

Rejecting Project Fear for Project Hope: Creating the Moral Case for the Remain Campaign

Ben Ryan

The European Union has spent years staggering through a crisis with political, economic, theoretical and practical elements. It has been, in many ways, a disappointment, failing to live up to the standards that were set for it in the 1950s. It stands in need of some redemption. Despite all this it remains the best hope for a genuinely international, voluntary and moral model of governance. This article makes that case for the EU as the body with the potential to be the moral force the 21st Century world needs and, therefore, an organisation for the UK to help save, not leave. (The views expressed represent only those of the author.)

Introduction

When we debate whether or not the UK should leave the EU, what are we really discussing? From the way in which the debate has been conducted thus far it seems to be a debate about the British national interest – particularly (at times exclusively) its economic interest. If it were the case that the purpose of the EU were simply to be the best means of securing economic benefits for the UK then it is very poorly suited to do so. This ought to be no surprise – the EU is not now, nor has it ever been, primarily designed for securing national economic gain. It is also not, nor has it ever been, primarily about trade (and certainly not free trade).

The West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer said as much in a 1952 speech to the Bundestag, claiming that all six governments involved in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) ‘realise ... that the political goal, the political meaning of the European Coal and Steel Community, is infinitely larger than its economic purpose’.¹

In making the case for the EU, accordingly, it is a mistake to try to make the case in purely economic terms. Critics of the Remain Campaign have dubbed it (not without justification) as ‘project fear’. A real case for Europe would more accurately have to be called ‘project hope’. Hope, that the European project can yet meet the political goal and political meaning that its founders hoped for in the 1950s. Hope, that there might yet be an international political project founded to fight for a moral cause and to meet problems which are not parochial or national – but genuinely global. If the Remain campaign can currently be called ‘project fear’ then the Brexiteers are ‘project despair’ – despairing of the idea that genuinely international and transnational political solutions are possible, despairing that the EU is capable of much-needed reform and despairing that the UK ought to be in the centre of any such project.

Twenty-first century geopolitics needs an organisation like the EU. It does, however, need the EU to be better. The EU, in turn, needs the UK. The UK is the second largest economy in the EU.² It is the member state with the biggest military budget,³ a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In the Commonwealth, the UK has a soft-power presence that is almost unrivalled in international diplomacy, particularly in Africa. It is, in other words, a crucial member state of the EU. If the UK were to leave the EU it might be the end for the hope of the EU to become a model for international governance. The message it would send is that such international bodies are of no benefit to powerful members. The stakes for the EU are potentially, therefore, higher than for the UK in this referendum.

In what follows this article will clarify the problems facing the EU. It will then argue what we can learn from history about the development of the European project and the need for transnational solutions. Finally it will conclude by arguing the need for redemption in the EU, hope for the future and, particularly, the need for the UK to remain in the EU.

Clarifying the case for the defence

It should be made clear that there can be no doubt that the EU is currently in a serious crisis. Faith in Europe is at an all-time low and mistrust of EU institutions is now outstripping mistrust in national governments and institutions.⁴ The Eurozone crisis continues, with austerity politics having been imposed on a number of member states, most prominently (and most in opposition to the national democratic will) in Greece. The much-discussed 'democratic deficit' is still much in evidence. To the East a resurgent and aggressive Russia threatens the EU's borders. The refugee crisis might yet be the most severe problem of them all. There is good reason, in other words, to fear for the EU, and it would be foolish to claim otherwise.

Similarly it would be dishonest to claim that being in the EU does not entail sacrifices. Being part of a larger organisation does, inevitably, entail the need to take seriously the needs and democratic will of other countries. This does indeed mean that the UK sacrifices its ability to have sole control over things like welfare and migration policy (though in truth it gives up rather less than some critics would suggest). This article does not attempt to deny these legitimate criticisms of the EU. It does, however, argue that they are ultimately less important than the potential value of a European Union.

Learning the lessons of history

The early European project

In debating the point of today's EU there is far too little consideration of the origins of the European project. The context and content of the early European project provides a valuable lesson for today's EU. Contrary to some who like to claim Europe as a socialist project or a trade project, or an American tool in the Cold War, the simple truth of the matter is that this was primarily a Christian Democrat-designed project from the beginning.⁵ The founding fathers and the signatories of the early treaties (Paris, which established the ECSC, and Rome, which established the EEC), were overwhelmingly Christian Democrats, most of them Catholics. The result of this is that the early European project embodied the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, and particularly two principles (Solidarity and Subsidiarity) within an overall model of a political body with an explicit moral mission.

In the Schuman Declaration that ultimately led to the Treaty of Paris and the ECSC, Robert Schuman noted that 'Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.' Note that this is not about creating a better economic model, though economics was certainly envisaged as a key tool in the purpose of creating Europe. Solidarity was envisaged between nations, in the creation of a lasting peace. Crucially it was not like previous European efforts at creating peace that relied on bilateral treaties but instead, as Schuman noted, it was designed to make war 'materially impossible'. Rather than relying on governments to simply keep their word, this was a peace which was based on the idea that it had to be made impossible to independently militarise.

This was astonishingly ambitious – and came as a great (if welcome) surprise to the Americans, as documentary evidence from the time reveals.⁶ Solidarity, however, was not limited to states, but also to classes. There is a remarkable focus throughout the early treaties on living and working conditions. This reveals how wrong it is to assume that the European project was ever primarily about promoting business and trade. Certainly the early European project used economics as a tool, but the promotion of working conditions reveals a typically paternalist, but morally based, Christian Democrat mindset. This mindset was prepared to accept regulation and restrictions on industry and trade for the sake of workers' rights and conditions. Crucially, by making such a condition a subject of a European treaty it guarantees that no member state could radically undercut its neighbours by sacrificing working conditions, a transnational solution to a typical complaint about capitalist economies.

Subsidiarity was a term suggested for the European project by Pierre-Henri Teitgen, the French politician, and was explicitly drawn from the Papal Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) Crucially, the point of the principle is one of justice. The encyclical said of subsidiarity that 'It is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organisations can do' (§79). In the European political context the idea was to protect local communities and citizens from the state and from the centralizing power of industrialisation. Once again this reveals a concern which is primarily moral, and which in this case is designed to undermine the power of national interest in favour of local and regional identity.

It should be noted that as an entity founded on the principle of being a moral project, Europe has had some significant success stories. It is easy to take for granted that there has been decades of peace in Western Europe, or to subscribe all the credit for that to NATO. We should resist the temptation to do so. The pooling of coal and steel radically changed the picture of relations between France and Germany in a way in which no bilateral treaty or military alliance had ever done.

Living standards have seen a quite remarkable increase during the period since 1950, as have the rights due to workers. The latter have been significantly boosted by the later European project's concern for fundamental rights, as seen particularly in the Charter of Fundamental Rights attached to the Lisbon treaty of 2009.

Perhaps no area of collective action on a moral cause has been as impressive as the EU's commitment on environmental issues. The EU is the world's most ambitious and proactive international body on these issues, with the EU ETS (European Union Emissions Trading Scheme) representing the most significant of any such body worldwide. Its efficacy has been admittedly reduced during the Eurozone crisis⁷ and there is more to do, but no one should be in any doubt that the EU remains a world leader on environmental issues.

The lesson that should be learned from this history of the European project is that this was certainly once an organisation with an explicit moral purpose. How successful it has been in embodying those principles throughout its history is open to debate, and indeed few would argue that it hasn't, in some respects, been a disappointment that has failed to live up to its potential.

Critically, these principles demonstrate that the European project has always had at its heart, at least in principle, a commitment to moral values that are expressed through transnational solutions.

The trajectory of the nation state

The European project has existed largely as a moral project to meet issues that require a transnational solution. The need for such a body is increasing in the modern world, not decreasing. The economic collapse is illustrative of the ever more international nature of economics. The need for collective responses on taxation, fiscal policy and working rights is increasing, not decreasing. The security needs of the Western world in facing a threat from a transnational enemy in Islamic radicalisation again requires an ever more collective response. The environment continues to demand genuine transnational responses, preferably of a variety that, much like peace in the 1950s, demands that backsliding or non-compliance becomes materially impossible.

The world is becoming smaller and the problems it faces are becoming more communal. The nation state, always an 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's famous phrase, is fast becoming genuinely imaginary in terms of its ability to deliver for its citizens. A withdrawal from the EU is a reversal of a trend which in all other respects is seeing states co-operate to a higher degree than ever before.

Redemption, hope and the UK

There have been many failings in realising the EU and the vision of its founders. The particular failure of solidarity in responding to the refugee crisis and in imposing brutal austerity on Greece, has been desperately disappointing. More broadly it is probably fair to say that there has been a hollowing out of the EU's moral principles in favour of a new neo-liberal economic orthodoxy. This shift has been accompanied by a difficult transition from a relatively homogenous project of six, broadly similar states sharing an identical recent history, to the far more heterogeneous 28 member Union today.

However, the principles of a political project that genuinely has a moral mission and works to provide necessary transnational solutions are already in place. They are imperfectly realised at present, and that cannot be denied.

Nonetheless no international project has ever come closer to being a successful example of a voluntary, transnational moral project with the ability to realise meaningful change. The EU needs to be pushed to rediscover its purpose – but that is not an impossible ask. Given the increasing need for such bodies, there is a corresponding need for the EU to be successful. For the EU to be successful it really needs the UK as a member. The UK, as argued above, is a significant power, without which the EU would be much weaker. In fact, without the UK there is the very real risk of the EU never becoming a model of transnational governance for the future.

The EU needs the UK. Cynics might question whether the UK needs the EU. Yet this is a short-sighted answer. The UK is a part of the wider world, and a world at that which is beset by problems that are best addressed by transnational solutions. Herein lies the need for a new ‘Project Hope’.

Those who would see the UK stay in the EU remain hopeful of the cause of transnational politics as providing solutions to the world’s most pressing problems. They are hopeful that the EU can live up to its potential and rediscover its founding principles. The alternative is to despair in such causes, reject the EU and hope that, against all evidence to the contrary and in defiance of the trajectory of history, that nation states might yet provide the solutions without any such union.

For further reading

- Jonathan Chaplin and Gary Wilton, eds, *God and the EU: Faith in the European Project* (Routledge, 2016).
- Olaf Cramme and Sara B Hobolt, eds, *Democratic Politics in a European Union under Stress* (OUP, 2015).
- Jurgen Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Polity, 2015).
- Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union* (Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 2002)
- Ben Ryan, *A Soul for the Union* (Theos, 2016).

Ben Ryan is a Researcher at Theos, the religion and society think tank. He holds degrees in Theology and Religious Studies from the University of Cambridge and in European Studies from the LSE. He is the author of *A Soul for the Union* (Theos, 2016).

¹ From a speech to the Bundestag 12th July 1952. A translated version is available in David Weigall and Peter Stirk, eds, *The Origins and Development of the European Community* (Leicester University Press, 1992), 66.

² Reported by the Centre for Economics and Business Research and others, <http://www.cebr.com/reports/world-economic-league-table-2015/>.

³ The UK has both the highest military expenditure and the highest proportion of defence spending as a percentage of GDP according to 2013 data from the European Defence Agency.

⁴ Olaf Cramme and Sara B Hobolt, ‘A European Union under Stress’ in O. Cramme and S. B. Hobolt, eds, *Democratic Politics in a European Union under Stress* (OUP, 2015), 3.

⁵ See, e.g., Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ Acting Secretary of State John Foster Dulles revealed his surprise at the plan in a telegram to President Eisenhower dated 10 May 1950.

⁷ For a summary see Luca Taschini, Sascha Kollenberg and Chris Duffy, ‘System Responsiveness and the EU ETS’ (Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, 1 January 2014), http://www.lse.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/System-responsiveness-and-the-EU_ETTS.pdf.