be a huge mistake. European geopolitics are indeed undergoing drastic changes given the rise of a "European Trumpism", Populism, and the new Nationalism experienced by many Union members. This shift in paradigm is looked upon during my trip to Europe this spring of 2017. Initially I included Luxembourg, Italy, and Germany to mark the 60th anniversary of the Treaty and for this I planned of staying more than one month re-visiting and re-learning Europe. However, due to a sudden accident, I had to reduce my time in Europe and just crossed the borders of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Within that shorter time, I could only take notes on the most observable and thus,

it might not be as completed as planned but let's say that this is the first half that will be the motivation for the second half entertained for this fall with another return to Europe during the German election.

The shorter itinerary took me first to France in the middle of the presidential election, then to Brussels where the central command of the European Union resides and the third stop was Netherlands and later back to Paris in time for the presidential election. These stops brought new perspectives not only on the new political change in France but also the new urban demographics in many cities where I have spent many years of initial academic formation. Hence, in this part of my work on Europe is of a nostalgic nature at first but slowly with assistance for past acquaintances I expand a little more for this report. Thus, I will only look at the effects of migration and how it is related to the rise in many ultra right-wing movements, the anti-immigrant feelings, and the return to protectionism although there are other factors that I will reserve for another writings. It is through a collection of images, readings, observations, and exchanges with colleagues that begin this writing with the idea of making it a more complete article. As a researcher of past Southeast Asian migration movements to North America, particularly in California, I could use past experience to compare the racial nature, the economic dimension, and the government policies applied to the immigrants. California is now home to more 2 million of Southeast Asian immigrants resettling since 1975.

Europe, from the Rome Treaty of 1957, experienced a period of stability during most of the last 60 years. There were a lot of changes recently with the on-going conflicts in the Middle-East. From a humble beginning of a few member nations, the European Union now has 28 members, a population of over 500 million people and a geographical area covering almost 4.5 million km². The Euro is a common currency for 19 countries. In terms, of economic power, the Union is the second most powerful economy in the world when considered as a single entity. In fact, the EU website has termed that the last 60 years of achievements could be the longest 60 years of peace, solidarity, and prosperity, definitely an accomplishment and a recognition must be dedicated to the founding fathers of the Union.

Crisis came in 2008. Europe was facing a lot of challenges ranging from economic to political issues. Peace is still maintained among members but war is not that far and it is right on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. The Middle-East conflict results in huge movements of refugees pouring into Germany, France, and Greece. They are still in refugee camps. Hastily organized resettlement Centres in Europe are coping with these influxes with a lot of problems and challenges. Furthermore, many European countries considered to be with robust economies are not recovering well after the crisis of 2008-2009. France, Italy, Spain, and Greece are examples of this situation due to slow growth, unemployment, and poor public finances. Now, this extra burden is most difficult to deal with since it is still evolving to new proportions. Terrorism is not unfamiliar with many European urban Centres. There are signs of "Je Suis Charlie" on the walls in many locations.

Within this new socio-economic context, my trip back to Europe is filled with some bittersweet feelings. Could Emmanuel Macron stem the bleeding? A repositioning is needed and could we count on the stability of Germany? Can Greece recover? When this flow of refugees will subside? These are questions that Europe needs to find answers and they are slow to come. In France, I find the victory of Mr. Macron a relief and the timing was perfect to stop Marine Le Pen. I witnessed with joy the arrival to power of the new president who at 39 years old is the youngest French president. Indeed, it was a major victory against the ultra nationalist party and marked perhaps a re-balancing that brought some comfort for the majority of the French citizens. These few weeks of observation is not enough with the knowledge that it might just scratch the surface of many layers that demand a longer time and a more extensive research work with thicker description. Three weeks are not really enough to have a complete picture.

However, the image of a changing Europe is most visible in urban demographics. Fifty years back, there were immigrants from North and Central Africa mixing with those from Southeast Asia former colonies. The integration process was smooth and they have become part of the multi-ethnic urban scene. The 13th Arrondissement in Paris, Boulevard General Jacques in Bruxelles, Belgium, and the Chinatown in Amsterdam, the Netherlands are examples of such an ethnic presence. Now the new waves add new dimensions with a mix of immigrants and refugees from the Middle-East, from Mainland China, from North Africa are forming new neighborhood with more integrative flavors. The Push and Pull factor works simultaneously with flow of immigrants and refugees being pushed away from war-torn areas in the Middle - East and those who are attracted to a more stable economic situation are sharing the dwindling resources. How could receiving countries cope with this sudden influx? Are communities ready to share the dwindling resources? Do they know enough about the new immigrants and refugees? Such are the problems that result in conflicts. The adjustment process takes time and without enough assistance, the new arrivals are left fending for their own survival. This was reminiscing of years I studied the resettlement policies and the adaptation process with the Southeast Asian exodus in California.

At this neighborhood called Osdorpplein in Amsterdam, I spent time walking around and saw the example of changing Europe. In the food court, near the HEMA store, shopkeepers slowly removed the covers of their stalls. A charming barista covered with a hijab-made preparing my Latte with a perfect English and told me she was from Morocco. Her Dutch was also fluent as I heard her conversation with another customer. My lunch was a Lasagna prepared by a Turkish immigrant who happened to stop by Rome for a few months before settling in this lakeside Osdorspplein near the Tram Line 17. Across the table, sharing my conversation with the Turkish owner, an immigrant from Croatia told me about how hard it was for her to find a better place to live for her family. At that time, she was working for a child care Centre for autistic children. She blamed on the effects of globalization that only the rich got richer and the poor was unable to cope with the changes. They just had to look elsewhere for a better stable life.

The views from the Dutch residents are filled with uncertainty. Along the canals, on a sunny Sunday, coffee drinkers in perfect English told me that in general people of the Netherlands are welcoming immigrants and refugees. But, things are not that smooth and complicated by the sudden sheer number and the facilities and services are inadequate. Suddenly, there is an increase in social problems. They range anywhere from simple misunderstandings to conflicts of racial nature. Then residents do not feel safe. Some problems can be resolved with both sides making an effort, others just being forgotten. Unemployment is getting worse and with the competition between old and new immigrants.

In France, my friends who are now French naturalized citizens complained about the quality of life threatened by both insecurity and the lack of opportunities. Shocked by repeated terrorist attacks, the French are turning more and more anti-immigrant and from the gathered support that pushed up Marine Le Pen to the second place, France is not easily convinced that the problem will go away quickly with the new administration of Macron although it is a welcome relief.

So, these uncertainties, painful realities, and the socio-economic conditions of many European countries are the main explanations to see a European dream is fading away. Many national economies are on the brink of collapse. Greece is the case in point. A strong redress must be on the work. It must be quick and soon enough. Europe must remain unified. Emmanuel Macron's victory is not enough. However, a concerted plan involving nations must be considered by all who thought that Brexit was a big mistake.

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