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3

Is the EU ‘a crap 1950s idea’?

*Dominic Cummings, branching histories and the case for Leave*

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The Brexit campaigns of 2016 – both Leave and Remain – were fought largely through the medium of simplicities, delusions and lies (Shipman 2016). Neither campaign generated much deep political thinking. The Leave campaign floated to victory on a fantastical promise of ending immigration and returning Britain’s EU funds to the National Health Service (NHS). The Remain campaign relied on no less fantastical projections of the ruinous short-term economic costs of Brexit (the so-called ‘Project Fear’). Dominic Cummings, Leader of the Vote Leave campaign, did more than anyone to focus the campaign debate on bogus issues like the NHS and the impending enlargement of the EU to include Turkey (Cummings 2017a). Nonetheless, in a series of writings authored after the referendum, Cummings has produced various arguments for Brexit that have drawn considerable attention and praise.

Cummings’ position is worth considering for two reasons. First, it is useful to know which actual arguments propelled some of the leading figures in the campaign, especially since they chose not to reveal those arguments at the time. Second, Cummings insists on moving beyond vague ruminations on whether Brexit will succeed or fail. He thinks political judgments must be based on ‘precise quantitative predictions about well-formed questions’. While Cummings’ own judgements are not, I think, at all defensible, those who advocate Britain’s re-entry into Europe – which is now in all likelihood a generational project – would do well to follow the form, if not the actual substance, of his approach.
Brexit and disaster-avoidance

Cummings’ position on Brexit flows from four more general preoccupations. First, he possesses a deep-seated disdain for the British political and administrative classes, which he variously damns as incompetent, lacking in relevant knowledge and mired in dysfunctional bureaucracies. Second, he has a fascination with the advances of science and technology, and their application to human understanding and societal improvement. Third, he recognises that societies face key moments, when the decisions taken send the society down one or another branch of history. Brexit was one of those key moments; for better or worse, the Leave decision sent Britain down a very different ‘branching history’ than would have been the case had Leave lost. Fourth, Cummings is a follower of Tetlock’s work on forecasting. He thinks that political judgements – and presumably, key political decisions – should be based upon rational probabilistic assessments of specific, measurable, time-defined outcomes (Tetlock & Gardner 2015).

All four of these preoccupations come together in Cummings’ case for Leave, which rests on the probabilistic assessment that leaving the EU would improve the chances of ‘1) Britain contributing positively to the world and 2) minimising dangers … [including] Britain’s exposure to the problems caused by the EU’. Viewed more specifically, Cummings’ argument proceeds along three tracks. Track one takes the Eurosceptics’ conventional ride through Brussels – that familiar wasteland, as they see it, of failure, false promise and dysfunction. The only distinctive feature of this part of Cummings’s journey is the Hayekian-inspired claim that the EU lacks the self-correcting mechanisms of the market and the experimental sciences (see Van Parijs, Chapter 27). For Cummings, the EU – ‘a crap 1950s idea’, as he calls it – is excessively hierarchical and centralised, and as such lacks the error-correcting mechanisms of a national parliamentary government (Shipman 2016, 38). Quoting the physicist David Deutsch, Cummings insists that ‘preserving the institutions of error correction is more important than any policy’.

This part of Cummings’ argument need not detain us. The idea that the EU is slow-moving and lacks rapid error-correcting mechanisms is a plausible criticism to make. Scholars of the EU often make the same point. No fundamental transformation in the EU can take place without a Treaty change, which requires a unanimous decision of all Member States. It’s also fair to say that the EU is hierarchical,
at least in the sense that its decisions are top-down and taken without much direct democratic input. But it’s ludicrous to attribute this problem to excessive centralisation. Indeed, the principal reason why the EU is so slow-moving is due to its highly decentralised and consensual decision-making practices. The EU is such a feeble force in global affairs because it lacks the centralised political system of the other Great Powers. Similarly, the EU has struggled with the eurozone crisis because it lacks the centralised tax and budgetary powers necessary to manage successfully a Monetary Union. More generally, the concept of ‘error correction’ in politics is more problematic than Cummings seems to recognise. Where there is a clearly agreed aim, it is relatively straightforward to identify an error – this is the case, for example, in computer coding. But in politics, errors are often only identifiable after the event, and even then, the attribution of ‘error’ remains controversial. Was Western military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 an error? Was the absence of Western military intervention in Syria in 2012 an error? Was the creation of the EU an error? None of these questions can be answered independently of a justification of our political projects, a justification that will inevitably require an appeal to contestable moral values as much as any probabilistic assessment of outcomes (Morgan 2005).

The second track of Cummings’ argument focuses on the idea that ‘leaving would improve the probability of … making Britain the best place in the world for science and education’. Here it is important to recall that Cummings worked in Whitehall as an advisor to the minister of education and is the author of an ambitious project for educational renewal (Cummings 2013). For Cummings, science and education are key evaluative criteria. He predicts that a post-Brexit UK will achieve more, and make a greater scientific contribution to the world, once free of the EU’s legal and regulatory regime.

One merit of this argument is that it is sufficiently precise to generate a testable prediction. Post-Brexit Britain will, if this prediction pans out, score higher on objective criteria of scientific success at some specified date in the future (2026?) than the Britain of 2016. Presumably the criteria will include such factors as educational scores on the PISA surveys, citation-weighted research publication rates, scientific prizes, global university rankings and technological patents.

The third track of Cummings’ argument is the most interesting. Brexit, he argues, minimises dangers, especially the biggest danger of
all: the danger that the free movement of labour will spark a populist backlash that will threaten free trade. As he puts this point:

1) … a return to 1930s protectionism would be disastrous, 2) the fastest route to this is continuing with no democratic control over immigration or human rights policies for terrorists and other serious criminals, therefore 3) the best practical policy is to reduce (for a while) unskilled immigration and increase high skills immigration particularly those with very hard skills in maths, physics and computer science, 4) this requires getting out of the EU, 5) hopefully it will prod the rest of Europe to limit immigration and therefore limit the extremist forces that otherwise will try to rip down free trade.

This argument conjectures a chain of events leading from ‘no [national] democratic control over immigration’, a requirement of the EU’s Single Market, to the rise of extremist forces demanding 1930s style protectionism, which Cummings rightly considers a disaster. He wants to avoid this disaster by way of another conjecture: a chain of events leading from ‘democratic control of unskilled labour’ – high-skilled labour would be unaffected – to a broader public tolerance of free trade. Ideally, Cummings would like to see post-Brexit UK prompt the formation of ‘new institutions for international cooperation to minimize the probability of disasters’ (Cummings 2017a). He seems to think that the UK post-Brexit is in better position to do this than as a member of the EU.

While it is difficult to argue against probabilistic wagers and counterfactual claims, there are significant problems with both the second and third tracks of Cummings’ argument. The claim that post-Brexit UK will be well placed to experience a scientific renaissance runs into a number of obvious difficulties. First, the UK already does relatively well on national comparative measures of scientific progress (Scientific American 2012). Second, scholars have never been able to identify with any great confidence the conditions likely to produce scientific progress (Taylor 2016). And third, any post-Brexit UK government will have to ensure that the country remains (and is perceived to remain) an attractive place for foreign science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workers to come to study, live and work. It is very difficult to see how Brexit helps here, especially since it diminishes the status of all workers coming from EU countries. Where once these workers had a status grounded in the EU constitution, they now will be in the UK merely at the pleasure of Her
Majesty’s Government (Morgan 2016). The reluctance of the Tory government to allow the CJEU any role in protecting the rights of EU citizens in the UK can only increase the anxieties of such people.

Cummings’ wager that Brexit would diminish the chances of an extreme form of protectionism emerging in Britain has some initial plausibility. Certainly, UKIP has pretty much collapsed; in the June 2017 election, the voters it had gained in earlier elections largely fled back to the two major parties. But viewed more closely, his argument about Brexit as a means to avoiding protectionism and increasing the UK’s share of global trade is deeply problematic. Here we have to weigh a probabilistic claim together with a preventative claim. How likely is it that – absent a reduction in unskilled immigration – the UK would face an anti-trade backlash leading to 1930s-style protectionism? On the face of it, the UK is an unlikely site for protectionism. No current political party – not even UKIP – favours trade protection. Indeed, a central argument of leading Tory thinkers is that post-Brexit the UK will enter a ““post-geography trading world” where we are much less restricted in having to find partners who are physically close to us’ (Fox 2016). Furthermore, opinion surveys suggest that UK public opinion is among the most pro-free trade in the advanced industrial world (Pew Survey 2014). In short, 1930s-style protectionism seems like a rather low probability threat. But even if we were to accept that protectionism represents even a low-level threat, there is little reason to think that ending low-skill immigration offers an effective and efficient solution, especially since this type of immigration is so essential in the hospitality, retail, health care and agricultural sectors of the UK economy (Consterdine 2017). Cummings’ remedy is not only unduly costly; it promises to be even more injurious than the underlying ailment.

As to the hope that post-Brexit UK will spring to life as a trading superstar, Cummings’ argument is no more persuasive than that of Liam Fox and others in the Tory government. The major problem here is that EU membership does not prohibit any EU Member States from trading successfully around the globe. The fact that the UK has been relatively unsuccessful in key global markets (China, for example) has nothing to do with the EU. Indeed, if the EU were the principal cause of trade failures, then why has Germany proven so much more successful? No less problematic is the suggestion that post-Brexit UK will make gains in this new ‘post-geography trading world’ sufficient to outweigh any losses from exiting the Single Market. If the UK were to trade under WTO rules and couldn’t negotiate new frictionless customs arrangements, it is difficult to see how the UK could retain its domestic car industry, one of the
largest sources of UK manufacturing exports, or even its aircraft manufacturing industry (Islam 2017). The other big trade problem facing the UK post-Brexit is that the UK has very little power to force the EU to offer favourable trading conditions. Cummings like other pro-Leave advocates often neglects to mention that as a Regional Trade Association (RTA), the EU is allowed, even under WTO rules, to discriminate against third-party countries. For these reasons, most macro-economic estimates of the effects of leaving the EU predict that Brexit will have a significant trade-lowering and welfare-diminishing impact on the UK economy. In sum, if the goal is to increase trade, Brexit seems like the wrong way to do it.

**What disasters should we worry about?**

While there’s not much to be said in favour of the actual content of Cummings’ argument, the general form of his argument is quite sensible. Cummings is right to warn against the vacuity of general claims that Brexit will succeed or fail. He is right to recommend that political judgements be based upon probabilistic wagers and predictions. Cummings is also right to emphasise the importance of identifying threats and thinking about institutions capable of error-correction and disaster-avoidance. Yet even with these admonitions in mind, I think it is possible to reach a very different assessment about the merits of leaving the EU.

At this point, it would be helpful to introduce a few brief distinctions. A threat might be conceptualised as a harm multiplied by the probability of its occurrence. A disaster is a harm with very high costs, whether material costs or value costs. The notion of value costs is important. Political communities stand for certain values – whether liberty, democracy, justice or whatever – and when those core moral values are lost, it might be counted a disaster. Organised political communities guard against threats by way of various preventative mechanisms (whether policies or institutions). These mechanisms must be both effective (i.e. they must work) and efficient (i.e. they must have low ancillary costs). It is no good putting in place preventative mechanisms that impose higher costs – whether material or moral – than those posed by the underlying threat. A surveillance society with unlimited police powers might be effective against terrorism, but it is inefficient, since it requires a sacrifice of some of our core moral values. One further point: political decisions have uncertain outcomes. When taking a major political decision – a decision that initiates a new ‘branching history’ – a sensible political actor will weigh not only likely costs and benefits, but also the


capacities of those bureaucrats, politicians and administrative agencies that must enact that decision.

With these distinctions in place, it’s possible to think about some threats that post-Brexit UK faces. To narrow the focus, it might be helpful to limit our attention to threats that jeopardise values that are relatively uncontroversial and widely shared, such as national security and societal wealth. The following threats all seem sufficiently probable and sufficiently costly to these values that they require preventative measures:

(i) the exclusion of the UK from the favourable trade, security and research opportunities enjoyed by other EU Member States;
(ii) the break-up of the UK as a political community and the return of terrorism in Northern Ireland;
(iii) US isolationism and trade protectionism leading to a collapse of the post-war international order;
(iv) Russian aggression in Eastern Europe;
(v) large-scale migration – tens of millions per year – into Southern Europe;
(vi) a major banking and debt crisis in Italy;
(vii) large-scale domestic terrorism as a consequence of the implosion of Middle Eastern and North African states and the failure to integrate existing Islamic minority populations.

We have already discussed threat (i), which will arise as an immediate and direct consequence of Brexit, especially if Brexit takes the form of exiting the Single Market and Customs Union. The seriousness of threat (i) further increases, if the EU were to pursue its own self-interest and seek to ensure that the UK is materially worse off outside the Single Market than inside. The EU certainly has no interest in seeing the UK flourish outside the Single Market, because it might encourage other states to leave. Nor does the EU have anything to gain by allowing the UK to pursue an à la carte strategy, where it enjoyed the benefits of access to the Single Market while bearing none of the costs. A prudent UK government cannot dismiss the possibility that the EU will follow such a realist strategy towards the UK. It must expect the EU to pursue policies designed to diminish the UK’s economic and political power.

The threats the UK faces outside the Single Market are only exacerbated by threat (iii), which acts as force multiplier to threat (i). Indeed, if and when the UK exits the EU and its Single Market, the UK becomes much more dependent on the US. Pro-Brexit ministers like Liam Fox
speak of the opportunities the UK will have for new trade deals with the US. But it is far from clear that these trade deals will be offered on favourable terms by a US president who emphasises ‘America First’ and is allergic to international treaties. The most readily available remedy against threats (i) and (iii) is simply for the UK to remain in the EU.

The same remedy can be said about threat (ii). No one has yet come up with a solution to the Northern Ireland problem once the UK leaves the EU. This problem has both an economic and a political dimension. Economically, Brexit presents Northern Ireland with the problem of trading across a new land-border between the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Not only will this land-border make it difficult to sustain the extensive intra-company trade flows that depend upon just-in-time deliveries. But a land-border will likely have a severe impact on the Northern Irish agricultural sector. The political problems are, if anything, even more daunting. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 presupposes that the UK and the Republic of Ireland are both members of the EU; and it makes explicit reference to the European Convention of Human Rights and to European Courts in safeguarding the rights specified in the Agreement. If the UK pulls out of both the EU and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), as Prime Minister May has urged, then the GFA could unravel and terrorism return to Northern Ireland.

Threats (i), (ii) and (iii) can hardly be dismissed as either improbable or trivial. They are serious threats – threats to security and societal wealth – that would not have arisen had the UK remained in the EU. The case for Brexit does not, however, require that these threats be ignored. A sophisticated case for Brexit could concede that these are genuine threats, but are outweighed by other even more serious threats that Brexit would allow the UK to avoid. Some obvious candidates here are those listed as threats (iv), (v), (vi) and (vii). All of these threats affect the UK only indirectly. Thus if one judged that Eastern and Southern Europe had a high probability of collapse, whether because of external factors (Russian aggression or migration) or internal factors (a financial crisis or domestic terrorism), then Brexit might present itself as an escape. Why shackle the country to a corpse – especially if the corpse is facing impending disaster?

At this point, the threat-based case for and against Brexit turns on a set of probabilistic judgements about which combination of threats is more likely and more harmful. Cummings is right, I think, to maintain that arguments for and against Brexit that took place on this territory would be more fruitful than one that relied upon vague and emotive
appeals to the failure or success of Brexit. It must be noted, however, that arguments in the register of threats and disaster-avoidance become altogether more complex once we include more controversial and contestable values than security and societal wealth. For many people in the pro-Brexit camp, national identity remains their ultimate and most important value; and the threats to national identity posed by large-scale immigration are sufficient to justify Brexit even at some expense to security and societal wealth. Conversely, for many people in the anti-Brexit camp transnational solidarity (or cosmopolitanism) is their central value. For these people, the idea that the UK turn inwards and ignore threats to Eastern and Southern Europe would be an anathema. It is not obvious how to resolve or even meliorate disagreements driven by incommensurable values. Perhaps the promise of Cummings’ threat-based approach to politics is to allow us to distinguish disagreements about probable outcomes and disagreements about the efficacy of preventative measures – both of which disagreements seem amenable to some form of rational adjudication – from disagreements about fundamental values. Given that the 2016 referendum debate never approached this level of clarity, Cummings’ post-referendum writings might be viewed as his own mea culpa.