

# COSMOPOLITAN PERIPHERIES

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ARTICLE BY

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Fifteen years ago, almost every European citizen would talk positively about the European project, seen as the sum of three promises: shared prosperity, fundamental rights and sustainable democracies. But we knew that if one unravels, the others would follow: after the Eurozone crisis, a social crisis and a fundamental rights crisis are forming. The imbalance and lack of solidarity between Member States is such that the project is running out of political energy, bringing adverse consequences for us all.

Is Finland a peripheral country of the European Union? Yes. Have you ever heard about Finland being a peripheral country of the European Union? Probably not.

The periphery is at least as much a cultural and political artefact as it is a geographical matter. Being in the periphery isn't necessarily about a location at the tip of some mass of land; it is rather about not having the power to call oneself 'at the centre'. In many ways, the centre and the periphery are defined not only by their definitions, but by the 'definers' themselves. In the United States, it is the geographical extremes of the continental landmass – the West Coast and the East Coast – who get to call to whatever is between them 'fly-over country', as if this inhabited portion of the nation was so devoid of cultural power or importance that it shouldn't be worth mentioning it by another name, or any name at all. In the European Union, the issue of centre and periphery seems only simple at first sight, as the 'centre' is really somehow located in the centre of the continent and the peripheries at the EU's extremes. Or is it?

As the example of Finland shows, the use of ‘periphery’ in EU-parlance, and particularly in relation to the Eurozone, is mainly a function of economic power that then gets translated into political and media agenda-setting capabilities. ‘Periphery’ has been the term of reference for the economies of the Eurozone that have lagged behind the economic powerhouses of ‘central’ Europe, namely Germany, both in terms of output and of convergence to the Economic and Monetary Union targets. The use of this term, seemingly innocuous and technically correct, carries with it implications of hierarchy, unpreparedness and even submission. Thus, once redefined without us even noticing it, periphery starts acquiring different usages and meanings. There are political as well as economic peripheries. Politically, the peripheries are more to the East as the economic peripheries were to the South. Sometimes, the two get conflated every time that a recession happens or an election brings results that were not in the plans devised by the ‘centre’. In the background, one can almost hear the irritation with which the terms are used: a periphery is whatever is creating problems for the centre. But where did these troubles come from and is European disintegration their inevitable consequence?

In recent years, we have been witnessing a clear drift in European vocabulary: from

pejorative terms referring to some countries – the PIIGS<sup>1</sup> or the ‘problem children’ of Europe – to the suggestion of splitting the Eurozone into two separate currencies – one for the weaker and the other for the stronger Member States. It is no wonder that even the most Euro-enthusiastic temperaments are anxious about the future of the Union.

The 1990s were optimistic years, with all the talk of the end of history and the supremacy of free-market democracies. Behind us were the days of a continent split into ‘blocks’; even more forgotten was the pre-WWI coinage of a medical term to refer to the problematic countries of the continent, which were always referred as the ‘sick men’ of Europe. Turkey was once the ‘sick man’ of Europe, but so were Germany and France.

The periphery seems a rather mild use of terminology when compared with some of the alternatives. When the Eurozone crisis erupted in the beginning of 2010, the acronym-du-jour was PIIGS; simply an acronym, reordered to give them a meaning, but a very dehumanising one at that. Paul Krugman, the Nobel-prize winning economist, did not fail to see the unintended (hopefully, just unintended) consequences of this usage and tried to rearrange it, going for “the GIPSIs”, which – for the already over-suspicious ear –

1 Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain

replaced the dehumanising implications with memories of persecuted ethnic minorities and outcast communities. We find another supposedly well-meaning but paternalistic expression in the usage of ‘problem child’ or ‘problem children’ to refer to peripheral countries. Nowadays, as an economic journalist has written, *“indebted Portugal is still the problem child of the Eurozone (...) asphyxiating debt levels, falling job creation and bad loans still plague the economy, a year after it exited its bail out programme, warns the IMF<sup>2</sup>”*. The same terminology was used for Spain and Italy. And if the common citizen won’t read IMF reports, official press releases or op-eds by the European elite, the media will always highlight those terms, which have a serious impact on public opinion. However, in this last case, the derogatory term can be somewhat illuminating: we tend to forget that problem children do not arise out of nowhere, and that they are often the result of problematic parenting by the adults. If we would be willing to see the EU as a particularly chaotic case of a dysfunctional family maybe we would at least have a metaphor that would allow us to not ‘treat’ one or two members of the family by their exclusion from all the others.

In short, the notion of periphery in the current European debate is much more about politics and economy than a simple geographic con-

cept. It brings an idea of hierarchy between countries, of good versus bad pupils (another common metaphor): a persistent infantilisation rhetoric is used, stressing tensions which may end up being forces of disintegration of the European project, supposedly based upon the principles of solidarity, equality and cohesion between its Member States. Indeed, how can we build a European project when some Member States are seen as lazy, objects of scorn, and others as arrogant, domineering and authoritarian?

Thus, nationalist discourses are arising on both sides at the expense of a project that was inspired, above all, by the desire to overwhelm national interest. And these nationalist feelings occur not only among European politicians or citizens against other Member States, but also from them all towards the European project and the “evil Brussels” that represses national sovereignties.

National governments have, in general, mastered the art of blame-deflecting and responsibility-shifting between one another, and European institutions, and instead onto the European project itself. Partially, this is a quite effective response to the exclusionary principle that works behind the usage of the centre-and-periphery divide. If this spatial metaphor reinforces the sense of dis-

<sup>2</sup> Mehreen Kahn, “Indebted Portugal is still the problem child of the eurozone”, Daily Telegraph, August 6 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11786694/Indebted-Portugal-is-still-the-problem-child-of-the-eurozone.html>.

tance between core-countries and the other, more expendable Member States, it cannot fail to reinforce as well the conclusion that many European citizens have arrived at: the EU is unfair, useless and an elitist project. While the elitist specificity was already a concern during the good times, there was at least a justification that the end result of the inherent *avant-gardiste* nature of the European life was a better one for all concerned:

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more cohesion; more economic and social convergence; better standards of living across the EU. The project might not be built on a bottom-up approach, but it had what some economists call 'output legitimacy'.

The problem is that lack of democratic legitimacy is even less sustainable and tolerated when 'output legitimacy' is no longer being returned; undoubtedly, decisions are being taken without us, and it suffices for a chief-of-state or government to use that aggravation card any time that he or she may find his or her government in a bind, in order to extricate him or herself from a complicated domestic political situation, therefore feeding nationalism and Euroscepticism. As this happens so often, cumulatively the citizenry of the Union becomes absolutely convinced

that not only is the European project an idea driven by elitist thinking, but worse than that: the EU is a project of the elites, by the elites and for the elites. In short, there is a belief that there is nothing in it for the common man. And this is why nationalists and Eurosceptics discourses are gaining ground all over the Union, even among the most progressive citizens, opinion makers and politicians: they foster the feelings of exclusion or differentia-

tion, building a wall between 'others' and 'us', and deepen the existing gaps between the economic and policy 'centre' and everything else. European disintegration materialises not only in the peripheral countries against an authoritarian, unfair and contemptuous 'centre', but it is expressed in the 'centre' countries via a strong reaction against the transnational and cosmopolitan option.

The ongoing economic depression has exposed the political, institutional and regulatory weaknesses of the European Union and it has threatened to jeopardise the entire European integration process. In order to build in Europe – and in the world a sustainable environment for democracy, human rights and shared prosperity – we need the equivalent of an ideological reformation

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that will reframe the economy, globalisation and transnational politics. We need positive arguments – instead of just counter-arguments; we need to build a common heritage instead of just having EU funds allocated as lump sums or blank cheques to the national authorities; we should look at what is successful and make it bigger. Instead of just the Erasmus programme, the EU should build Federal universities and locate them in the crisis countries, giving them a chance not just to fight their “brain drain” but to become the Silicon Valleys of Europe. In short, we must creatively take profit of these differences in order to best overcome our divides: unite for better action instead of divide and rule. Ultimately, this is what European integration should be about.

There is much at stake in the European discussion about the centre and the periphery, and much more at stake than even Europe itself. On its face, this is a question of whether the largest and boldest international integration project in the history of mankind will survive. Europe has a bad record when it comes to its past disintegration experiences. The first era of globalisation ended with WWI. The first international experience, the League of Nations, ended with WWII, followed later by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia ended in bloodshed and ethnic cleansing. Even if we do not go that far this time, the acrimonious breakup of the European project would constitute a sad warning for any international integration project in the world.

In that sense, the destiny of the European project already bears deep significance to the wider world. But there is also a huge blind spot behind the current European debate: it is as if, in the Freudian sense, the core countries of Europe were ‘projecting’ themselves in the characterisation of their European partners as peripheries, while being afraid of becoming peripheral themselves. For what is Europe if not an appendix of the big Euro-Asian super-continent? Or, looking southwards rather than eastwards, what is Europe if not some kind of circumflex accent on top of the much bigger African Continent, which has already dou-

bled Europe's size in population and may still, in this century, be from six to ten times more? After centuries of dominating the trade networks of the world and colonising entire continents, the quarrel between Europe's centre and peripheries betrays a deep anxiety about becoming irrelevant and inconsequential in tomorrow's world.

And that's where – to end on an optimistic note – Europe as a whole can learn a lot from so-called peripheries: rather than accepting a subaltern role, peripheries have often found a much greater room to manoeuvre than is usually imagined. Taking advantage of their geographical position, their diasporas and the collective imagination of their people as seduced by the abundance of possibilities in the wider world, peripheries have launched bridges across oceans and made melting pots out of harbour towns across the world. Although the term is used much more regarding big metropolises, one could even argue that peripheries are the original creators of cosmopolitanism. This sense of belonging to a global citizenship is something that the whole of the EU must cherish in order to survive its challenges now and in the near future.

It would help if the EU would, at least now and then, let itself also be defined by its peripheries. Starting with the term periphery itself. For in its original ancient Greek meaning (shall we let the Greeks have the

last word on this one at least?), periphery means the circumference of a circle or the surface of a sphere – as the Earth itself, of which the periphery is just the layer below the atmosphere. Indeed, the planet has no corners, appendices or any other kind of tip: no periphery except the uninterrupted surface of the planet. In order to face its many challenges, from climate change, to the plight of refugees, to the asymmetries of globalisation, let us all learn to be peripheral – by which is meant: citizens of the world living on the surface of the planet.



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