

Where is My European Union? The European Ideal has been Irreversibly Damaged

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As Greece prepares for a monumental decision, there is only one certainty: the European Ideal has been irrevocably damaged

I am a Europhile. Not only that, I am a product of the Union. I have structured my life around the idea of free movement; my identity around the notion that I can be more than one thing: Mykonian, Greek, Londoner, British, European. For the first time in my life, I am beginning to wonder, whether the European project is now simply too broken to be fixed.

Do not misunderstand me. I am passionate about the notion of a Europe of partners, united around principles of solidarity and trade. I just think we have taken wrong turns. So many and so wrong that I feel very uncertain as to whether we can ever find our way back.

I am not alone in feeling like this and it is not of consequence only with regard to Greece. I have had numerous messages in the last few days from pro-European friends here in Britain, telling me that the way the institutions have treated Greece, have convinced them to cross over to the “out” camp for the forthcoming UK referendum on European membership.

I am not in the deluded camp who think that national sovereignty is a magic bullet that will restore some nationalist utopia which only ever existed in our minds. Governments have been captured by corporate interests, so completely and at every level, that all EU exit changes is the field on which necessary battles must be fought. No flag provides protection from that, however tightly we wrap ourselves in it.

Neither do I want to suggest that the project hasn't been a success. Before it was captured by this fatal monetarist fever, it achieved decades of unprecedented peace and prosperity, extraordinary advances in working and consumer rights, and a mingling of cultures and populations which has enriched us all. But I know, in my heart, it is now irrevocably damaged.

The choice being presented to the Greek people is a difficult one. Stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea, as they say. On one hand, continuing a programme which has decimated the country and its economy, plunged millions into poverty and has killed many thousands. On the other, the complete unknown. No, not automatic Grexit, as some would have you believe. But certainly the possibility of it.

The side which supports saying “yes” to the disgraceful agreement being offered, in exchange for staying in the Euro, paint it in two ways: First, as a battle between certainty

and uncertainty. But that is misleading. Because, by examining our country's trajectory over the past five years, the certainty being offered by a "yes" is a certainty of more misery, more poverty, more humiliation, more degradation. Those recommending "yes" to taking more of the medicine being extended to us, do so in the full knowledge that this medicine is poison.

Second, the choice is being painted as one between emotion and reason. It is, of course, not unusual for the established to be presented as reasonable and the radical as emotional. It is pretty much the whole basis of conservatism. But fear is also an emotion. And what drives the "yes" camp seems to be a very clear terror of the notion that the unknown might be even worse. It is the logic of locking yourself inside your cabin on the Titanic, because the lifeboats are small and the ocean frozen.

Last winter, I stood outside the Opera House in the centre of Athens looking at the posters in the window. I was approached by a well-dressed and immaculately groomed elderly lady. I moved to the side. I thought she wanted to pass. She didn't. She asked me for a few euros because she was hungry. I took her to dinner and, in generous and unsolicited exchange, she told me her story.

Her name was Magda and she was in her mid-seventies. She had worked as a teacher all her life. Her husband had been a college professor and died "mercifully long before we were reduced to this state", as she put it. They paid their tax, national insurance and pension contributions straight out of the salary, like most people. They never cheated the state. They never took risks. They saved. They lived modestly in a two bedroom flat.

In the first year of the crisis her widow's pension top-up stopped. In the second and third her own pension was slashed in half. Downsizing was not an option – house prices had collapsed and there were no buyers. In the third year things got worse. "First, I sold my jewellery. Except this ring", she said, stroking her wedding ring with her thumb. "Then, I sold the pictures and rugs. Then the good crockery and silver. Then most of the furniture. Now there is nothing left that anyone wants. Last month the super came and removed the radiators from my flat, because I hadn't paid for communal fuel in so long. I feel so ashamed."

I don't know why this encounter should have shocked me so deeply. Poverty and hunger is everywhere in Athens. Magda's story is replicated thousands of times across Greece. It is certainly not because one life is worth more than another. And yet there is something peculiarly discordant and irreconcilable about the "nouveau pauvres", just like there is about the nouveau riches. Most likely it shocked me because I kept thinking how much she reminded me of my mother.

And, still, I don't know whether voting "yes" or "no" will make life better or worse for her. I don't know what Magda would vote either. I can only guess. What I do know, is that the encounter was the beginning of the end of my love affair with the European project. Because, quite simply, it is no longer my European Union. It is Amazon's and Starbucks'. It is the politicians' and the IMF's. But it is not mine.

If belonging to the largest and richest trading bloc in the world cannot provide dinner for a retired teacher like her, it has no reason to exist. If a European Union which produces €28,000 of annual GDP for every single one of its citizens cannot provide a safety net for

her, then it is profoundly wicked. If this is not a union of partners, but a gang of big players and small players, who cut the weakest loose at the first sign of trouble, then it is nothing.

Each one of us will have to engage in an internal battle before Sunday's referendum. I will be thinking of you, Magda, when I vote. It seems as honest a basis to make a decision as any.

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