Brexit and the Risk of EU Disintegration

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David Cameron decided to hold the referendum on UK membership of the EU in order to defeat the eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party, to stop the advancement of UKIP and to confirm his leadership. He made a wrong calculation. That unhappy decision has triggered dynamics he has proved to be powerless to control and finally have led to his political suicide.

The deal negotiated between EU and UK before the referendum enabled Britain to add a new optout to those concerning the euro, Schengen, the police and criminal justice legislation and the European Charter of fundamental rights: the one regarding the “ever closer union” clause. In fact, the EU had legitimized the dangerous concept – fortunately deleted by the outcome of the referendum – that a member state might not share a fundamental principle enshrined in the preambles of the founding treaties of the European institutions. Cameron was successful in asserting the British vision of EU-UK relations, which conceives the EU as a market, not as a project aiming at political union, and assigned to Britain a partial membership status.

Many protagonists of the referendum campaign have left in succession the stage and stepped down. This shows that they did not have a post-Brexit strategy. As the majority of the Scottish and Northern Irish citizens voted to remain, the unity of the UK is now in doubt. The place of Britain in Europe and in the world is uncertain. The unpleasant reality that Brexit reveals is the return to isolation, that in the globalization era cannot be a “splendid isolation” as in the past. Suddenly, the governing class, at least a part of it, is perceiving that Brexit might mark the final decline of the life cycle of Britain. An echo of this awareness can be detected in the speech that Mr. Cameron delivered last 9 May when he argued that Brexit could represent a step towards disintegration of the EU and the return of the ghost of war in Europe.

A sentence ascribed to Winston Churchill reads: “if Britain has to choose between Europe and the open sea, she must choose the open sea”. Following the Brexit vote, the fate of Britain is to float in an Atlantic area between Europe and the United States where she might play a minor role, i.e. that of fiscal heaven. But, after the scandal of Panama papers, even the success of this choice cannot be taken for granted, since the efforts of the international institutions to tame global finance are gaining ground.

The era of global empires – the British was the penultimate – has come to an end. The national dimension is inadequate to face global challenges that are emerging at the geopolitical, economic and environmental levels. The choice to act only at national level condemns to irreversible decline. In a world in which technology reduces the physical barriers, solutions can come only from standing together with other nations rather than standing alone. The slogan, repeated over and over again during the referendum campaign, according to which a victory of the “Leave” would have paved the way for the UK to regain full sovereignty, shows how distant from reality are the Brexiteers. And yet they cultivate the illusion of continuing to enjoy the advantages of the continental market without
allowing free movement of people. Brexit can become the symbol of an historic defeat of the EU after those of the European Defence Community (1954) and the European Constitution (2005). Schäuble’s proposal to expel Greece from the Eurozone represented the break of the taboo of the irrevocability of membership in the Union that has materialized now with Brexit. It is the first time that a member state has decided to leave the Union after an uninterrupted series of enlargements that have led the original core of six to progressively include 28 countries. Jean-Claude Juncker, asserting in his speech on the State of the Union that the EU is facing “an existential crisis”, admitted that the future of the European project is at risk. Brexit is the most recent symptom of a larger trend towards EU disintegration and the return to nationalism. The most visible aspects of it are walls and fences that are raised at states’ borders to hinder immigrants’ flows. Alarmed citizens are rediscovering nationalism and xenophobia in the illusion of being able to escape the challenges of terrorism, migration and the economic crisis. They are wrong because only Europe has a sufficient size to address global issues and compete with the protagonists of world politics and economy.

National governments seem to be living in the past. In a beautiful book, The Sleepwalkers, Christopher Clark compares the behavior of national governments on the eve of WWI to sleepwalkers, blind to the reality of the horrible slaughter they were preparing. The memory of 1914 reminds us of the disasters of nationalism. Today’s unresponsive national governments are entangled in a vicious circle. Weakened by the populist growing wave, they are paralyzed by the fear of a defeat in national elections. The lack of reactions to the disintegration process of the EU encourages nationalists and xenophobes to exploit the citizens’ darkest worries. The most hateful behaviors and symbols of our past are returning, as foreseen in the Ventotene Manifesto: “If tomorrow the struggle were to remain restricted within traditional national boundaries, it would be very difficult to avoid the old contradictions.” The reactionary forces will fight for “the restoration of the nation State. Thus they will be able to latch on to what is, by far the most widespread of popular feelings, the patriotic feeling”. The old contradictions return as European unification remains unaccomplished and the achievement of the European federal project has not been brought to conclusion. History repeats ever more glaringly the contradictions it is unable to resolve.

The EU cannot continue to define itself as the first supranational democracy in history if it is unable to answer the concerns of its citizens, first of all a work for jobless people, sustainable development, integration of migrants, terrorism, foreign and security policy. A partial but effective reply to all those issues can only come from policies promoted within the framework of the Lisbon Treaty, e.g. a New Deal for the European economy and a development plan for Africa and the Middle East financed by a financial transaction tax and a carbon tax and a permanent structured cooperation in the field of security and defence that would enable the EU to become a global actor. It is not only unreasonable, but practically impossible to address the problem of a constitutional reform of the EU without a change in the policies that would enable to regain citizens’ trust. In fact, any proposal for Treaty change will be hindered by the growing mistrust of citizens towards the European project and will risk to be rejected like the EU Constitution was by the French and Dutch referenda.

A strong movement from below is needed to stimulate the governments to resume the march towards federal union. The great demonstration that will take place next 25 March on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome will represent a challenge to governments (to wake up from their inertia) and to citizens and civil society (to convince them that the moment to mobilize themselves has come).