

THE
EUROPE
ILLUSION

*Britain, France, Germany
and the Long History
of European Integration*

STUART SWEENEY

REAKTION BOOKS

*To my late wife, Lynne, and my dad, who never lived to see
this published. And to my children, Thomas and Elizabeth,
and to Alexandra, who have made it possible*

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INTRODUCTION: Brexit, Populist Aberration or Slow Burn Revolt?

In June 2016 Britain voted to leave the EU. This was the first time a country had done so during the 59 years since the signing of the Treaty of Rome. During that time membership had risen from six states to 28. Unhelpfully, many commentators have characterized *Brexit* as a simple populist aberration, akin to the election of Donald Trump in America. In fact, people voted to leave the EU for many reasons, and the Leave campaign forged an unlikely alliance between middle-class ‘eurosceptics’, the older working class and poorer anti-immigration voters. These disparate voters expressed concerns about different things, but their worries centred on Britain’s control of her own borders, laws and finance. There was suspicion of the whole European project, which some viewed as subject to relentless ‘mission creep’ from the more straightforward European customs union that Britain joined in 1973. With advances like the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, supranationalists seemed to have gained the upper hand over more cautious integrationists, and reluctant Europeans in London.¹

At the same time Britain’s engagement with the EU remained muted. Notably, British voter turnout in European parliament elections over 1979–2014 remained resolutely subdued, barely rising from 32 per cent to 36 per cent. It slumped as low as 24 per cent by 1999 as the EU pressed ahead with monetary union. Meanwhile EU-wide average turnout fell from 62 per cent to 43 per cent as continental Europe appeared to be afflicted by the British ailment of ‘euroscepticism’.

In fact, Britain’s more acute ‘euroscepticism’ festered over time. This was partly the responsibility of ‘elite’ politicians, civil servants, journalists, academics and business people, who viewed contested aspects of European integration as too sensitive for public debate. Instead, British voters were

asked to follow other Europeans in their momentum towards a European Union and beyond. But this book contends that British particularism encourages explanation rather than condemnation. I will argue that contrasting histories of the key European states reveal a great deal about why integration can follow distinct trajectories. Failing to grasp historical difference leaves journalists and commentators at a loss to understand the complexities of the European project. Brexit is then dismissed as a populist-racist interlude, rather than a reflection of distinct historical legacies in European states, which encourage integration, with appropriate safety valves.

As the Brexit process has continued, with the March 2019 deadline for the completion of the ‘withdrawal treaty’, the extent of British particularism has been made clear. Despite the strength of the Brussels negotiating stance and the expected economic costs to Britain around Brexit, support for ‘leave’ in opinion polls has remained surprisingly strong. Those calling for a ‘people’s vote’ (or second referendum) have readily admitted that the result of such a ballot is far from certain. Above all, the Conservative Party in Britain, sometimes described as the ‘natural party of government’, is split down the middle on this single issue. Meanwhile the Labour Party continues to struggle to unite under a single Brexit policy. The need to look more deeply into this dominant political issue, in Britain and elsewhere, for clues as to how we got here is pressing.

Britain’s profile in Europe has certainly declined since 1814. At that time M. le Comte de Saint-Simon wrote his ‘Reorganization of European Society’.² This was the end of the Napoleonic Wars, when European unification through military conquest had failed. Saint-Simon, the former French captain of artillery at Yorktown during the American War of Independence pressed Britain and France to set up a joint parliament. Britain’s liberal traditions and world-power status would entitle her to send twice the number of deputies to the new legislature as France. Over time, that discrepancy would disappear as France absorbed lessons from the English, who brought commercial and political maturity. The states of Germany, seen by Saint-Simon as a third great European federal power in the making, were politically immature but with a promising future. Prussia and other powerful German-speaking states would learn from the older nation states of Britain and France to be able to accede to a membership of a triumvirate of European powers. Indeed, with the British and French as senior partners, Germany might avoid a revolution as

destructive as that brought on King Charles I, or Louis XVI, victims of revolutionary regicide in Europe.

Later, Britain's position of primacy in European matters, highlighted by Saint-Simon, had declined to a peripheral role. By the French Presidency of Charles de Gaulle London occupied a bystander position. This continued during the Franco-German partnerships from Kohl-Mitterrand onwards. Finally, by the Merkel era, the German Chancellor and others characterized Britain as Europe's 'problem child'. In short, Britain's downward trajectory encourages scrutiny of this triumvirate of leading European powers. In understanding that three-way dynamic, we can begin to understand the mechanism by which Britain has been squeezed out of European power, or exited willingly.

While France and Britain are mature unitary nation states, the role of Germany as 'nation state' is complicated and disputed: Germany was only unified in 1871. Before that time, in the guise of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and related states (the Empire), and afterwards during Germany's catastrophic twentieth century, the borders of what we understand as 'Germany' moved constantly. But Saint-Simon and others were conscious of a German-speaking power that might develop from the Empire. That Empire was finally dismantled by Napoleon in 1806, but partially reconstructed through Bismarck's 'little Germany' in 1871.

Moreover, although the Empire included non-German speakers, and excluded German speakers of Switzerland, Greater Hungary and East Prussia, the loose federation of states and cities was an overwhelmingly German-speaking power after 1648. The rise of the powerful house of Hohenzollern, in the elector state of Brandenburg, merging into greater Prussia, was an engine that propelled the development of this third great European state. Prussia-Germany then stood comparison in modern Europe with France and Britain. This provided three linguistically distinct regions, which competed, cajoled and integrated in fits and starts.³

In telling this longer tale, Europe's core history is represented through Britain's relationships with France and Prussia-Germany since the map of Europe was redrawn by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Helpfully, taking the longer view we can discern common trends and patterns driving European integration. But these currents are tempered by historical and cultural particularisms of individual European states, which have made setbacks like Brexit predictable and manageable. In short, the central argument is that integration in Europe, broadly defined, has

evolved through diplomatic, economic and cultural links, cemented between these three states. Yet it has been rare for all three states to be friends at the same time. Indeed, British and European history has been blighted by the tendency for two of the three to pursue partnership, to the detriment of the third. This lends support to the cliché that two is company and three a less satisfactory crowd.

Admittedly, in telling the tale largely through the three largest European powers we risk a teleological approach that highlights the importance of Paris, London and Berlin, through assuming the importance of those three states upfront. But focusing on the two dominant nation states of the post-1648 period (France and Britain) and the most populous linguistic region, then nation state, whose beginnings reside in the earliest experiment in federalism (Germany), seems a defensible position. These are not European powers solely of the twentieth century. With the Empire, they are powers that would have been allotted dominant votes in any European Chamber of Deputies, designed by King Henry IV of France, Quaker William Penn or Saint-Simon himself.

The risk of assuming away the rest of Europe is overridden by the advantage of manageability and the insights that viewing Europe through three culturally distinct regions will bring. Moreover, it will not preclude us from bringing in other European powers by way of comparison, including Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Russia and the United States. For example, the United States represents a nation whose Federalist Constitution of 1788 inspired and cajoled many imitators within the European project. The birth of that nation during the Revolutionary War coalesced European powers into an anti-British alliance with the thirteen colonies by 1778. This was intended to suppress British sea power and empire. To some this speaks of European identity.

Today, as Europe faces another challenging period, the reader can stand back, avoiding panic responses to Brexit. After all, British history suggests unease towards overarching federal or supranational organizations. Indeed, the referendum of 2016 implied a rejection of supranationalism in areas like free movement of peoples, monetary policy and the judiciary. More recently political discourse in the UK focused on whether post-Brexit Britain should remain in the single market or customs union of the EU. Yet the fact of Brexit has met tepid opposition across the two dominant parties. Importantly, the general election of June 2017 saw Labour and Conservative parties achieve their largest aggregate vote since 1970 (87.5 per cent). Both parties published

‘pro-leave’ manifestos in the election campaign, leaving little democratic justification for a second referendum, and making London’s departure from the EU (‘soft’ or ‘hard’) very likely. But that does not undermine the strong forces tending to European integration. It simply spells more pragmatic and variable geometry in Europe.

In March 2017, as the isolated third member of the triumvirate, London triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to formally exit the EU. Since then, the media has provided minute-by-minute commentary on the protracted negotiations. Fleet Street has bombarded readers with the personalities and foibles of the chief protagonists, and the details of the ‘divorce bill’. But behind the scenes, away from Jean-Claude Juncker, Michel Barnier, Guy Verhofstadt and other media favourites, negotiations are dominated by the ‘big three’ states. This encourages us to consider the negotiating stance of these three states in the context of their history and culture. For example, France’s support for supranationalism is incomprehensible to a British audience unless the history of France and her enduring European ambitions is understood. Equally, Germany appears motivated by crude economic ambition and old-fashioned mercantilist instincts, with roots in the dynamics of earlier federal German states.

At the same time, Germany is content to allow France to take the lead on diplomatic and strategic matters. Understandably Berlin wishes to avoid undue involvement in areas that caused catastrophe in the last century. Meanwhile, Britain presses her traditional neoliberal agenda, born of J. S. Mill and free-trade traditions, with opt-outs on all statist architecture. Of course, the reality is more nuanced and absorbing than national stereotypes might convey, and it is these subtleties that we will examine. Yet guiding the negotiations are attitudes and national sensibilities reflecting these nations’ experiences in war, economics, empire and religion.

More generally it is through the history of these three states that the dynamics of European integration (and disintegration) become illuminated. In particular, we can identify patterns that have pushed Britain and Europe towards greater interconnectedness, as Europeans reacted to change and reversals over 370 years. Indeed, the three states were forced to cooperate through wars, revolutions, constitutional change, industrial revolution, economic cycles, empire, decolonization, migrations, religious schisms and challenge from extra-European ‘others’. At the same time European states struggled to stand alone, without institutional links to

others. After all, wars became more destructive, economic expectations were elevated, European empires collapsed and secularism became a unifying factor. Latterly the threat represented by the 'other' reached terrifying proportions with the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Meanwhile Europeans fretted that their economy was unable to compete with first America, then Japan (briefly) and latterly China. Hence, in the face of these dangers, integration for our three European states became a priority. The triumvirate of nations sought critical mass in economics, trade, diplomacy and defence, underpinned by a European identity, formal or informal.

This longer-term view of European integration is unorthodox. Many academics distinguish the European periods before and after the Monnet Plan of 1950. In this interpretation the earlier period is characterized by grand schemes and philosophical texts, while the post-war period delivered tangible legislative (treaty-based) change. But the absolute distinction between integration through treaty and formalized institutional arrangements is misleading. After all, treaties can be torn up and amended. Institutions tending to integration (like the League of Nations) can cease to exist, and member states can leave the EU or Euro (like Britain and potentially Greece). Integration can mean very different things to Europeans in different states at different times. For example, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron now emphasize 'free movement of peoples' as fundamental for European integration. But this has come to pass through treaty change in recent years. For European integrationists like Briand, Schuman, Monnet and Adenauer that would have seemed an alien concept. Equally for earlier writers like Sully, Penn and the abbé de Saint-Pierre it would have been truly beyond the pale (and the remit of practicality). Of course, with Europe's Schengen open borders now contested this may be so again.

Yet crucially for Europe, further integration is now threatened by national differences resurfacing in French-British-German relations. Britain has embraced a diplomatic profile occupied frequently in the story: 'semi-detachment'. London seems resolved to celebrate a pragmatic and 'common sense' approach to state-building, developed under an unwritten constitution. 'Perfidious Albion' remains suspicious of the continent's 'deductive' reasoning, grand plans, Napoleonic codes and federalism. Meanwhile political elites in France and Germany pursue deepened integration through monetary, fiscal and political union. Strikingly, the difficulty of concurrent intimacy between 'the big

three' was highlighted by the 2016 Brexit referendum. Noticeably, British attempts to negotiate protection against Eastern European immigration met limited support from Paris or Berlin. They were reticent to challenge 'free movement of peoples'. EU treaty change was anathema to Paris administrators, themselves grounded in constitutions and codes. Equally, Berlin administrators remain fearful of tearing up rule books, perhaps remembering Germany's traumas of the early twentieth century.

But this book argues that Brexit need not scupper the federalist dream of a United States of Europe. After all, this federal project has strong historical pedigree, with roots in the Holy Roman Empire, Prussian-led customs union and then German state-building. Ironically, it was British innovations in federalism through the union of England and Scotland that so impressed Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay as authors of their American Federalist Papers over 1787–8. They were less impressed with the impotent Empire arrangements that saw Vienna struggle to defend itself over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴

The EU will remain a formidable institution of 27 states, with others waiting in the wings. Moreover, with Britain's departure, the non-Euro zone portion is greatly reduced. The eight remaining non-Euro states are likely to face pressure to conform to the architecture of the European Central Bank (ECB). In short, the weight of historical momentum towards a 'United States of Europe' is strong. As ECB President Mario Draghi famously quipped, Europe will 'do what it takes' to keep the project alive. Yet without a sense of that long history the reader is left bewildered by the force of these underlying currents. The robustness of European integration, illustrated by Draghi's employment of his 'big bazooka' approach to European Monetary Union (EMU), is an accumulation of centuries of European coalescing. Setbacks along the way have focused minds more fixedly on unity.

In fact, the remaining EU 'big two' now have the opportunity to steer the project, relieved of British euroscepticism. Macron's France can exert traditional influence on the bureaucratic culture of the EU, notably at the European Commission. This role for Paris reflects a past where continental European influence was primary. Colonial adventures in Africa and Asia were always secondary, unlike in Britain where they sustained trade and maritime dominance. Moreover, French culture and corporatism can thrive in Brussels, tempering the excesses of globalization and

neoliberalism, institutionalized by Margaret Thatcher's single market. Secure in the role as architect of these enduring arrangements, Paris can accept a supportive role to the economically dominant Germany.

True, this book demonstrates that Europeans have been reticent to accept stability around one economic power, but today's German economic hegemony remains balanced by Berlin's diplomatic and military impotence. In particular, the German state is modestly armed, non-nuclear and lacking a seat on the UN Security Council. Equally, Berlin can continue her traditional brokerage role with both Russia in 'middle Europe' and Turkey, erstwhile military ally, and now conduit for mass migrations into Europe. Germany's role as a fulcrum in these regions should allow Franco-German leadership to be re-exerted in Europe, without integration being sabotaged by anxious Eastern Europeans. The strong historical links between Russia and Germany, in the prominent Partitions of Poland and Prussian Tsarina Catherine the Great, help underpin Berlin's unique role in middle Europe.

Meanwhile, as the 'big two' pursue EU partnership, Britain is left to forge a role outside the EU. A semi-detached Britain, outside the formalized EU but with generous EU trade agreements, might exploit Britain's imperial trading experience accumulated over centuries. After all, Britain remains the EU's second largest economy. London's gentlemanly capitalist breed have long mediated between American-sponsored globalization and the EU's German-sponsored social market. Britain outside the EU might be allowed to continue to mediate in this way, exploiting her imperial, liberal, unitary and pragmatic past. In that way integration between the three key European states can continue in a more sustainable manner, with each playing to their strengths, informed by historical particularisms. But for Britain, finally attaining the role that Dean Acheson challenged London to attain more than fifty years ago will not be easy. After all, France and Germany are sceptical about the value of London's role as bridge between America and Europe. Equally, European history, revisited here, shows that states can descend into national insecurity and ultimately violence if they feel cornered and outnumbered. It is important not to be too Panglossian about Europe.

So the stakes in Europe could hardly be greater. Watching the twists and turns of these Brexit negotiations, with the benefit of context, illuminates matters. London has sought to balance nationalism (control of borders and distance from the European Court of Justice) against free

trade (single market and customs union membership). Consensus has been difficult to achieve within the Conservative Party and in the House of Commons. Meanwhile Brussels has displayed impressive unity among the 27 against the common ‘other’ in London. Indeed, as London has pursued her traditional ‘semi-detachment’ from Europe, France and Germany have been re-energized in what many contend to be the long-term goal of a United States of Europe. Notably, Macron has already embraced further economic integration towards fiscal union. He has promoted a shared ‘eurozone budget’, despite German anxieties around Berlin’s ‘lender of last resort’ role in the EU. Meanwhile, Trump’s unpopularity in Europe has allowed Macron to place a European Army as a credible alternative to NATO back on the table. Merkel is unlikely to be around to see the fruits of this latest Franco-German *détente* but it illustrates once again the strength of a partnership that has developed over a protracted period.

Formalized unity between the partners would reconstruct arrangements dismantled more than one thousand years ago with the division of Charlemagne’s empire. It need not imply a collapse of Europe’s integrated politics and economics. With secure European foundations, Britain might embrace a meaningful relationship with a United States of Europe. Equally, if Europe abandoned EMU and chose more pragmatic intergovernmentalism, it would represent a different form of European integration. This would imply looser arrangements, but equally be underpinned by the weight of history and logic of economies of scale.⁵

So with the benefit of the rich history of these three states, and their interrelationships over time, we will seek to conclude on which way events may go. At the same time we must remain vigilant to the warning, always provided by historians, that the past is not necessarily a guide for the future.