

Immanuel Wallerstein's Commentary No. 421

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Collapse of the European Union? A Skeptical View

One of the many games pundits and politicians are playing these days is to spell out why and how the European Union (EU) is going to collapse, is already collapsing. Anyone who follows the news worldwide knows all the standard explanations: Grexit and Brexit will only lead to other exits; nobody wants more migrants (refugees) in their country; Germany has too much power, or not enough; ultra-rightwing forces/parties are rising almost everywhere; the Schengen Agreement providing visa-less movement is being suspended in most countries that had adopted it; unemployment is unstoppably growing.

There is an underlying theme in this litany of pessimism (or is it optimism?). Europeans - both the sophisticated and the "ignorant" - have become impervious to rational arguments. They are almost all acting irrationally, responding to their emotions and not to reflective analyses. But is this so, Charlie Brown? It makes for a good comic strip, but does that mean the EU will actually cease to exist?

I am not here giving my views about whether the EU is good or bad, should or should not be supported or undermined. Rather, I wish to analyze what I think will actually happen. Will the institutions that now make up the European Union continue to exist ten or twenty years from now? I suspect they will. To see why I think so, let us review together what may make Europeans - both the sophisticated and the "ignorant" - hesitate about taking the fatal step of dismantling what they have been working so hard to create for the last seventy years or so. There are some reasons that one might call economic, others that are geopolitical, and finally still others that might be called cultural.

Let us begin with the economy. The situation in terms of current income, both for the states and for most individuals, is bad everywhere in the EU. The question is whether dismantling Europe would be likely to improve it, or in fact make it worse.

One subject of constant debate is the Eurozone - will it survive? Take for example what happened in Greece in the two 2015 elections there. Alexei Tsipras, the leader of the now-governing party Syriza, was elected in the first election on an anti-austerity platform. He then, in negotiating with the EU for a further loan, retreated on just about everything he had promised the Greek voters. He agreed to measures demanded by the EU that severely hurt the real income of the majority of the population. For this, he was denounced for betraying his promises by left forces within Syriza who withdrew from the party and established their own list. Yet in the next election called very swiftly by Tsipras, he received the mandate again. The Greek voters chose him rather than the left forces within Syriza.

It seems clear, at least to me, that the Greek voters paid no attention to the left denunciations because above all they did not want to leave the Eurozone. Tsipras had made maintaining the euro a priority and the left forces sought instead to resume an autonomous currency. Apparently, the Greek voters believed that the very real negatives of being in the Eurozone were, in their view, less than the probable greater negatives of recreating the drachma.

The situation is roughly the same concerning the so-called safety net features that European governments had installed, such as pensions and unemployment benefits. Virtually all the countries in the EU have been cutting the safety net back for lack of funds. These cuts have been resisted, sometimes successfully, by left or left-of-center parties. But is there any reason to suppose that, were the European Union to disappear tomorrow, these governments would have more funds to distribute? The left parties often say so, condemning what they see as the neoliberal pressures of the EU bureaucracy in Brussels. But look around the world. Can you point to governments not under the purview of Brussels that have been able to increase welfare-state expenditures?

If there is no real advantage in terms of real income levels in dismantling the EU, are there other reasons to do it? The EU has played an important geopolitical role since its inception, and has been growing steadily in membership. The United States has been publicly supporting the rise and expansion of the EU but actually trying to undermine it. The United States has seen the EU as a major geopolitical danger. It is obvious to most observers that the EU's geopolitical strength is the result of numbers. A dismantlement would end this strength and reduce the separate European states to no practical importance geopolitically.

In the end, most European leaders and movements understand this. However much some of them rail against the EU as a structure, are they ready in fact to yield the advantages that a large singular entity gives them? Rightwing groups, especially in eastern Europe, see the EU as one pressure on the United States to offer them military protection against a putatively aggressive Russia. Leftwing groups in other countries, such as France, use the strength of the EU to contain what they think are putatively aggressive actions by the United States. What would either of these groups gain by the dismantlement of the EU?

Finally, there are the so-called cultural links between the United States and Europe. They are publicly proclaimed and more quietly disdained as a remnant of U.S. hegemonic dominance in the first twenty-five years after 1945. Once again there are varying motivations. The left parties and movements want to use their unified structure as a mode of regaining the cultural autonomy (even superiority) they felt they had before 1945. The rightwing forces want to use their strength to insist upon their cultural autonomy on so-called human rights questions. Once again, in union there is strength.

What I see happening is more and more rhetoric and less and less real action. For good or bad, my sense is that the institutions of the EU will survive. This does not mean they won't change. There is, and will continue to be, a real political struggle within the EU about the kind of collective institution it ought to be. This intra-European political struggle is one part of a worldwide struggle about the kind of world we wish to build as an outcome to the structural crisis of the modern world-system.

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