

The Way We Were: Studying Europe Forty Years Ago

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, MAR 1 2016

David Cameron's gamble over Europe has taken me back forty years. This is because in September 1975, I took myself off to Leicester University to read the MA in European Political Studies. For a colonial, then in his late-Twenties, the choice of both place and course was (shall we say) curious. After all, until the rainy day I arrived, I had scarcely heard of Leicester – and certainly didn't know anything about its now famous university. I'd also not really thought much about European politics, but was caught up with the politics of apartheid South Africa. Events in the country were building towards the insurrection of black school children that would culminate, in June 1976, in the deaths of 173 children in the Soweto Uprising.

In my Honours year (a post-graduate level in South Africa) I'd written a long paper on the Southern African Customs Union – the world's oldest Customs Union. Conceived by Whitehall, this was a device to share revenue amongst colonial territories in southern Africa and (the then Union of) South Africa in the early-20th Century (It brands itself these days with the acronym, SACU).

My thinking at the time I enrolled at Leicester was that, somehow, the states of southern Africa would eventually have to pool sovereignty, and that the then European Economic Community (EEU) was showing the way. There were three of us in the taught MA stream: my class mates – both English – were enthusiastic Europeans who were galvanized by Britain's accession to the EEU in January 1973.

To be frank, I was largely bemused by all the toing and froing over the issue of membership especially in the context of British domestic politics which I only vaguely understood. My understanding of the latter, I feel compelled to add, was not enhanced by my living with a wonderful family who were devoted followers of the Socialist Worker Group. So, political conversations at home and in the class-room took place in completely different vocabularies.

One of my fellow students had just completed a short-service commission in the British Army. I remember him warning that the long-term challenge of Britain in the EEC would come from the Tories. He also once warned that Margaret Thatcher, then about to be elected Leader of the Conservatives, would become a modern Boudicea! Both not bad insights, it must be said!

The MA course consisted of four papers and a short thesis. As I remember it, the course in European institutions was taught by an Anglophile German, Ernie Wohlgemuth. He encouraged us to apply for money from the EEC Commission office in London to travel to Brussels to see 'Europe in action'. A fine and jolly outing it was, too. My return to the UK was marred, however, by a rough brush with an Asian passport official who was rightly suspicious of a white South African who was studying Economic integration in Europe with money supplied by the European Commission!

Comparative Politics was offered by Christopher Hughes, the former Head of Department. He was interesting with a rich, but somewhat eccentric, take on the comparative method. We each had to choose the domestic different country to study. I chose the Netherlands if only because my rudimentary knowledge of the language would give me a head start – or so I thought.

The theory option was given by Murray Forsyth who was then writing his now famous book, *Unions of States: the*

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Theory and Practice of Confederation. Then Reader in the department, Forsyth offered a longitudinal optic on what European integration was about, drawing from, amongst other sources, *The Federalist Papers*. He was certainly the very first person to show me why political theory matters most in these matters.

The English School theorist, Professor R.J. (John) Vincent, who had also taken the MA in European Political Studies some five years before me, and who died far too young, was also inspired by Forsyth's theoretical take on European integration.

Another person who died far too young was Peter Savigear who took the Strategic Studies Paper. Incurable and with an infectious sense of humour, Savigear was the only person I ever met who was interested in and researched the Fronte di Liberazione Naziunale Corsu (FLNC) or the National Liberation Front of Corsica. He certainly knew all about NATO and the stuff that was building towards (what was later called) the Second Cold War, but Peter Savigear came to life (and peals of laughter) when he told of efforts to meet commanders of the FLNC.

The long essay – I think we called it a 'short thesis' – was on 'anything' to do with the EEC. I wrote on the relations between the EEC and the ACP (African, Caribbean, Pacific countries); it was probably the closest thing the entire year which approximated political economy.

As the Brexit frenzy has taken hold these past few months, I've wondered about the Leicester course – and the many others like it that were on offer at the time. Was this the moment that the study of Politics was giving way to IR? Or was the IR that we now think that we know different to what was then on offer? Could things have turned out differently, if we had thought about the European project through different lenses than Politics of IR? Should students have spent more time on understanding national psyches – beginning, perhaps, with Britain's? Why were these courses so celebratory, so devoid of critical interrogation – or was this something that I had entirely missed during the year-long exercise?

But as Cameron has drawn closer to the precipice, I have mostly pondered this: Did these courses help or hinder England understand its tortured view of itself in the world?

About the author:

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