

Brexit and EU Identity II: Wake Up, and Rise Like a Phoenix

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It's been a while since Conchita Wurst made headlines. Her Eurovision triumph in 2014 seems long ago, but alongside her musical career she has built a name as an activist not only for LGBT etc rights but for other progressive political causes. Her idealism and energy have a direct appeal that others on the left would do well to harness. She doesn't possess a nuanced understanding of the EU worthy of a PhD candidate or the scars of a lifetime devoted to service in the political machine. What she has in abundance is courage, joy, energy, heart and panache.

These are all qualities that have been lacking in pro-European circles in recent years, but their absence was perhaps never more obvious than in the UK's Brexit referendum campaign. The big lesson for pro-EU campaigns elsewhere, and for the generation of a more profound sense of EU identity, is that *passion matters*. Europeans, like everyone, are *people*: rational calculations about self-interest based on neutral parsing of facts just don't form the basis of most people's thinking most of the time. For fellow sci-fi fans, let me put it this way: we are Kirk, not Spock, when push comes to shove.

To be sure, there are worrying implications of this observation. It's becoming a cliché that the present is a period of 'post-truth politics' in which facts don't matter or in which relativism can be invoked to deny that there is any such thing as truth. This cannot be sustained in a democracy, which is why the stakes are so high: without a great counter-effort, this trend could easily produce the kind of right-wing autocracies being built in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere. I could never advocate either such a polity or such an approach to political debate.

Facts do matter. Evidence matters. Expert interpretation of the best available knowledge matters. But all this can be swept away or hollowed-out if it relies on dry delivery or fails to understand the need to engage politically to get these voices heard, and *listened to*. The rubbishing and marginalisation of experts in the Brexit referendum was not accidental. It was a deliberate strategy of the Brexiteers, who, with the help of their many friends in the media, presented themselves as outsiders defending the everyday citizen against propagandists. For sheer chutzpah, this has no equal in the present century, not least because the main pro-EU activists were elite-educated, very wealthy oligarchs.

So, Brexit's next great lesson is a reminder of the power of elites, and the increasing inability of citizens to tell fact from fiction in a world of information overload and cynicism towards politics. It shows the importance of connection to a leader's persona that seems attractive (sadly, for many Brits this was Boris Johnson). It also shows conclusively that long-term investment and patience can and do pay off: Eurosceptic politicians and journalists have been shaping 'common sense' understandings of the general population for decades now in the UK, creating fertile soil for the eventual referendum. To contain the damage of Brexit, progressives in other Member States must see this as a key battle ground, as indeed must those of us doomed to be *Insel Affen*, before it is too late. In the specific context of building a pro-EU, progressive case, linked to a deeper sense of EU-ropean identity, I think the following steps are crucial.

First, we absolutely must actively counter the growing right-wing narrative centred on the EU as a too-liberal (!) meddler, against which right-thinking national governments must rebel. This is partly an issue of Euroscepticism, and partly an issue of right-wing authoritarian politics: it may seem ludicrous to us progressives that our opponents paint the EU negatively as a source of things that distract from decency or economic well-being, such as human rights, freedom of movement or social justice, but they do. We are quick to point out the EU's failings in these regards, and to scoff at its over-blown claims about a progressive social model, but this only leaves us without a means to counter opponents' claims. We need, yes, to make the EU better when it comes to progressive politics, but we need to stand up for its achievements in this regard too. Yes, we need to acknowledge the EU's abysmal failures, such as the havoc imposed on Greece and the ongoing failures of leadership and vision. But only by standing up for the EU's progressive achievements and potential can we argue that such policies and politics matter, and also make the case for the EU as part of the way forward in such issues. This is where Conchita-style personable idealism is useful and appealing.

Second, but relatedly, we need to show those sections of the population that are being left behind by the current forms of globalisation and economic thinking that the EU cannot just speak to their situation but actively help improve it. Many of the pro-Brexit voters were protesting about being left behind socio-economically, especially in parts of the country such as Wales, which voted to leave the EU despite a recent past of general acceptance of EU membership. This needs to be countered for reasons of social justice as well as those of EU survival. Of course, this would be easier to do if the EU institutions had progressive majorities deciding on legislation, but we cannot leave the struggle until then: in the intervening years, why should the disadvantaged bother with some distant institutions in Brussels or see them as important when nobody you know has a life that's getting better?

Third, it is vital to build understanding of what the EU is for and how it works. Many voters in the UK had absolutely no idea about either. This makes it much easier to consign the EU to the Hades of fear and indifference, and even if greater understanding of the EU won't automatically make people more in favour of it, it would help voters realise what's actually at stake.

Fourth, it is crucial to make the EU a felt presence in people's lives. This is not a call for propaganda. Rather, it's a call for more realistic and sensitive depictions of how politics and economics actually work in Member States than is typical. The UK's media is infamously (and deliberately?) ignorant and critical in this regard, but it's only an extreme case of what can be found elsewhere too. I wrote in a previous blog that the TV series *Borgen* should serve as a model here, and I still believe this: it is a deft and accurate painting of the intertwining of the EU and the national, and far more needs to be done to make such understandings the norm. Again, I am not asking for pro-EU propaganda here. Instead, I am asking for a media and dramatic context in which the real-world Europeanisation of our lives both public and private is understood and portrayed as a part of how things are that is inherently no worse than other political structures.

Fifth, we need to promote understanding of how citizens of other Member States live, their cultures, the social and political forces they are subject to. Popular culture is a potentially tremendous help here, because through drama and comedy we can understand both others and

ourselves rather better. The ultimate aim of such an understanding is for Europeans to see each other as people with much in common, and with shared experiences and challenges. Of course, this does not guarantee that citizens will develop a stronger EU identity, but it's an essential step on the road. Otherwise, how can the unemployed of East Anglia, for instance, see their opposite numbers in, say, Silesia, as anything but a threat or an irrelevance *from the outside?*

So far in this post I've been concentrating on what can and should be done, with relatively little on how to do it. To some extent, this is because it's an attempt to help shape an agenda rather than a detailed manifesto. But it is also because what's needed is a multi-pronged and multi-level political struggle. Ideally we would have an existing Euro-demos to mobilise. We don't, and so we will need to work nationally and sub-nationally while trying to midwife one. In this regard, ***Brexit may have unintended benefits, if the narrative is constructed correctly.*** First, it is already showing to many Eurosceptic Brits just how much is at stake, and how difficult it will be to withdraw from the EU. This can easily be presented as a cautionary tale: vote for Frexit or Nexit or Czexit, and you'll lose out just as the Brits have. Second, and more positively, Brexit could make it easier to generate a greater sense of shared EU interests and experiences: even though other member states are awkward partners, none has so routinely stood outside the mainstream or scoffed so repeatedly at the very notion of a 'European project'. This offers an opportunity that progressive pro-Europeans elsewhere must seize; like Conchita, we are waking in the rubble and walking over glass, but with resolve and determination we can fly again.