

How EU membership undermines the left



In a recent article, Peter J Verovsek criticised left-wing supporters of Brexit, claiming that they were backing a 'statist, nationalist initiative' that could only benefit the right. [Peter Ramsay](#) replies, arguing that it is left-wing Remainers who are stuck in the past and that a fetishism of the supranational and the cosmopolitan is the real problem for the left.

Peter Verovsek [reminds us](#) that 'since Marx, the left has been a self-consciously international movement that seeks to transcend both the nation and the state.' He insists, therefore, that Brexit can be no good for the left because it is an attempt to revive the nation. And Lexit is no better, he claims, because it is an attempt to revive the state.

Let's start with Brexit – because if you are genuinely interested in transcending either nation or state, you have to start with Brexit.



Credit: [Chris Dodds \(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#)

It is leaving the EU that challenges and disrupts the British state in its contemporary form. Remaining in the EU means not challenging or disrupting the smooth operation of the actually existing political form of capitalist rule in Britain today. The EU is not a foreign superstate that rules over Britain. The EU is a political form through which the British government [collaborates with other European governments in order to govern Britain](#). The other EU member states do the same for their own populations and territories. They collaborate with each other by constitutionalising various restrictions on economic policy, and by making law in intergovernmental forums.

This intergovernmental process means that European governments are more accountable to each other than they are to their domestic legislatures. The capitalist nation states of Europe [have been transformed](#) by EU membership into capitalist member states. Brexit represents a serious blow to this form of remote and unaccountable government, the one by which we are actually ruled. This blow is [experienced as such](#) by the British state's political, bureaucratic and academic cadres who have as a result been [relentlessly negative](#) about the vote to Leave, and the prospect of implementing it. And it is why the support of so much of the left for Remain is profoundly conservative.

So if you wish to get beyond the state then Brexit is a first step. But even if that is right, surely we are still left with the problem that, as Verovsek puts it, the 'nation-based character of Brexit betrays the internationalist principles that have grounded the left'? Though Verovsek does not make the claim explicitly, he implies that only Remaining in the EU is consistent with internationalist principles. But this is to [mistake](#) the EU's inter-governmental politics and its cosmopolitan market freedoms for genuine internationalism.

The mere fact that some institutions are supranational does not mean that they are internationalist. Nor does the fact that these supranational institutions impose free movement of capital and labour on the nations that obey their rules. Internationalism is the creation of solidarity between the peoples of different nations. The EU has systematically undermined that solidarity within its own borders, pursuing policies that have created a northern core and a southern periphery with disastrous consequences for the states in the periphery. Its approach to the migration of Africans and Asians across its borders is [about as far from internationalism](#) as you could get. This is not an accident.

Verovsek is keen to invoke Karl Marx's authority, mentioning him three times. But, for Marx, overcoming the limitations of the nation and of the state was a democratic project that required the political activity of the producers, the majority of the population. Transcending the state is a question of democracy, a question of the state being first transformed into an instrument of the majority of society. This remains first and foremost a political struggle over control of the nation state. The development of the EU, the widening and deepening of the scope of its intergovernmental law-making, and of its technocratic political approach, has occurred precisely as the left's influence over the national political economy of its member states has declined. [The EU's rise and the old left's defeat](#) are two sides of the same coin of de-democratisation. The EU was, and remains, the organised effort of Europe's ruling classes to evade political accountability to electorates. Its democratic deficit is structural.

Once the nature of the EU is grasped it is apparent that the chief obstacle to the development of a genuine internationalism – of political solidarity between the peoples of different nations – is not the moribund British nation state, but the [counterfeit of internationalism that is liberal supranationalism](#), and its chief institution, the EU. Brexit is not the end of the left's aims, but the beginning. For real international solidarity to have a chance in Europe we need democratic movements for Grexit, Fraxit, Deutschxit and all the rest.

But again, even if this is correct, surely a return to the British nation state is still no gain for an internationalist left. As Verovsek points out, supporting Brexit brings the left 'into a political coalition with free market Tories, the anti-immigrant UKIP, and the Murdoch press, all of whom threaten to coopt the leftist project with their neo-colonial vision of a 'Global Britain'. And, Verovsek claims, nationalism is the real source of Brexit: 'Given Brexit's entanglement with English nationalism and its scapegoating of foreigners, it hardly seems an appropriate vehicle for the left.' All this is apparently obvious, providing that, like Verovsek, you don't bother to reflect on the incoherence of the right's politics that he has described.

As elite Remainers do not tire of pointing out, a neocolonial Global Britain is a non-starter because Leaving the EU [can only diminish](#) Britain's political influence in the world. This is exactly why true internationalists will embrace Brexit. Any true internationalist should celebrate the diminution of Britain's baleful influence in world politics – its [endless war-making](#) around the globe and its hypocritical assertion of the moral superiority of its political institutions. The Empire is long gone and good riddance. No Tory fantasy about Brexit will bring it back.

The old Tory Eurosceptic right is disoriented by the disappearance of the world in which it belongs. In its confusion, it finds itself doing the work of the left by disrupting the careful efforts of the ruling class, work that most of the left refuses to do. What is truly depressing is just how many leftists are committed to the project of maintaining Britain's interfering global role through participation in supranational capitalist organisations.

If neo-colonial Global Britain is unrealistic, it is also at odds with UKIP-style populism, which again is only awkwardly related to English nationalism. Critically the [well-attested rise](#) of English national feeling is an expression of the weakening of British national identity. Where the far right of the 1970s adopted the Empire's Union Jack as its symbol, today's far right has increasingly adopted the St George's cross. The changed symbolism is significant. Far from English nationalism presaging a return to an assertive imperial Britain, it is further evidence of the fragmenting and decline of the old national loyalties.

That left wingers should mistake these morbid symptoms as signs of the right's strength only indicates the left's own overwhelming sense of weakness, and its isolation from the mass of the population.

There is of course an element of self-fulfilling prophecy in the left relying on its condemnation of English nationalism to back the political status quo. Nothing is more likely to fuel the rise of the populist right. As the left abandons the political nation and retreats further into the embrace of the supranational bureaucratic networks of the British state, it will [further alienate itself](#) from the millions of ordinary people who correctly believe that the British political class and the British state bureaucracy do not have their interests at heart. Those millions are left with nowhere else to turn than the populist right. Social democratic parties across Europe are currently experiencing the disastrous effects of such an approach. Myopia is too kind a word for this.

Which leaves us with the last ditch of the left Remainer: reforming the EU. Verovsek agrees that the EU is no 'social democratic paradise'. He too is opposed to 'European directives requiring competition in the provision of public services, court decisions that imperil international collective bargaining, as well as its suppression of Greek democracy.' But he urges that 'Instead of counterproductively supporting Brexit, the British left should push for change within the EU where it can make a real difference at the global, systemic level.'

If the British right is living on fantasy island, then much of the European left seems to inhabit a fantasy continent. The left is being wiped out across Europe. Although European leftists are unable to convince their own electorates at home, they pretend they can reform Europe as a whole.

I do not doubt the sincerity of Verovsek's sympathy for the Greek people, but his unwillingness to absorb the very clear lessons of the Greek experience is a symptom of the left's broader intellectual senescence. In 2015, it was obvious to the EU that the Greek people were not willing to Leave either the Union or the Eurozone. As a result, the EU was able to impose an [economic catastrophe](#) on the Greek people to make sure that the big banks did not have to bear any of the cost of their reckless lending. As Costas Lapavistas has pointed out, Greece teaches us that even if you believe that the EU is fundamentally reformable (which for the reasons given above, I don't), there is no chance of reforming it unless nation states are willing to walk away [1]. Brexit is anything but counterproductive for the left.

Verovsek also criticises the specific position of Lexiteers, who argue that a programme of nationalisation and state intervention in the economy is prevented by membership of the EU. He points out that other EU states maintain nationalised public transport and free university tuition. It is true that the operation of EU rules and regulations leaves more room for manoeuvre than British governments have availed themselves of. But Lexiteers do not mean a little bit of nationalisation here or there. They favour [wholesale state intervention](#) in the economy, and the EU's [neoliberal constitutional order](#) would be a constant source of legal challenges to any truly radical socialist government of the old school, fulfilling the hopes of neoliberal thinkers for capitalist international cooperation.

Verovsek is also doubtful about the desirability of the state socialist industrial policies of the twentieth century. As it happens I share those doubts. But even though I am not convinced of particular Lexit proposals, I am at one with Lexiteers in seeking to end constitutional restraints on intervention in the economy by democratic governments. That ought to be a basic commitment of any democrat. If the people cannot control the economy they cannot control their collective life. And to exercise democratic control over the economy requires bringing the EU to an end.

Verovsek warns the left that it should be fighting the 'fetishism of the nation-state'. But look across the ruling elites and you will find almost no enthusiasm for the nation state: not in academia, nor among the experts, bureaucrats and politicians that academia has trained. What you will find is an all but ubiquitous fetishism of the supranational. Supranational cosmopolitanism is chief among the ruling ideas of our age, the ideas of our ruling class. Anyone who is serious about political change, about reviving the democratic internationalism of the left, will find hope for it not in elite supranational networks but in the insurgent rebellious nations.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article first appeared at our sister site, [LSE Brexit](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

About the author



Peter Ramsay – LSE

Peter Ramsay is Professor of Law at the London School of Economics.

[1] Costas Lapavistas ‘The Left Case Against the EU’ paper presented to Europe After Brexit conference SOAS, 22 September 2018

[2] See Wolfgang Streeck. *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (Verso 2013) Chapter 3