

LIBERTY AND LANGUAGE: FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON WHY BRITAIN MUST LEAVE THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Most discussions of Britain's relationship with the European Union give the impression that the issue is one of extreme complexity. In fact it is a relatively simple one. The question is a very straightforward clash of philosophical values. Those who advocate British withdrawal from the EU are in favour of the primacy of the individual over the state, the right to participate in a free market economy, and the right to the protections of a legal order which defend the individual against the encroachment of the state. Those who accept continued British membership of the EU are committed, whether explicitly or not, to a philosophical defence of the absolute primacy of the state over the individual, to an economy characterised by central planning by the state, and to a legal order in which the individual has no rights against the state.

Whether or not one accepts all aspects of Ayn Rand's teaching, she recognised the importance of identifying the philosophical premises which underlie the actions of individuals, institutions, and nations. No two philosophical premises could be more contradictory than those which are dominant in Britain and those which are dominant in Continental Europe. Almost the entire British philosophical tradition, from the time of John Locke to the time of the "revisionist" Liberal T. H. Green, and to a very considerable extent since then, has been to assert the primacy of the individual and the voluntary social order against the impositions of the state. The title of one of Herbert Spencer's works is *The Man Versus The State* — a phrase which sums up the broad direction of English and Scottish political philosophy. By contrast, almost the entire Continental philosophical tradition has been devoted to asserting the domination of the state over the individual, and upholding the state as the embodiment of the people and the nation. Among German philosophers, it is true

that such 18th and early 19th century figures as von Humbolt, von Goethe and the early Fichte had considerable "liberal" elements. However, by far the most dominant figure in German philosophy by the early 19th century was Georg Hegel, whose voluminous works asserted the claims and value of the state as higher than that of all the other institutions and forces of society. Hegel wrote that the state "is the divine idea as it exists on earth". All "the worth which the human being possesses, all spiritual reality, he possesses through the state."¹ Over the course of the 19th century, Hegel became by far the most dominant philosophical influence on German thinking. In contrast with Spencer's *The Man Versus The State*, Hegel promulgated the Idea of the State. To a Continental, the concept of "the man versus the state" would be as absurd and meaningless as "the branch versus the tree". No supporter of Britain's membership of the EU has, to my knowledge, ever demonstrated how these two concepts of political philosophy can be reconciled. All German political and economic movements of any influence since then, whether Bismarckian imperialism, Social Democracy, Marxism, National Socialism or Christian Democracy, derive their primary philosophical inspiration from Hegel. The philosophical ideas of Hegel have dominated all aspects of German thinking since the late 19th century, and have therefore influenced all aspects of politics, economic policy, law and social policy in Germany.

In 18th century France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that the state represents the "general will" which no individual is entitled to go against. He argued that the state should take over the role of priests and parents. Children should be taught to regard their individuality only in its relation to the body of the State, and to be aware, so to speak, of their own existence merely as a part of that of the State.² Since the late 18th century, Rousseau's ideas have been just as dominant in French philosophy as Hegel's have in German philosophy. In contrast to Germany, France has never had any significant liberal philosophical tradition. Those very few French thinkers who have had some liberal element, such as Voltaire and Bastiat, have arguably had more influence on the English-speaking world than they have on France. The philosophical ideas of Rousseau have dominated all aspects of French thinking since at least the Revolution, and have therefore influenced all aspects of politics, economic policy, law and social policy in France.

DIFFERENT MODELS OF THE WORLD

Ideas have consequences. One of the most familiar lines in *Hamlet* is the one where the central character says: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Shakespeare recognised — like Rand — that an individual's philosophy acts as a "filter" through which he or she interprets the world, through which he or she constructs the model of the world on which he or she operates. (One of the numerous philosophical contradictions within Rand's philosophy is the fact that she accepts the view that individuals operate according to different philosophical premises, while rejecting the corollary of that position, which is that individuals therefore do not operate directly on the world itself, but rather on a model of the world.)

An individual's philosophy means that he or she notices certain things and relationships between things, and fails to notice others; and that he or she will be receptive to certain ideas and unreceptive to others. For example, a couple of years ago, the British Internet magazine *Wired* ran a nation-wide advertising campaign which included a poster which said something like:

Governments are getting worried about the uncontrolled spread of information on the Internet.

Tough.

This advertising campaign was proposed by the advertising agency, agreed to and paid for by the publisher of *Wired*, and accepted by the company which owned the hoardings, and not

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



banned by the authorities. The publishers took a commercial decision that an approach based on defiance of the concerns of the state would actually increase sales of their magazine among members of the public. It would be utterly inconceivable that such an advertisement would appear in any Continental country (with the possible, but unlikely, exception of the Netherlands). Not only would no advertising agency dare propose such a poster, or any publisher dare to even consider it, but if such a poster was put up on a privately-owned hoarding, the police would pull it down within hours, and prosecute the advertising agency, the publisher and the hoarding company for “crimes against the state”, a category of jurisprudence which has no equivalent in British law. Neither would such an approach appeal to Continental consumers: on the Continent, “respectable” people do not, under any circumstances, go against the wishes of the state, and strongly disapprove of those who do. In Britain there is a healthy libertarian culture of mocking the state and collectivist institutions. One thinks of the television comedy *Yes, Minister*; of *Private Eye* magazine; of the film comedies *Passport to Pimlico*, *Whisky Galore*, *The Man in the White Suit*, and *I’m Alright Jack*. These have no equivalent on the Continent, where the representatives of the state are not considered to be figures of fun. In Britain, you are free to express any view which has not been outlawed by specific legislation. On the Continent, by contrast, the state has very wide discretion to decide what forms of expression are legal or illegal. When the Continental state is determined on a course of action, it is very active in discouraging the expression of dissent, even without formally prosecuting the dissidents. An example is the current drive towards economic and monetary union and the single currency. As Bernard Connolly, a senior EU monetary official who was sacked for publishing a critical study of EMU, explains:

[I]n France the long arm of the authoritarian state has pressurized dissident economists and bankers, deployed financial information programmes on international TV channels, threatened securities houses with loss of business if they questioned the official economic line, and shamelessly used state-owned and even private-sector banks, in complete contradiction with their shareholders’ interests and Community law, to support official policy ... In Italy, securities houses have been ‘punished’ by the state for publishing accurate economic analysis that made life difficult for the lira within the system. In Denmark the central bank acted illegitimately to ‘punish’ banks who might conceivably have defied the Prime Minister’s warnings not to finance sales of the Danish currency. ... The economics profession in Europe organized literally hundreds of conferences, seminars and colloquia to which only conformist speakers were invited; and the Commission’s ‘research’ programmes financed large numbers of economic studies to provide the right results from known ‘believers’.³

This difference speaks volumes about the difference between the philosophical values which prevail in Britain and those which prevail on the Continent.

LANGUAGE AND PHILOSOPHY

Even simple words are subject to many different interpretations, may give rise to amusing confusion or can bring on hopeless contradictions. From the context of our visual memory, each word elicits images attuned to our particular personality. Whether we communicate or talk over one another’s head may be a matter of chance association, of ingrained prejudice, of a lively imagination, all entailing a multitude of cerebral processes. And when it comes to such complex value-charged terms as freedom, justice, mind, soul, good, evil, communication becomes even more difficult!

Prejudice then takes over its baneful arbitrament, gives rise to an almost biblical confusion of tongues, sets mind

against mind in bitter controversy: “Alas! we live in an age in which it is easier to split the atom than to overcome prejudice.”⁴

In the above passage, Albert Einstein was referring to communication between individuals using the same language. When we refer to people using different languages, the factors he described are multiplied enormously. In 1961, after the construction of the Berlin Wall, when President John F. Kennedy said “*Ich bin ein Berliner*”, his purpose was to demonstrate his solidarity with the people of that city. Unfortunately, his audience burst out laughing, much to President Kennedy’s surprise. In Germany, *ein Berliner* is a type of doughnut; the phrase that would have expressed Kennedy’s intention better would have been “*Ich bin Berliner*”.

In his exceedingly valuable contribution to the field of linguistics, Professor Noam Chomsky has demonstrated that language is the means by which a person communicates his or her philosophy, or model of the world, to other people. A well-known example is that of the Eskimos (or, to use the “politically correct” term, Inuit), who have many words which correspond to the English word “snow”. These words refer to “falling snow”, “hardened snow”, “powdery snow”, “snow which it is possible to walk on”, “packed snow”, “snow in irregular formations”, and so on. Observing an Arctic landscape, an Eskimo’s language — and the model of the world on which it is based — would enable him to see a far more complex and varied scene, where you or I would see merely “snow” everywhere, because he has the words to make sense of it. To take another example, when Captain James Cook landed in New Zealand, the Maori natives could not see his ship. They could see Captain Cook and his crew when they landed, and see the small dinghies on which they landed. But they simply could not see the large ship moored off shore, for the simple reason that they did not have any word in their language to name it, having never seen, or conceived of, a sea-going vessel so large.

The languages of the Eskimos or Maoris have far smaller vocabularies, and therefore have far fewer means of conveying philosophical and relational complexities, than Indo-European languages such as English, French, German, Spanish or Italian, or such Asian languages as Chinese, Japanese or Hindi. Yet the speakers of these more complex languages are themselves limited in their understanding of each others’ model of the world. Typically, Oriental languages have numerous words to describe internal states of psychological awareness which have no exact correspondence in European languages. The Chinese concept of *chi*, for example, which might be translated approximately as “life energy”, represents a family of words dealing with flows of energy within the individual’s mind and body which are generally outside the experience of Westerners, and therefore do not appear in Western languages. The classical liberal linguist Professor Geoffrey Sampson, of Leeds University, gives a converse example:

[T]he traditional conceptual schema shared by the Chinese and Vietnamese includes no words for “free”, “freedom”, “liberty”, “liberal”. The Chinese *tzu yu* (in Vietnamese transliteration, *tu do*), originally a phrase of no philosophical interest meaning “following one’s own bent” or the like, was pressed into service in the nineteenth century to translate the Western concept of liberty, and it seems fair to say that the concept has never really “taken” in the Far East. For instance, the standard Chinese encyclopaedia-dictionary *Tz’u Hai*, published in 1938, calls *tzu yu* a ‘legal’ (rather than ‘political’) term, and its definition includes the phrase ‘not subject to illegal restraint’ (*pu shou fei fa chü shu*) — the qualification ‘illegal’ clearly makes the definition empty as a definition of political liberty. (It is known that one of the difficulties which faced Chinese who began to read Western political theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lay in comprehending

that the term translated *tzu yu* was not intended by the Western authors as a pejorative one — so deeply permeated by authoritarian assumptions is Chinese culture.)⁵

A COMPLEX PROCESS AND SET OF RELATIONSHIPS THAT HAS BEEN TURNED INTO A NOUN

The languages of Europe, with the exceptions of Finnish and Hungarian, have a common Indo-European origin, and it is generally a comparatively straightforward task to translate between English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and so on. When we translate the words which designate an object, such as “a table”, as *une table* or *ein Tisch*, the translation is comparatively straightforward, although even then there are extremely subtle shades of meaning which may be lost in translation. For example, genders, which we do not have in English, lend a distinct “masculine”, “feminine” or “neutral” quality to words in Continental languages. When we translate terms referring to family relationships, such as “grand-father”, “wife”, “son-in-law”, and so on, these have quite profoundly different connotations in different cultures, reflecting differences in family structure. When we come to what Chomsky calls a nominalisation, that is to say, a highly complex process and set of relationships that has been turned into a noun, it becomes very difficult indeed, if not impossible, to render an accurate translation. Nominalisations include such words as “economics”, “democracy”, “law”, “the state”, “liberty”, “equality”, “public opinion”, “the nation”, “regulation”, “the people”, “employment” and “justice”, as well as thousands of others. These words in English are labels which describe a very complex set of ideas, assumptions, values and processes. In French, German, Spanish, Italian, or other Continental languages, their equivalents refer to a completely different set of ideas that in many cases is entirely contradictory to the assumptions an Englishman (or American or Australian) would associate with them. In virtually all such cases, the word in English refers to a process based on the independence of individuals from the state, and the existence of a voluntary and unplanned social order, while in Continental languages, the words refer to processes which take place primarily, if not entirely, on the initiative of the state, for the purpose of retaining or extending the power of the state over the individual and the voluntary social order.

Because Continental languages do not have the words which correspond to such phrases as, for example, “a free-market economy”, “the rights of the individual against the state”, “rolling back the frontiers of the state”, “free trade” and so on, it takes an enormous effort of the imagination for a Continental to have any understanding of what they mean at all. When Continentals visit Britain (or the US, Australia, etc) they generally find many features of its society utterly bewildering. For example, the role of juries, selected at random from the public, taking legal decisions on the basis of what “a reasonable person” would think, the role of unpaid magistrates, who are neither trained lawyers nor state officials, in the maintenance of justice, the presumption of innocence in criminal trials, the right of *habeus corpus*, the right of the individual to legally challenge the government — and win — are utterly incomprehensible to Continentals. In all Continental countries (with the partial exception, once again, of the Netherlands), the definition of the word “law” is “the mechanism for imposing the will of the state”. The concept of “law” as something existing separately from the will of the state, and which protects the individual against the abuses of the state, has no word in Continental languages, and therefore does not exist.

Similarly, the phrase “a free-market economy” signifies, to a Briton, a situation in which individuals are free to set up a business whenever they want to, to employ staff immediately at mutually agreeable wages and conditions, to invent some new product or service and market it without the government’s permission, to make products or services available for sale to whoever wants to buy them, to respond to consumer demand with

products and services which people actually want to buy, and to make as much profit from his business as people want to pay him. Such a concept of economics is very difficult for Continental people to understand. The fundamental principle of economics in Continental countries is that the state takes all economic decisions of any significance on the basis of central planning, usually in consultation with the large employers’ associations, trade unions and other powerful interest groups, in their capacity as collective bodies. The details of economic relations between individuals, in such areas as the relationship between employer and employee, or between supplier and customer, or concerning the introduction of new products to the market, are bureaucratically imposed by the relevant state officials, and are never left to free bargaining between individuals. The state dictates the nature of employment contracts, the terms on which goods and services are exchanged, what products and services may be offered for sale, and according to what specifications, what new products are allowed to be sold, who may set up a business, and on what terms, and, indeed, every other economic activity. Such concepts as a person inventing a product, setting up a company, marketing the invention and making a fortune by satisfying consumer demand, all without needing any permission from the state, is completely incomprehensible to the Continental mind, which takes it for granted that these are matters for the state to decide.

FREE TRADE VERSUS *REALPOLITIK*

The concept of “free trade” is equally incomprehensible to the Continental mind. Free trade — the idea that tariff barriers should be eliminated so that goods could be sold throughout the world — was proposed almost exclusively by British economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Richard Cobden and John Bright. By the mid-19th century, the doctrine had become so dominant in British thinking as to be almost the national religion. The concept of free trade, however, never had any discernable impact on Continental economic policy. To the Continentals, it was — and is — taken for granted that one of the most important functions of the state is the protection of national industry and agriculture. Countries such as the German empire and France built up their industries in the later 19th century on the basis of state economic planning and joint ventures between the state and private industry, surrounded by colossal tariff walls to keep out foreign industrial products and food. The idea of abandoning this policy in favour of an incomprehensible British doctrine simply never occurred to them. All historical attempts to create a pan-European economic entity, such as Napoleon’s Continental System, Hitler’s *Grosswirtschaftsraum*, and the European Union of today, have been attempts to extend the doctrine of protectionism on a continent-wide basis, and have been set up specifically to strengthen such protectionism against the threat from international free trade. How could it conceivably have been otherwise?

An illuminating demonstration of the difference between the two philosophies occurred during the Opium Wars of the 1840s. China had millions of opium addicts who got their supplies of imported opium from British India. The Chinese emperor decided to bring an end to drug addiction, as a means of improving the health of the population, and therefore prohibited the import of British opium. The British government regarded this as a violation of the individual rights of Chinese opium addicts, and in a spirit of righteous indignation fought a war against the Chinese government in the name of “free trade” in order to force that government to permit “individual Chinese consumers” to exercise “freedom of choice” in remaining or becoming drug addicts. As far as the British government was concerned, it was fighting for the holy principles of free trade and individual consumer choice. Every other country in the world, of course (with the possible exception of the United States, though even there free trade was never as dominant a doctrine as it was in Britain), regarded the Opium War as a straightforward exercise in *Real-*

politik in which a powerful Western state imposed its will by force on a weaker Asian country for its own national benefit. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, slogans such as “free trade” and “individual consumer choice” were as irrelevant in this context as the religious cries of Muslims invading some territory in one of their *jihads*. (Of course, this does not mean that the Opium War was actually justifiable on libertarian grounds; the point is that the British had a completely different philosophical conception of what that war was about from the rest of the world. And I note that I have quite unconsciously used a German word to convey a concept which has no exact English equivalent.)

“DER NEUE VATERLAND”

To take a converse example, the German word *Vaterland* has a meaning which cannot be accurately translated into English. In the German or Austrian family, *der Vater* is a stern, disciplinary figure, exercising absolute, unquestioned authority over the mother and children in a way which does not exist in English-speaking countries. The uncritical awe and reverence with which *die Mutter* and *die Kinder* regard *der Vater* stands in sharp contrast to the indulgent, affectionate easy-going British “dad” who is so often over-ruled by “the missus” and “the kids”. To the German, therefore, the word *Vaterland* has an implication of something demanding absolute, uncritical obedience which an Englishman would find virtually incomprehensible. English words such as “the country” and “the nation” do not even convey the vaguest sense of the concepts inherent in *das Vaterland*. When the German political leadership urges that “Europe” must become “*der neue Vaterland*” for the peoples of the EU member states, very few British people understand the full meaning and implications of the phrase. Similarly, in French, when the phrase *raison d'état* is used by a state official to request a service from a private citizen, it commands immediate, uncritical obedience which is not conveyed in a translation to “reason of state”, a phrase which would provoke incomprehension in the mind of a Briton, American or Australian. If the words do not exist in a person’s language to describe a concept, then the concept itself does not exist.

Attempts to form political conglomerates composed of two or more large linguistic groups have all, except for Switzerland, been failures, primarily, I believe, because the members of each group are talking at cross purposes. Political empires in which the dominant group imposes its language on its subjects have been more successful. For instance, the Roman empire imposed Latin on its subjects from Hadrian’s Wall to the pyramids of Egypt. The British empire imposed English, the French empire French, the Spanish empire Spanish, and so on. Under the tsars, the Russian empire imposed a policy of “Russification” on the Ukrainians, Balts, Georgians, and so on, which was continued by the Soviet regime and extended to eastern Europe after the second world war. The purpose in each case was to use language to impose the dominant group’s philosophical premises on its subjects, to force them to think the way the Romans, British, Russians, or whatever, thought. An institution such as the European Union cannot hope to succeed unless one country’s language — and therefore philosophical model of the world — becomes dominant.

The EU is, of course, run exclusively according to the Continental model of the world. All of the EU policies which cause bewilderment or outrage in Britain can be easily comprehended in this light. For example, the imposition of tens of thousands of “harmonisation” directives, which are aimed at making products, and the conditions under which they are manufactured, absolutely identical throughout the EU, can be understood as establishing the principle that the state, and not such “Anglo-Saxon” horrors as “the free market” or “consumer demand”, lays down how all products are to be manufactured. They have nothing to do with such factors as “health and safety”. Because the three European Communities were set up in the 1950s by

six Continental states, and were operational for 25 years before Britain joined them, it could not possibly have been otherwise. Britain’s free-market philosophy has, of course, had no impact whatsoever on any aspect of the EU’s policies or operations in the past quarter of a century, and nor could it conceivably do so at any point in the future. Britain has 11% of the votes on the Council of Ministers (in return for contributing 19% of the EU’s budget), and this proportion will fall as more Continental countries are brought into the EU. Even assuming that the British government was prepared to argue for free market policies within the EU, it would always be overruled by governments which regard the EU primarily as a mechanism for keeping out the free market and more firmly entrenching state control. And anyway, nobody’s philosophy has ever been changed by the way a committee votes.

THE GAINS TO BRITAIN OF LEAVING THE EU WILL BE MORE THAN ECONOMIC

We all know that Britain will gain enormously in economic terms when it leaves the EU, which, at some point, it certainly will. Not only will billions of pounds directly paid to the EU’s budget return to the pockets of the taxpayer, but the vast cost to business of implementing the tens of thousands of directives and regulations will also be saved. Those companies which have been closed down, fishing boats driven out of business, beef farmers whose private property has been confiscated and who have been deprived of their livelihood, and countless other victims of EU policies, will be able to re-establish themselves. In addition, withdrawing from the Common Agricultural Policy will mean that food prices will fall dramatically, and tariffs on food from outside the EU will disappear. Regaining control over Britain’s territorial waters will benefit the British fishing industry, and incidentally the environment, from the essentially communist system of the Common Fisheries Policy. Freed from the protectionist trading policy of the EU, Britain will be free to pursue a policy of world-wide free trade, for the enormous economic benefit of its people. The abolition of Value Added Tax, the first tax in world history in which private companies are compelled to work as unpaid tax collectors for the state, in other words literally as slaves, will also be a huge boost for the economy. And of course the threat of a European single currency, a European armed force, a “Euro-FBI”, the imposition of Continental laws relating to freedom of expression and controls over the media, and other nightmares, will be permanently lifted. Britain will also gain in the political and legal areas, by the restoration of the common law, the freedom of the individual, and the sovereignty of Parliament as the fundamental principles of British law and government.

These and countless other economic and political benefits will be enormous. But more significant will be the gains in terms of the reassertion of Britain’s philosophical values. To the libertarian, of course, a nation’s economic performance derives from the prevailing philosophical values within that nation. Ayn Rand asserted that wealth is the product of the individual’s mind, and that the workings of the individual’s mind are the product of the philosophical premises which that individual holds. The fact that people in Continental countries find such a concept incomprehensible or horrifying is itself a demonstration of the essential truth of Rand’s assertion.

NOTES

1. Quoted in George H. Smith, *Atheism, Ayn Rand and Other Heresies*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York, 1991, p. 281.
2. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 278.
3. Bernard Connolly, *The Rotten Heart of Europe*, Faber and Faber, London, first published 1995, 1996 edition, p. xix.
4. Quoted in Edi Lanners (editor), *Illusions*, first published 1973, translated by Heinz Norden, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977, p. 11.
5. Geoffrey Sampson, *Liberty and Language*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 159.