

# Britain referendum on EU: Brexit and the Left

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**In anticipation of tomorrow's referendum on the European Union, Jacobin is publishing a series of views discussing the nature of the European project and the respective left arguments for both Leave and Remain.**

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***The European Union is brutal and undemocratic — ignoring that just gives the Right more power.***

He may be unflappable, and reputedly of interest to a whole queueing phalanx of inflamed loins across Europe and beyond, but Yanis Varoufakis couldn't face down the masters of Europe, and he can't sell a progressive campaign against Brexit on these premises. (A progressive "out" campaign seems to be an even more difficult prospect, but that is of less pressing concern, since the vast majority of leftists who are doing anything about the referendum are campaigning for "in.")

Watch this video for yourself, and note the logic very carefully, because it elides a number of registers of analysis without acknowledging that this is happening.

Varoufakis argues a number of points in connection with Brexit: one, in the event of Brexit, the UK will probably end up with Boris Johnson as prime minister, and negotiate a more rapid entry into the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP); two, given the rise of the far right, and the risk of the European Union "disintegrating" and thus producing new nationalist reflux, the Left has to learn the lessons of 1929, form a popular front "with other democrats," and stop the meltdown; three, a retreat to the nation state can "never benefit the Left."

To his credit, Varoufakis doesn't attempt to claim that the EU is in any sense a progressive force, much less a democratic one — but then he'd look rather odd if he did. He doesn't say, as some Breainers do, that the problem is exclusively right-wing governments rather than the EU itself.

However, he doesn't seriously engage with the problems of the EU either — which he suggests can be democratized over time, beginning with such minute measures as live-streaming official meetings — and the argument still leaves a lot to be desired.

First of all, "retreat to the nation state" can mean a number of things depending on the context. To oppose, not just TTIP but the whole apparatus of neoliberal trade and regulatory agreements which usurp democratic powers, could be characterized as a "retreat to the nation state."

To insist on the right of national states to impose capital controls, nationalize industries, shut down tax havens, prosecute corporate criminals, or any one or all of these things, is a "retreat to the nation state." Whether it can "benefit the Left" is a question of context and strategy.

And given that national states even today are still more democratically accountable than any of the international governing institutions that they have willingly ceded power to, there is no case for this a priori claim on Varoufakis's part. And what is more, this assumption on his part, and that of his political confederates, cannot be said to have benefited the Left in practice.

A coalition with "other democrats" to stop fascism can mean many things, but the idea that it has to mean the Left aligning with the pro-EU center is strangely oblivious of the last forty years or so.

If the recent past demonstrates anything to us, it is that the Left aligning with the center is utterly useless at preventing the rise of fascism, because it means allowing the center to perpetuate precisely the policies which give ground to fascism, while confirming the irrelevance of the Left as an oppositional pole.

After all, the rise of the far right in France, Greece, Hungary, and elsewhere is hardly unconnected to the politics of the pro-EU center which simultaneously work to progressively erode parliamentary democracy while also perpetuating moral panic about migrants, national security, and Islam, upon which the far right feasts.

Fortress Europe permits a relative free movement of labor within it, but has now signed a pact with Turkey, sealed with Kurdish blood, to illegally push back refugees. It is not unforeseeable that in some circumstances one would have to align in practice with the centrist political forces doing all this, but doing so now seems perverse.

More importantly, Varoufakis should have learned his lesson: Syriza went into office thinking it would find all sorts of beneficial alliances with "other democrats" across Europe, to defend Greek national sovereignty and hold back the austerity juggernaut.

They thought that an Hollande, or a Renzi, would take their part. Those hopes turned out to be founded on delusion. What is more, the rise of the neo-Nazi formation, Golden Dawn, took place in part thanks to the record of the broad pro-European center in power, and what it did to the Greek population under the rubric of serving its debts to European banks.

If Golden Dawn isn't marching to power now, that is not because of any alliance between the Left and the center. Far from it, the center — including centrist politicians and the press — coddled the fascists until they overstepped the mark.

It is because the Left maintained a consistently independent antifascist opposition. The fascists, happily enough, then got into a fight with the Greek state over who wielded effective authority on the streets a little too soon, long before they had any chance of forcing an outcome in their favor.

Had that dynamic of neo-Nazi ascent not been broken, who knows what would have been the result of Syriza's collapse into the pro-austerity center?

Still, at least the fascist threat is a real one, and genuinely frightening. I'm less rattled by the claim that "Boris Johnson will be your prime minister" and "TTIP will be signed faster." Absent other context, that doesn't seem to be very different from what we have.

Putting the case at its most forceful (and setting aside the stuff about TTIP, which is going to be signed either in Brussels or London), the argument would be that the beneficiaries of Brexit would be the most hyper-Atlanticist, hard-right wing of the Tory party, who would then be able to claim the Tory leadership and win back all the lost UK Independence Party (UKIP) support.

Johnson, as leader, would depend on the hard right and feel compelled to give them red meat. In the

new polarization of politics, post-Brexit, a more right-wing Tory party would once again win the election, and the protections and rights in British law, conforming to EU regulations, would be rolled back.

And thus would descend a long reign of reaction.

Well, that's one way of calculating the possibilities, and it's a real risk. But it isn't the only way to think through the prospects, and these aren't the only considerations.

We don't know that the Tories wouldn't split down the middle after a Brexit. We don't know that Jeremy Corbyn wouldn't find the 2020 election much easier. We don't know that, deprived of their key mobilizing issue, the radical right might not begin to run out of steam.

I am not claiming that all of these outcomes are likely, merely that there is a degree of indeterminacy. On the other hand, we don't need to speculate too much about what staying in means — it means Maastricht, Lisbon, the fiscal pact, competition laws, etc., along with the free movement of labor within the union.

It means privatization and competition in the public sector. It means neoliberal limits on borrowing and spending.

It means for sure that the further centralization of power in the hands of its unelected institutions will continue apace. It means that the iron cage of the bureaucracy, codifying the interests and demands of the European Business Roundtable, will continue to tighten around the representative institutions.

Whether you like it or not, the European Union represents an immense obstacle to the achievement of left-wing ends. It is not the only such obstacle, but we do not have to behave as if it isn't an obstacle.

This is why the vast majority of large corporations in the United Kingdom are in favor of staying in. And what is more, within that context, the radical right would also certainly continue to gain ground — because the undemocratic nature of the EU, its neoliberal constitution, and its crisis-ridden nature are all likely to breed the sorts of discontents and dysfunctions on which the radical right thrive.

If, as Varoufakis fears, a Brexit were to lead to the disintegration of the European Union, the only absolute certainty is that this framework, and the laws which national governments have passed to conform to it, would be up for renegotiation. It would all have to be fought over again.

Ironically, the very forces of the European radical left that now support the EU with a "warts and all" clause — Syriza, Podemos, Corbyn — could potentially find themselves with a much freer hand to achieve radical ends if elected.

And even if the radical left were not able to gain some wiggle room in the short term, there is no accounting for the possibilities that this weakening of the political power of the European business class would open up in the long term.

So there is the question of the immediate balance of forces, and the likely short-term beneficiaries of Brexit, and the long-term consequences for a mode of class rule that would have to be renegotiated, struggled over again, and linked to a profitable formula for growth.

In the short run, one wing of the Right will be the victor whatever the outcome of the referendum,

because the Left is absent. In the long run, business cannot be confident that in the subsequent struggle to reorganize and re-institutionalize its class dominance, it wouldn't suffer significant losses.

All of this is not to say that there's a clean, socialist road to Brexit. Far from it. The point is that while staying in is a relatively known quantity, leaving is not. It would be messy and murky, and in that murk there would be the forces of the petty-bourgeois, nationalist right.

But being a Brexit skeptic doesn't mean you have to soft-sell the EU as an opponent either. It is easy to avoid dealing with this problem by putting all the emphasis on the need to combat the nationalist right, but this is just shirking responsibility for the logical consequences of one's stance.

If there is to be a progressive "in" campaign, let it fully admit and take ownership of its choice. Let it acknowledge that all the options are bad, that staying in is bad, that leaving is bad, but that the unpleasant certainties of staying in are better than the uncertain difficulties of leaving.

Because it would be a grave mistake to win a referendum on the basis of downplaying the EU as an opponent, only to find a new crisis on our hands, a new Greece being made an example of, a new Lampedusa where immigrants are savagely tormented, a new government being told what to do on pain of fiscal strangulation.

Don't let the nationalist right be the only ones talking about the brutal and undemocratic nature of the European Union.

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**P.S.**

\* "Brexit and the Left". Jacobin. 6.22.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/brexit-yanis-varoufakis-boris-johnson-farage-ukip-corbyn-eu/>

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