

Without the British, Germany is Alone

‘The United Kingdom has one leg inside the European Union and one leg outside. After 23 June the reverse will be true’, Jean-Louis Bourlanges told *Le Monde* last week. This bon mot by the French former centrist MEP belies a truth that many are losing sight of in the hysteria over ‘Brexit’ or ‘Bremain’: the British and the continent are stuck to each other, no matter what happens. The real question one should be asking right now is how the UK and Germany relate to each other.

After all, the European Union owes its existence solely to the ‘German question’. The idea was, after 1945, to strap Germany with France into an armoury of rules. These rules would apply equally for both countries, and for any other country wanting to join. The founding fathers of the EU understood that just punishing Germany for the horrors of the Second World War was not going to work. They had tried it before. And they had paid a very high price for that failure. The humiliation of the astronomical World War I reparations imposed on Germany was one of the main causes of World War II. In other words: in order to tame Germany after three wars since 1870, it was important to tie the country in a European straightjacket not on its own but together with France. The first baleen in the corset stay was the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951.

Throughout the centuries, the British have wrestled with the question whether they wanted to be part of the continent or preferred splendid isolation. In a sense that choice becomes a daily dilemma. Germany has often enforced that choice. It British detachment that was partly responsible for German hegemony.

When Germany becomes too dominant, the British take action. They liberated Europe from the Germans twice. Afterwards, they withdrew. London did not want to participate in European unification at first. Later it changed its mind. *Le Monde* dug up two Winston Churchill quotes, which beautifully illustrate this eternal paradox – and the essence of Europe! Before the Allied landings in Normandy Churchill told Charles de Gaulle, the leader of Free France and a critic of the US, furiously: „So get this quite clear. If Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, she must always choose the open sea.” For open sea, read: America.

In Zurich in 1946, however, Churchill called for the „constitution of the United States of Europe”. He had considered European unification a necessity for some time already, as a way to rein in Germany. He was

always ambivalent, though, about the question whether Britain should be part of that.

An issue that the UK has been unable to solve until now, and will probably never be able to solve, is how they can keep some kind of control over this 'European necessity'. All British attempts to sabotage European unification from the moment it became a success are manifestations of this – as are all their attempts to limit the status of their membership after their accession in 1973.

This is what the Brexit referendum is about. Most of the news about Brexit should not come from London, but from Berlin. What is at play here is a purely European issue; the British ambivalence is well-known. Berlin is tired of the constant British obstruction in Europe. Still, it fears Brexit more than Remain. If Britain leaves, Germany will be alone in Europe with a weak, sinking France at its side. Germany fears itself. Contrary to what analysts say on prime time television, this referendum is only partly about migration, Eurocrats or the 'Brussels monster'. It centres on the eternal question of who owns power in Europe; about what Germany is going to do with this power this time; and what this means for Europe.

11 June 2016

Europe Fills The Void With Desperate Howling

Last week, two dark-skinned boys suddenly appeared on the wraps of the renowned Kinder chocolate bars. And this immediately caused increased traffic on one of Germany's Pegida websites. Was this „a joke”, somebody asked: what had happened to the blonde child on the bar? Another wrote: „Do Turks and other countries put German children on their confectionary and food? Certainly not.”

When the manufacturer announced that they were childhood photographs of German top footballers, the protests were silenced. Pegida asked supporters „not to respond anymore”. They had „stumbled upon a hornet's nest” – as if those hornets were already there before Pegida supporters got involved.

Europeans' fuses are getting shorter and shorter by the day. This is also shown by the hysteria involving two media stars, Sylvana and Ebru Umar, in The Netherlands. The new Austrian president was assigned extra bodyguards: the very evening of his election victory there was a call for an attack on his house. Everybody insults everybody, all the time, because all

feel their values being attacked. Why are newspapers and websites full of issues dealing with identity and cultural differences? Why do Europeans see everything through the prism of 'values' these days?

Because we do not have an ideology anymore. The only thing we have, American philosopher Mark Lilla once wrote, is a dogma: libertarianism. After the fall of the Wall we have stopped thinking. During the Cold War we belonged to the free, democratic West. But since we were caught in an ideological conflict with communism - a rival image of reality - we still continued to think. It kept us on our toes. Communism was not purely evil; it contained some good elements, although the implementation was poor. We read about it, we debated it. It kept us critical and curious: sometimes we adjusted our own vision. But we stopped doing this since 1989. After all, we had 'won'. Now the rest of the world would become like us: democratic, individualistic, and free.

With our blind trust in the progressive, universalistic effect of freedom that was so precious to us, we have helped Arab and other peoples to make the transition, too. This became a disaster. Many Arabs do want freedom, but do they want gay marriage, or separation of church and state? No, thank you very much.

This backlash is now manifesting itself in Europe, too, as a result of the same intellectual laziness. Instead of recalibrating the idea of Europe, which was essential in a changing world (Is 'No More War' still relevant? Where does Europe end?) governments have blindly opted for economic expansion. They opened their economies, without too much consideration for the impact on national democracies. With progressive legislation on euthanasia and transgenders we continued to keep up with the times really well.

Now Europe is facing a couple of crises. But we don't know anymore how to react. We didn't see this coming at all. We are scared and unprotected.

Everybody sticks up for themselves with the last remaining battle cries: 'civil liberties' and 'democratic values'. These slogans allow us to advocate both for and against the EU, both for freedom in the Middle East and against freedom for Arabs to come here. We use it to justify both military intervention (Libya) and non-intervention (Syria). As a result libertarianism itself has now become meaningless.

Europe is becoming a barrel of contradictions. We don't want any refugees anymore, but we disqualify the only country who can help us achieve that goal, namely Turkey – because Turkey is not a Western democracy. We want the state to protect us against unemployment, criminals and multinationals, but we glorify Edward Snowden – who undermines the

strong state. Europe is stuck in an intellectual vacuum. All that is left is desperate howling.

28 May 2016

Globalisation: War by Other Means

The main idea behind European unification was that when you make countries economically interdependent, they will think harder before they declare war on each other. Does it work? Europe has not had a war for seventy years. This does not mean it will always stay that way, but at least it's difficult to envisage European countries taking up arms against one another any time soon.

But did unification also smother other forms of conflict? That is certainly more difficult to maintain. Just look at how European countries rob each other of tax revenues; how they eavesdrop and spy on each other; how ruthless they are in sweeping refugees into neighbouring countries; and how they all try to protect their banks and push the bad assets and losses across the border.

In hindsight we've been naive, assuming for a long time that "we in Europe" were not into power politics anymore. We thought we were above that now, and that there would be no slipping back. Many Europeans are now asking themselves: will tensions between EU-countries reach a breaking point? Can national resistances to common solutions and arrangements actually explode the EU? Some fear it, others hope it.

We live in a globalised world, full of spillover - no country can remove itself from this. Globalisation binds countries together, but also creates a playing field for war by other means. „The trick is to make your opponents more dependent on you than you are from them“, writes Mark Leonard of the European Council on Foreign Relations in essay collection *Connectivity Wars*.

This is happening worldwide. China's power politics relies not on war (even Beijing heavily invests in defence), but on its aggressive trade policy, on cyber attacks and development aid. The country also has set up an alternative to the World Bank, in an attempt to break Western dominance of international organisations.

Some Islamic countries intervene in 'classic' military conflicts, from Yemen to Syria. But they also wage new, globalised wars-by-other-means. They

use oil and money as weapons, and have been trying for years to get the UN condemned for blasphemy.

Russia bombs Syria and has annexed the Crimea, but is also blocking gas pipelines, using military flights to disrupt civil air traffic over Copenhagen, bribing Balkan elites and spreading disinformation via YouTube. ISIS instigates massacres and uses migrants – typical products of globalisation – as a weapon. As to Europe, its armies are still active (mostly under the disguise of ‘peacekeeping’), but it is at its best when it uses economic weapons at a global level such as sanctions and fines for multinationals who violate EU rules.

The EU is a form of globalisation. It is globalisation on a smaller scale. Checking out is useless; it doesn’t make sense. Everybody knows that Switzerland’s biggest problem is Brussels, even though it is not an EU member state. The Euro crisis cost the Swiss a fortune, because it pushed the franc to new heights. Citizens all over Europe demand Grexit or Brexit, but their governments have a different agenda: to use Europe to reinforce their position, and to weaken that of others.

All EU countries are playing cynical games. Hungary is laying it on thick, but always climbs down when sanctions are looming. Poland doesn’t want to leave the EU; it wants to change the EU and remain the biggest net recipient. The closer Marine Le Pen gets to power, the less she is inclined to leave the Eurozone: this will marginalise France.

In this centrifuge the EU needs to keep a very strong center. The survival of its institutions, now put to the test, are what will keep everything together. If the EU fails this test everyone will lose out.

30 April 2016

Golden Days for Political Nihilism

Years ago, at the start of the nineties, there was into a Dutchman fighting alongside Croatian militia during the war in the former Yugoslavia. He was a civil servant from The Hague, as it turned out, who had taken a month off pursuing the thrill of war. In Bosnian hotels at night star reporters from all over Europe would tell each other excitingly about the day’s adventures on the frontline. One of them boasted that he had saved a child. Another shouted: „I was just able to duck down, bullets were whistling past my ears!” A third one had girlfriends in several bomb-shelled cities, all of whom wanted to marry him. For many journalists this war was a chance to play

the hero. Thanks to journalism you could experience the thrill of war and condemn it at the same time.

Back then these were peripheral phenomena. Back then, Europe was still going somewhere. The Wall had fallen, the Soviet threat was melting away. The West had won. This gave us a mission: the rest of the world would become like us. What we thought we saw in Yugoslavia were the last throes of the old order in which one asserted his rights through fighting, not through trade. We thought that we Europeans were above that: we were working on the internal market, on the euro and Schengen. One day of course, after the war, the ex-Yugoslavs would surely take part in these large-scale projects. Civilisation, to us, was always an upward trend. We Europeans knew it better than anyone: once you come out of a war you suddenly realise how stupid and useless it is to fight.

But now, 25 years later, Europe is not going anywhere anymore. Big European projects are shattering because every country only wants the benefits, not the disadvantages. These projects functioned as a compass. They gave us a focus, a sense of direction. Now we have lost that compass. We are floating aimlessly, bickering amongst ourselves. Donald Tusk, the European President, quotes Toynbee: „Civilisations die from suicide, not by murder”. He admits this is slightly coarse, yet „fitting for this situation”.

There used to be a ring of friendly countries, surrounding us like a safe cordon. They were outside the EU, but aspired to be members one day. Now they are exploding, one by one, and we are surrounded by a ring of fire. Meanwhile, Polish militia beat up asylum seekers in Sweden. Sales of weapons are up in Austria. Gang wars are raging in Dublin. Politicians receive threats. Violence returns to European society.

In one of his essays, Robert Musil mulls the question why Europeans allowed the outbreak of the First World War: „Because we had had enough of peace.” In Musil’s day, war was an alternative for stagnation. Society was going forward nor backward. Those were golden days for cynics and hedonists. People needed perspective. They desperately needed the feeling that they had a grip on their lives and that they were able to make a difference in politics and society. There is no need to exaggerate the parallels between then and now. But Europeans are feeling a similar sense of powerlessness now, and of futility. Many want to get involved, feeling a strong desire to put their energy into something constructive, something that creates progress.

It is important to find political answers to this. This kind of energy is looking for a way out. If it cannot find a positive channel, it will switch to a negative

channel – to political nihilism, brawls and other forms of hot-bloodedness. Politicians like Wilders or Le Pen can say whatever they want. But wouldn't it be lovely if more people would contradict them? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the ministers of the six countries who signed the very first European treaty in Rome in 1957, would not just meet to prepare the 60th commemoration, but also bring a new impetus to Europe, in whatever shape or form? For this is what Europe is craving now: positive impetus.

13 February 2016

Suicide Bombers Know Where They Are Going. We Do Not

In his last film, *Where to Invade Next*, American filmmaker Michael Moore painted Europe as Utopia. Europeans do not see it that way at all. We moan from dawn till dusk about the government, the elite, TTIP, and the monster in Brussels. We don't want any more migrants, but now that we've finally managed to send them back to Turkey that is wrong as well. This week we are serving up our own security forces, true to form. And Belgium? Oh, Belgium is a failed state.

Unfortunately, it looks like it was a walk-over for the El-Bakraoui brothers. Self-assured, totally dedicated to their mission – the destruction of the West, and the construction of a caliphate on its ruins – they blew themselves up in Brussels. It must have taken recruiters of Islamic State (IS) many months to bring these men into their sphere of influence. That takes much time, care and persuasive power. But at least that gets you something: people who want to die for their ideals.

In 2015, polling organisation Gallup asked if Europeans wanted to die for their country. The score: 18 percent of Germans, 27 percent of Brits, and 15 percent of the Dutch said yes. Only the Finns achieved 74 percent. We Europeans become paralysed when confronted with violence. Life in Brussels has stopped. Days after the attacks you still get e-mails like „Despite 'Brussels', we have decided to let the concert go ahead". This is exactly what IS wants.

After the Paris attacks Scott Atran, an anthropologist working for the CNRS, the Paris Centre for fundamental scientific research, wrote that we are suspended in our own ignorance of what motivates suicide bombers. We have to gain insight into what moves them, if not it will be difficult to fight them.

After the attacks in Paris, Brussels also came to a standstill, as did Boston in 2013. This makes citizens unsure about society's resilience. Even during the Blitz (1940-41), Atran wrote, „not even the full might of the German Luftwaffe at the height of the Blitz could compel the UK government and the people of London to cower so. Today, mere mention of an attack on New York in an ISIS video has US officials scurrying to calm the public. Media exposure, which is the oxygen of terror in our age, not only amplifies the perception of danger but, in generating such hysteria, makes the bloated threat to society real.”

The suicide bombers know where they are going. We do not. For decades, our governments beavered away at the European Union, arguing that it was a technical operation: a 'market', nothing more, nothing less. The nation state, they insisted, would persist as the main political unit. However, nation states are becoming more permeable.

Decision that were once taken in national parliaments are now taken on higher levels – on Wall Street, in Brussels, at the G20. This makes citizens nervous: the line that the EU is 'purely economic', isn't true anymore. Why are governments keeping up appearances? Fierce discussions are raging in many EU countries about what globalisation is doing to national identity. The Dutch Ukraine referendum also relates to that. But our leaders, who are supposed to steer these debates and have to propose better European structures, are ducking the question and looking the other way. This lack of political perspective is eating away at our social cohesion and confidence. Society gets fragmented: „Just let them do what they want”. But how are cynical citizens, who are checking out, going to find solutions for dealing with second- and third-generation migrants? With those who feel marginalised and gradually mature through petty crime only to be patiently converted in European prisons? How many people actually know that Europe, without even the slightest political debate, are already waging a hard war against IS in Libya? Is it possible that the attacks in Brussels have something to do with that, too? And with the Western invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Europeans should, besides lighting some candles, find a new common political destination again. Otherwise they will never be able to answer these crucial questions.

26 March 2016

What We Want: Back to an Old-Fashioned Us Against Them

What is the Dutch government going to do with the outcome of the Ukraine referendum? What will the European Union do? Oh, specialists say, the turnout was low and only a tiny minority in The Netherlands said no. So, we will find a solution: in Brussels we delete a provision, give The Netherlands an opt-out clause on a non-vital issue and all is ready. Crisis over. Lawyers are good at this. The Danes, Irish and British have been saved many times by minor adjustments in complex international agreements that are so filled with jargon that nobody reads them anyway.

The specialists are right, of course: they will undoubtedly find a way out. Sadly, this solution will only work for a limited time. In the long run the opposite will happen. This referendum was, after all, staged as a loud protest against this very rational culture of European tweaks. In that sense, the referendum is a symbol of a deep cultural change in Europe.

For decades, we believed that man was constantly getting better. We had done a good job massacring each other in the first half of the previous century. But at least, we thought, this had taught us a lesson: we built institutions that were going to help us focus less on our instincts and more on rational arguments. Parliamentary democracy was the next phase in the positive evolution of 'new European man'. After all, we were not shooting each other with ammunition anymore, but just with words. We believed in multilateral diplomacy and the market now, not in war and nationalism. We made compromises, since there could be no clear winners or losers anymore. Now we preferred negotiating for years on an agreement full of shades of grey, rather than once again relying on militias and Heimat. Europeans have been revelling in this homegrown goodness for a long time. The fall of the Wall strengthened them in this view - it seemed as if the entire world wanted to follow our example! This is how we stumbled blindly into postpolitics. This is politics without antagonism, where everybody agrees on the broad lines. Politics of 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand'. A world in which opponents can be accommodated by means of a tiny technical intervention.

But people are not machines. Read Freud, or Carry van Bruggen: people are social animals but also look for 'the difference with the other'. We are emotional beings who want to belong and who, to a certain extent, need antagonism: we want to react against something. It helps us to know who we are.

Globalisation and Europeanisation mean that it has become hard for us to do something with that need for antagonism in politics. Many decisions are made in Brussels, or by investors on the other end of the world. There is little we can do about it. A country like The Netherlands cannot take itself

out of globalisation. But the result is that many are turning their backs on politics and look for this antagonism elsewhere.

In the past, you had left versus right. A new distinction is looming now: good versus bad. This is a moral distinction. Us against them, folk against elite.

Debates about migration used to be fairly rational. Now they, too, have become a moral debates, with instincts trying to find a way out. The problem is that you can compromise on the economy, which is rational, while it is impossible to compromise on instincts, values or identities, which are emotional. The discussion about Europe is also becoming increasingly emotional. If you are not a Europhobe, you are automatically designated a Europhile. The two sides consider each other as enemies and insult each other. Debates never solve anything – on the contrary, the more you talk, the more angry and insulted everybody gets.

In parliaments we have rules. But the moral arena, which is predominantly situated outside of parliament and where from now on parliamentary decisions are being recalled, knows no such rules. Anything goes. That's what is wrong. This is about identity. About new, social fault lines in society. Our entire post-war belief system, the entire European 'order', is up for discussion.

9 April 2016