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## **Why Britain Walked Out: Brexit Can't be Written Off to Populism and Xenophobia**

by SERGE HALIMI -- *Serge Halimi is president of *Le Monde diplomatique** --

Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, must regret having compared a UK Leave vote to 'the beginning of the destruction of not only the EU but also western political civilisation in its entirety' (1). Nevertheless, the thunderclap of the Brexit victory resounds across Europe.

This time it will be difficult to ignore universal suffrage and ask a political class disowned by the result of the 23 June referendum to patch up an arrangement the people have rejected. No one imagines that the UK will be subjected to a democratic denial as flagrant as those perpetrated in France and the Netherlands after their no votes on the European constitution in May and June 2005. It is also unlikely that the British will be treated with as much contempt as the Greeks who, in response to their pleas for the EU to change course, were financially asphyxiated and socially purged, with disastrous economic consequences.

**De Gaulle opposed the UK joining the European Economic Community in 1967 because he did not want 'the creation of a free trade area in western Europe, in preparation for one covering the Atlantic area, which would rob our continent of its unique character.'** To blame the British government alone for this loss of identity would be unfair, however, when it had so many willing accomplices in Berlin, Paris, Rome and Madrid; so many that it's hard to see what 'unique character' or specificity the EU still defends. It is also telling that, in an effort to stop the UK from leaving, the EU had readily agreed to measures that would have suspended welfare benefit payments for workers from other EU countries and strengthened legal protection for the UK's financial sector.

The EU, brainchild of an intellectual elite, born in a world divided by war, missed one of history's great choices, or opportunities, to take another route 25 years ago. **The collapse of the Soviet Union was a chance for Europe to rebuild a project that could have satisfied its peoples' aspirations for social justice and peace.** If it had had the courage to demolish and rebuild the EU bureaucratic structures surreptitiously erected alongside its states, and remove free trade as the engine of the machine, **it could have opposed the triumphal progress of global competition with a model based on regional cooperation, social protection and top-down integration of the peoples of the former eastern bloc.**

**But instead of a community, it built a market.** Bristling with commissioners, rules for member states, penalties for its peoples, yet wide open to competition among workers, soulless and with only one aim — to serve the wealthiest and best connected in financial centres and major metropolises. The European dream has

been reduced to a world of penances and austerity, invariably justified as the lesser evil.

The protests expressed in the British vote cannot be dismissed solely as populism or xenophobia. And it is not by further reducing national sovereignty, in favour of a federal Europe almost nobody wants, that our politically discredited elites will assuage the popular anger unleashed in the UK — and rising elsewhere.

**Notes.**

(1) BBC World, 13 June 2016.