Brexit, post-liberalism, and the politics of paradox

*Adrian Pabst*

**The realignment of Western politics**

Britain’s vote to leave the EU is part of a tectonic shift in Western politics. An alliance of socialists and conservatives rejected the *status quo* of remote bureaucracy, mass immigration, and multiculturalism in favor of more self-government and the protection of settled ways of life. (Arguably the EU is a misguided object of their discontent and the political geography of Brexit is more complex, as I show below.) A similar realignment is underway in European countries such as Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, and France where it could see anti-EU parties force similar referenda or even seize power altogether. Europe’s social-democrats face an existential threat as their traditional working-class base is declining and former voters leave in droves to support Euro-skeptic alternatives. Center-right Christian Democrats are outflanked by both old nationalist parties and new, insurgent movements that are far-right on questions of identity and social cohesion and far-left on welfare and the economy. This paradoxical convergence is perhaps best exemplified by *Front National*, which calls for the deportation of foreign criminals, a public works program for the indigenous working-class, the re-nationalization of finance, an exit from the Euro, and – following the British example – France’s withdrawal from the EU.

Similarly, the substantial support for Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders suggests that the implicit consensus at the heart of US politics – free trade, immigration, and a liberal world order underwritten by America’s economic and military might – is breaking down. Whatever their important ideological differences, both are staunchly anti-establishment and purport to speak for the voiceless, the angry, and the disaffected. Trump’s unexpected (though unsurprising) success in the primaries is based on his appeal to both working- and middle-class people who feel alienated from the mainstream parties, left behind by globalization and do not want to lose their national identity. Not unlike the *Front National*’s leader Marine Le Pen, Trump combines a crackdown on undocumented immigrants with a promise to enact protectionism and provide public support for private enterprise.

This wider political realignment coincides with a significant decline of the middle class and the end of the “American Dream” – the promise that each generation will be better off thanks to ever-more equality of opportunity, upward social mobility, and ‘trickle-down’ wealth. Likewise, Brexit is so far the most dramatic sign that Europe’s promise of peace and prosperity on which the post-war European project was built no longer holds true.[[1]](#footnote-1) Faced with the impersonal forces of the global economy and national ‘market-states,’ a growing number of ordinary citizens are experiencing both economic uncertainty and cultural insecurity – a loss of meaning and support that jobs and communities used to provide for many. In response to the powerlessness of people, the architects of the new politics on either side of the Atlantic vow to restore popular sovereignty and national self-determination. In this sense, the Brexit motto ‘Take Back Control’ is of a piece with Trump’s pledge to ‘Make America Great Again.’

Thus we are seeing a parallel process in both Europe and North America – a reordering of politics that cannot be mapped according to the old categories of left *versus* right because they are part of the same liberal logic that is now in question.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, from the 1990s onwards both the center-left and the center-right tended to fuse economic with social liberalism, notably financial and trade liberalization coupled with a raft of equality legislation in support of abstract ideals such as diversity and inclusivity. In neither case did mainstream parties consider how the privileging of minority interests might affect the rest of the economy or the majority of society. Following the 2008 global credit crash and repeated civic breakdown (including urban riots from Los Angeles via London and Paris to Malmo), questions of ethics and culture, which the hitherto hegemonic socio-economic liberalism had seemingly settled, have returned to the fore of politics: substantive rather than merely procedural justice; the common good instead of purely private profit or public utility; shared cultural bonds based not on individual entitlement claims but on more mutualist, reciprocal models of contribution and reward. Such questions are part of a new debate that can be described as ‘post-liberal’ – greater economic egalitarianism and an updated version of social (small ‘c’) conservatism.

**The political geography of Brexit**

At first, the UK referendum result seems to reveal a post-liberal majority normally obscured by party divisions – a new yet natural coalition of voters who are economically solidarist and socially conservative, concerned with greater economic justice and more social cohesion. However, a deeper analysis suggests that the divide between liberals and post-liberals cuts across the opposition between Leavers and Remainers. In fact, many Brexit voters supported a national libertarian position with strong Thatcherite elements in the Tory shires (including small towns) and much of suburbia, and also amongst a section of the working class. This is particularly true for the numerous baby-boomers who, after enjoying a protected childhood during the 1950s, went on to embrace a left-wing culture of unfettered desire in the 1960s that led to the triumph of right-wing capitalism in the 1980s. A bunch of weed-smoking hippies morphed progressively into a generation of middle-aged, cocaine-fuelled financial speculators. As members of a ‘new class’[[3]](#footnote-3), the baby-booming Brexiteers now seek release from EU constraints on free trade with the rest of the world, which is a code for an ever-greater deregulation of labor, privatization of public services and liberalization of global finance.

The other Leave constituency is composed of working class voters who are often abandoned and trapped in poverty, dependent on meager state hand-outs following rapid de-industrialization in the 1980s and the absence of any proper regeneration in regions like the Midlands, large parts of the North (especially the North-East), the eastern seaboard and South Wales. These areas, where the Brexit vote reached sometimes more than 70 per cent, are characterized a concentration of low-skilled blue-collar workers who have been marginalized not just in terms of the economy but also by the socially liberal culture of the political class and the media. The righteous anger of these Brexiteers centers just as much on the lack of proper jobs, a shortage of housing, inadequate pay, a decline in the provision and quality of both health care and education as it does on the lack of public recognition and appreciation for their traditional ways of life, their patriotism, and their support for the monarchy and the armed forces. Following the EU’s 2004 eastern enlargement, the sudden inward migration into the UK as a result of European free movement of labor has not only exacerbated pressure on public services but also eroded a sense of shared identity in local communities and across the country. In large part this explains the 2.8 million new voters (compared with voter turnout in general elections) who helped swing the result in Brexit’s favor.

If a substantial part of the Conservative Leave vote is on the libertarian right, it is equally the case a large number of Labour (or by now ex-Labour) supporters who backed the exit from the EU are on the libertarian left. In this sense, Brexit highlights a significant and fast-growing libertarian minority that is to some extent helped by party politics and the centrist consensus which has dominated British and US politics since the 1990s: the convergence of the two libertarian liberalisms is reflected in the more apparent than real oscillation between the liberal right as the party of greed and the liberal left as the party of lust.

Similarly, the Remain vote cannot be reduced to the establishment and cosmopolitan liberal elites who despise tradition and the more small ‘c’ conservative communitarian outlook not just of the provinces but also many people in urban, even metropolitan areas such as London. Indeed, the capital where the winning margin for Remain was the largest in the country has some of the highest levels of social capital and religious practice (cutting across class, color, and creed), as do areas such as Cambridge and its surroundings as well as the Cotswolds north of Oxford.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nor was the pro-EU vote confined to the urban, metropolitan population of London, Liverpool, or Manchester. On the contrary, Remain did well across Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as in parts of the North West and Yorkshire.

In short, the Brexit vote does not fit neatly a narrative of binary categories such as the metropolis *versus* the provinces, urban *versus* rural, rich *versus* poor, young *versus* old, business *versus* workers, north *versus* South – even if Remain tended be associated with more highly skilled affluent city-dwellers while Leave was concentrated about low-skilled working-class voters. Rather, the referendum result reveals a new divide between libertarians and post-liberals that cuts across the opposition of Remainers and Leavers. This new divide reflects the culture wars that have been raging below the political radar for some time. While this tends to be couched in terms of the conflict of ‘cosmopolitan’ *versus* ‘provincial’, it is far more accurate to say that these culture wars are about a clash between an aggressively amoral libertarian liberalism and the more small-‘c’ conservative disposition and common decency of ordinary people who hold dear the kind of things that both Brussels and London elites have dismissed as anachronisms: tradition; a respect for settled ways of life; a sense of local place and belonging; a desire for home and rootedness; the continuity of relationships at work, in one’s neighborhood and local community; a sense of pride and patriotic solidarity; the importance of national language and cultural traditions in the face of an aggressively capitalist monoculture. Since libertarians oscillate between abstract cosmopolitanism, economic globalism, and ethnic nativism all at once while post-liberals seek to combine patriotism with an internationalist outlook, post-liberalism can be the new center ground of Western politics.

**A new, post-liberal era?**

The paradoxical blending of conservative with socialist ideas has the potential to win a popular, parliamentary majority provided that one of the two main parties abandons the centrist consensus or else a new party is created. So far the only post-liberalism on offer in Britain seems to be that of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) led by Nigel Farage, but in reality it is both *anti*-liberal and in league with economic liberalization. UKIP promotes nationalism and atavistic ethnocentrism as exemplified by the Brexit campaign poster featuring a long queue of Syrian refugees with the headline ‘Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all’. The party also pretends to defend the working classes abandoned by Labour while in fact seeking more free trade, greater freedoms from regulation for the City of London and a privatized health care system, all of which would hurt the unemployed and the working poor most of all. Indeed, they would be hit hardest by being ever-more exposed to the forces of global capital that UKIP wants to unleash in its quest to recreate a fantasized Anglosphere.

Herein lies the tragic irony of Brexit: the winners of the referendum are the losers of the political economy of the twenty-first century, which the exit from the EU is likely to exacerbate especially if the more communitarian commitment of some Brexiteers is undermined by the ‘national libertarian’ outlook of many more Brexiteers – the restoration of full national sovereignty (and therefore a near-complete withdrawal from the EU’s single market) but with maximal free trade and more power to global finance unhampered by matching political structures. Far from being post-liberal, this national libertarianism has made demagogic use of legitimate popular fears about the impact of immigration to advance an ultra-liberal economic project and a socially reactionary agenda.

The real alternative to empty liberal-cosmopolitan globalization and anti-liberal nationalism is a post-liberal vision that can underpin a commitment to greater economic justice and social harmony with an appropriate political economy. Post-liberalism does not so much intend to offer mere compensation for the side-effects of global capitalism as to provide fundamental reforms which would begin to change the nature of the market itself by aligning the executive with the long-term interests of the company, its shareholders, employers and consumers. In this manner, the alternative to economic liberalism in capitalist countries such as the UK is not an overweening state but rather (and with much present irony) a more continental European system of company governance and ethos that favors mutual benefit over an Anglo-Saxon ‘winner-takes-all’ mentality.

Although not all post-liberals would agree, a UK detached from the international political project of the EU would hardly be able to protect a post-liberal agenda from the forces of anarchic global capital that would be happy to see London as a northern Dubai, surrounded by a servile desert remainder of erstwhile England. No doubt the British economy needs internal re-balancing towards more manufacture, yet when linked with the European economy it is already somewhat more balanced in favor of industry, science, and the creative industries, which all benefit from substantial EU funds – besides its symbiosis with Continental manufacturing and agriculture. Without this balancing the danger of it becoming just an offshore tax haven, home to ever more gangsterish finance, is overwhelming.

It follows that a more European approach to the market requires Brexit to be either prevented or else neutralized, for example by combining free movement of people with an emergency break on cheap migrant labor and transition controls used by other EU member-states following eastern enlargement (ideas to which I will return below). Nor would prevention be out of keeping with post-liberalism, since its organic and tradition-respecting approach should not accord a Girondist legitimacy to a partly manipulated popular verdict that permanently overrides the sovereignty of crown in parliament. The process of reintegrating a nation cannot be separated, as Edmund Burke understood, from the process of sustaining and increasing its integration with the continent and culture of which it is inalienably a part:

It [Europe] is virtually one great state having the same basis of general law; with some diversity of provincial customs and local establishments. The nations of Europe have had the very same christian [*sic*] religion, agreeing in the fundamental parts, varying a little in the ceremonies and in the subordinate doctrines. The whole of the polity and oeconomy [*sic*] of every country in Europe has been derived from the same sources. It was drawn from the old Germanic or Gothic customary; from the feudal institutions which must be considered as an emanation from that customary; and the whole has been improved and digested into system and discipline by the Roman law. […] From this resemblance in the modes of intercourse, and in the whole form and fashion of life, no citizen in Europe could be altogether an exile in any part of it. There was nothing more than a pleasing variety to recreate and instruct the mind; to enrich the imagination; and to meliorate the heart. When a man travelled or resided for health, pleasure, business or necessity, from his own country, he never felt himself quite abroad.[[5]](#footnote-5)

However much the EU in its current configuration undermines the ‘community of culture’ that Burke describes so strikingly, it remains the only political expression of Europe’s shared cultural legacy and thus far the most ambitious attempt to build a new plural polity beyond ancient empires and modern states – starting with a new political economy that overcame the liberal oscillation between free trade and protectionism under the aegis of a hegemonic power (the Dutch Republic, followed by the British Empire and then the USA).

**Europe’s post-war project**

The post-war European project came into existence to resist the three forces that had devastated Europe in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century: economic nationalism, the free-market ideology of *laissez-faire* capitalism, and the state corporatism of the communist, fascist and national-socialist regimes. Europe’s founding fathers were more inspired by Christian social teaching than by secular ideology.[[6]](#footnote-6) They inaugurated cooperation between former enemies in agriculture and in coal and steel, and built coalitions among trade unions, businesses, and the churches. Underpinning this new economic model was a substantive conception of the common good based on bringing hitherto estranged interests into a new negotiated institutional settlement. Especially in the Federal Republic of Germany, the social market economy that was supported by both Christian and Social Democracy embodied many principles of Catholic Social Thought.

One way to characterize the post-1945 European project is in terms of a triple triad. First, vocation, value, and virtue: a vocational labor market in Germany, the Netherlands and parts of France and Italy (combined with regional banks and local government) sustained a more balanced and diversified economy that tended to produce goods and services of value serving the needs of people. This model also provided many incentives to virtue rather than vice: shared benefit, generosity, and a high degree of trust and cooperation instead of greed, selfishness, distrust, and conflict. The experience of the *trentes glorieuses* was as much to do with postwar reconstruction as it was about a new balance of rival interests in pursuit of the common good.

Second, solidarity, subsidiarity, and status: the early European project focused on real, interpersonal solidarity between agriculture, manufacturing, industry, and services. The much-maligned Common Agricultural Policy – in its original version – defended small-holding farms and their important social and cultural role against industrialized agriculture and its links to big food-processing and wholesale businesses, which squeezed farmers and independent shops. Co-determination in industry represented subsidiarity in action and was also a cornerstone of cooperation between countries that had been at war for much of the previous two centuries. The status of workers and peasants was central, affording them not just an income to feed themselves and their families, but also a public recognition of their vital contribution to society.

Based on a process of reconciliation between Germany and its erstwhile enemies, the post-1945 settlement gave rise to a new era of peace, prosperity, and partnership – the third triad. Europe sought to learn the lessons of centuries of war between rival colonial powers and sovereign states by inaugurating a new kind of cooperation with the aim of bringing about an ‘ever closer union *of peoples and nations*,’ as the preamble of the 1957 Rome Treaty states. In an attempt to avert the bloodshed of inter-state war and stop unmediated economic competition from turning into conflict, Europe’s founding fathers sought to build a different type of polity, which can be described as a subsidiarist and reciprocalist commonwealth that pools sovereignty and embeds states and markets in strong intermediary institutions in order to counterbalance global capital and centralized bureaucracy. To an extent the European post-war project managed to provide a balance between free trade and protectionism through regional and structural funds in ways that tempered both nationalism and the impersonal forces of unmediated globalization.

However, at the heart of post-war Europe was also an ambiguity from the outset – the primacy of economics and politics over society and culture. This primacy goes back to the ‘Monnet method’ of supranational integration that was already enshrined in the 1957 Rome Treaty, which is is also known as ‘neo-functionalism’ – the idea that ever more economic exchange and legal uniformity will over time produce political unification. Monnet’s neo-functional approach fused Napoleonic directives with German ‘Ordo-liberal’ thinking, which since the late 1960s has differed from Catholic Social Thought in that it privileges legal positivism and procedure over coalitions of interest in a quest for the common good.[[7]](#footnote-7) Europe’s ‘original sin’ was to fail to develop a shared political economy that would extend the virtues of the German social market model to the rest of the EU, while correcting the vices of Ordo-liberalism – too much emphasis on central rules and regulations, too little emphasis on the social purpose of investment and competition.

Germany has managed to preserve many elements of the social market, including worker representation on boards, regional banks, farm subsidies, an industrial policy, and a vocational labor market. But neither the Christian nor the Social Democrats resisted the neo-liberal takeover of German *Ordnungspolitik*, especially the pursuit of austerity and price stability that in the context of the Eurozone privileges deflation and depression. The tragedy of the EU is that Germany has exported its ethics and politics rather than its economy: Kantian morality of context-less duties, Weberian statecraft void of virtue, and Bismarckian quasi-military management of citizens through centralized welfare. Reinforced by French *dirigisme* and bureaucratic diktat, the Franco-German marriage has engendered a Europe that is abstract, administrative and alien vis-à-vis its citizens just because it is founded more upon formalism, legalism and rationalism than it is upon substantive unity, judgment, and a fuller conception of reason. A richer rationality reconnected with habit, feeling and faith can correct the instrumental rationality of both capitalism and bureaucracy.

To Europe’s ‘original sin’ one can add the cardinal vice of the 1985 Single European Act so beloved of Mrs Thatcher and her successors as British Prime Minister. Far from creating a free market liberated from French dirigisme, it progressively replaced Europe’s Common Market, which rests on the mutual recognition of national diversity (with some basic minimum standards) that is negotiated predominantly by the individual member-states, with a Single Market that promotes top-down harmonization giving all power to the Commission and the Court of Justice. In practice, the EU put in place a regulatory regime that imposes uniform standards across all member-states, whereas before EU directives required some minimal harmonization of European law but also had the effect of banning restrictive regulation in countries that interfere with the four freedoms (people, goods, services, and capital). Ironically, the UK’s insistence on enlarging the EU rapidly and on extending the Single Market to ever-more sectors has reinforced the unmediated movement of capital and labor by weakening the mutual protection between regions and nations that European project originally provided.

Connected with this is the EU interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity. In Article 5 of the EU Treaty and other texts, subsidiarity implies that the Union is obliged to take action wherever it has an advantage in terms of scale or effect. Not only does this invert the burden of proof and raise question over who has the legitimate authority to decide,[[8]](#footnote-8) but it also hollows out the primacy of society over the economy. From the family via intermediary institutions all the way up to the nation, the primacy of the social over the economic is central to Christian social teaching (and cognate traditions such as guild socialism or One Nation conservatism). As a result of EU legalism and proceduralism, subsidiarity has become an engine of centralization when it was supposed to be a device for devolving power to people.

Thus EU centralism is neither necessary nor inevitable. It was the outcome of contingent political decisions to fuse Anglo-Saxon free-market economics with continental bureaucratic statism, which successive EU member-states and the Community institutions in Brussels have taken to new levels. It is this European ‘market-state’ that lacks political direction, economic vitality, social cohesion, and civic consent and that was rejected in the Brexit vote.

**A new European settlement**

After Brexit, the EU could either evolve into a super-state (composed of the Eurozone core), or lapse into a glorified free-trade area, or disintegrate altogether. Confronted with the threats of terrorism, economic depression in the Eurozone periphery, and the impact of mass immigration, the EU faced an existential crisis well before Britain’s decision to leave because the dominant neo-functionalist model of integration and enlargement eroded the social-cultural foundations upon which the European polity rests.[[9]](#footnote-9) In recent years, the dynamic of disintegration reached a new level, as Schengen and the Euro have served to undermine civic consent and public trust in the European project. There is a very real risk that Brexit could precipitate the unraveling of the EU, starting with the British Union and followed by exit referenda in countries with strongly euro-skeptic parties – including Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, France and Italy. Anti-EU forces are determined to bring down the Community institutions in Brussels and return to a more Hobbesian and Lockean world of international anarchy wherein the political and economic power of sovereign states and transnational markets trumps a more Burkean polity of common cultural customs and mores.

For this reason, turning the EU into a mere free-trade zone is the wrong answer to Brexit because increasingly unfettered free trade between sovereign nations will perforce require the creation of a super-state to prevent any national protectionism from re-emerging, which is why the common market based on mutual recognition has mutated into the single market with top-down harmonization. Such a super-state would also exacerbate the corrosive effects of globalization on national identity and the economy precisely because the modern state – whether at the national or the supranational level – is constituted through its centralizing tendency to suppress regional and linguistic differences in ways that over time provoke a popular backlash.

Amid popular revolts already at work in the decisive defeat of the 2005 Constitutional Treaty by Dutch and French referenda, both national and EU elites have quietly abandoned the old federalist dream of a United States of Europe or a core Europe.[[10]](#footnote-10) Advocates of exit referenda nevertheless assert that the EU is bound ever more to centralize and be dominated by both big business and big government. They cite in support of their claim the 2015 report of the five presidents of the EU institutions, which calls for the strengthening of the monetary union by 2025, the creation of a Eurozone treasury, and a move to full-blown political union. The pro-exit case rests on the claim that this will hijack the whole Union (including non-Euro members such as Denmark, Poland and, for the moment, Britain) and that, unlike national governments, EU power is – and always will be – unaccountable and undemocratic.

However, the five presidents report, far from offering a roadmap to the future, is a relic of a moribund conception of a supranational Europe wherein the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers would replace the executive and legislative branches of the member-states – a French project to which Mrs Thatcher famously said three times *non*. Today a centralized super-state has no mainstream political or popular support in any member-state – not even the Eurozone countries that are unwilling to agree even a banking union, never mind a fiscal or a political union. Since the failed Constitutional Treaty, power has in reality flown from the supranational level back to the intergovernmental level. Echoing Margaret Thatcher’s 1988 Bruges lecture, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel argued in the same place in 2010 that the future of the EU lies with the ‘union method’ of coordinated action by national governments, as opposed to the ‘community method’ of automatic supranationalism favored by Delors and, before him, Jean Monnet. That is why all the major decisions on Eurozone bailouts and the refugee crisis have been taken by Germany, sometimes in concert with France and other big member-states.

At the same time, no country has an innate right to lead the EU. France retains military might but her stagnant economy and deeply divided politics highlight the existential crisis that is engulfing the Fifth Republic, while Germany is the Union’s economic powerhouse but lacks the means to direct foreign and security matters. A full Brexit would leave the remaining member-states exposed to a German hegemony that Germany does not want and everybody else fears. A loose confederation of sovereign states as demanded by euro-skeptics in some of the new EU member-states such as Poland or Hungary might avert centralization but it would be powerless to counteract protectionist reactions or provide a strong European presence in the world. Thus the only genuine alternative to centralization and disintegration is the transformation of the EU into a proper commonwealth of nations and peoples – a multinational association that shares risks, rewards, and resources based on blending contribution with solidarity and pooling sovereignty (according to a substantive conception of subsidiarity) in areas where collective action provides mutual benefits for all. Up to a point the EU is already a plural polity of overlapping and concentric circles, multiple jurisdictions, polycentric authority, and hybrid institutions that can resist both a centralized super-state and a fantasized free-trade area.

However, the Brexit vote provides an opportunity to build a new European settlement that addresses legitimate popular fears about the impact of global capital and mass migration on the EU as a whole – not just Britain – by reforming free movement of labor and enhancing the legitimacy of EU institutions. The main problem with free movement of people within the EU is that it is unsustainable in an era of major economic dislocation and mass inward migration from outside Europe. With Schengen already suspended indefinitely, now is perhaps the final chance to revise the rules governing the free movement of labor before the EU disintegrates. No member-state wants to curtail the ability of citizens of one country to study, seek work, or retire in another, but there are several countries – including Germany – that want to overhaul the provisions on access to benefits and the automatic right to remain in another member-state without a job (and without the capacity to support yourself in the absence of state assistance). A post-liberal response to Brexit is to transform social security in all EU countries – especially Britain – in the direction of a contributory system wherein contribution is the basis for entitlement and non-remunerated activities such as caring for relatives or voluntary work in the community are honored.

In the short and medium term, member-states such as the UK that face pressures on public services, housing and health could be allowed to use an ‘emergency brake’ on inward migration for a duration of seven to ten years, which is how long the temporary derogation used by Germany lasted following the 2004 EU eastern enlargement. While the governments of Poland, Hungary and other central and eastern European countries might object, such an emergency brake and other safeguard measures are already part of EU treaties, and they help new member-states limit brain-drain. Such a deal could even keep Britain in the single market and avoid a full withdrawal that would be mutually diminishing. In exchange for access to the single market and a 10-year limit on immigration, the UK would still make a contribution to the EU budget (albeit at a reduced rate) and lose its influence over the rules on the single market if it chose to become an associate member.

Amid the crisis of legitimacy, the EU needs to renew the founding vision of a reciprocalist and subsidiarity polity that reconnects supranational institutions much more closely to nations, regions, localities, communities, and even neighborhoods. Central to such a transformation is a change in the current balance of power that gives the unelected European Commission the sole right to initiate laws, while the Council of (nationally elected) Ministers decides but does not execute policies. The first reform should be to recognize the council as the supreme executive power of the EU and to restore the commission to its original role of a European civil service that acts as a secretariat to the council in an advisory function, overseeing the implementation of common regulations and mediating among competing national and sectional interests. Second, the judicial activism of the European Court of Justice could be curtailed by further limiting the cases it hears and restricting its power to that of an arbiter, not a missionary which serves to transfer competencies from member-states to the commission. Third, the European Parliament lacks legitimacy because it is disconnected from national political classes. The lower chamber of elected members could be supplemented by an upper chamber composed of representatives from national parliaments, professions, regions, and cities (by fusing the existing Regional Committee of the EU with its Economic and Social Committee). A Parliament that represents European society – not just individual constituents – can command greater civic assent while also better exercising its primary purpose of scrutinizing legislation and holding the executive to account.

**The West’s post-liberal moment**

The current realignment of Western politics beyond the liberal consensus has seen the emergence of both anti- and post-liberal movements. The technocracy and liberal-cosmopolitan outlook of ruling elites will continue to provoke popular anger and fuel the flames of far-left and far-right demagogy and soft fascism. Arguably this anti-liberalism is in secrete collusion with liberalism because the latter’s promotion of free trade, globalization, and the unity of a global *cosmopolis* is dialectically linked with protectionism, atavistic ethno-centrism, and even racism, as well as the anarchy of rival nation-states based on a doctrine of absolute sovereignty. Far from seeing either the ‘end of history’ or a ‘clash of civilizations,’ we are witnessing the splintering of the liberal world order into different forms of plutocratic populism variously linked to a global financial oligarchy, the criminalisation of government and almost everywhere the bending of the rule of law to serve narrow sectional interests.

The liberal and anti-liberal oscillation between statist order and capitalist anarchy offers a unique chance for mainstream parties across the West to adopt a post-liberal vision. Post-liberalism can underpin a new consensus around the common good and incentives to virtue by developing a politics of culture, belonging and mutual recognition (based on the principle that duties beget rights) and also by making reciprocity the governing principle of both society and the economy (based on the idea of contribution and just desert). The task is to build cross-class and cross-cultural coalitions that can reconnect elites with the majority, bring estranged interests into a negotiated settlement and foster a sense of virtuous leadership across the whole of society. Both the center-left and the center-right need to return to their respective core purpose of ensuring that a broad alliance of citizens is represented at the tables of power in politics and the economy. To outflank both liberals and anti-liberals, post-liberals have to craft a renewed civic patriotism that is rooted in a narrative of hope and an ethical critique of the excesses of both capital and bureaucracy. What politics requires is a public philosophy of the common good articulated in a generous story about national renewal and the renewal of the West’s best traditions.

1. Adrian Pabst, ‘The Double Death of Europe,’ *LSE Euro Crisis*, 7 May 2015, at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2015/05/07/the-double-death-of-europe/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 13-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rod Liddle, *Selfish Whining Monkeys: How We Ended Up Greedy, Narcissistic and Unhappy* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Milbank, ‘Divided Island: Brexit, Religion and Culture,’ *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 12 July 2016, at <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/07/12/4499021.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Edmund Burke, ‘The First *Letter on a Regicide Peace*,’ in *Burke: Revolution­ary Writings*, ed. Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), p. 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian* *Democracy* *and* *the* *Origins* *of* *European* *Union* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Certain strands of Ordo-liberalism – in particular the work of Wilhelm Röpke, Alexander Rüstow and, more recently, Werner Lachmann – are infused with Catholic Social Thought and cognate traditions in Protestantism, whereas other versions embrace more Weberian and Kantian ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Philip Booth and Diego Zuluaga, ‘Subsidiarity needs to take its rightful place in the EU’, Reimagining Europe, 24 February 2016, available online at <http://www.reimaginingeurope.co.uk/subsidiarity-needs-to-take-its-rightful-place-in-the-eu-2/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Adrian Pabst, ‘Commonwealth or Market-State? Europe’s Christian heritage and the future of the European polity,’ in Gary Wilton and Jonathan Chaplin (eds.), *God and the EU: Faith in the European project* (Routledge, 2016), 109-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Charles Grant, ‘Unnoticed by Brexiteers, the idea of an EU super-state is quietly dying,’ *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 June 2016, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/16/unnoticed-by-brexiteers-the-idea-of-an-eu-super-state-is-quietly/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)