

## EU Today Podcast 4 Transcript

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*[Intro music in theme of piano playing Ode to Joy]*

**Katie Lindner:** Hello, and welcome to EU Today, a podcast from the Center for European studies, a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thank you to the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission, the EU Delegation to the U.S., and the U.S. Department of Education for supporting our center and its programs. On this podcast, we sit down with scholars and policy leaders to discuss pressing issues facing the EU. We hope you enjoy it.

On this podcast, we'll be interviewing UNC History Professors Susan Pennybacker and Cemil Aydin, both Jean Monnet Center of Excellence Key Staff Members. In partnership with the Center for European Studies, Professors Pennybacker and Aydin organized the April 2019 "Global Brexit" panel and "Lost Futures" conference, exploring the past and present of global themes related to Brexit. Susan Pennybacker is a Distinguished Professor of European History here at UNC. She's a modern British historian whose work is on the long British twentieth century in a global context. Cemil Aydin is a Professor of Global History here at UNC. His main interests are comparative and transnational modern world history, with area foci on Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Interviewing professors Pennybacker and Aydin is Mark Reeves, a PhD candidate in history here at UNC.

*[Ode to Joy fades back in and plays for appx. 4 measures]*

**Mark Reeves:** Well, I thought we would begin by just talking about the origin of the conference idea for "Global Brexit and Lost futures of European Empires." So, I don't know Susan, if you wanted to discuss that?

**Professor Susan Pennybacker:** So, "The Lost Futures of European Empires" was a concept that came through one of our colleagues who was an Africanist, who had partly worked on visions of a federation that had grown up in Africa after 1945. Some of which came to fruition, but others not. In relation to the commonwealth, the British commonwealth, there were parallel movements for federation, including in

the French empire, and this led to a notion of, on the one hand, a notion of reconfiguring the European empires in a proposed future, but also the loss of those visions over time, which were emanating from across the political spectrum. And we were able in the early period of this "Lost Futures" enterprise to receive some funding from the King's Fund which is shared between UNC and King's College London. And the first of the lost futures conferences, which was similar to the workshop part of what we did, was shared and led in London by Sarah Stockwell who's in that department. Who's a historian of the British empire, quite fine historian, our colleague. And we met at both Winston House, which is a UNC facility in London, and also at King's College, and I believe that that was in 2011 even, perhaps in the summer then. And then we revisited the concept twice before "Global Brexit." The first time was a full-scale conference on the order of this one in 2014 which was shared again with King's, in the sense that King's folks came this time to the U.S., and again Sarah took the lead, and was co-convened in the US by myself and Lisa Lindsay, our chair and Africanist, now chair. And this featured a keynote by the great African historian, who retired this year, Fred Cooper, which was given at North Carolina Central, who were also consistently supportive and sponsors of this whole enterprise, and there were a couple hundred people at Fred's talk. And we had workshops that met in the GEC building and were supported by a number of entities on the campus. Then we had a small conference that Cemil and I convened that was a part of this tradition that was held in 2016 at the National Humanities Center, which in part featured scholars who were visiting at the NHC that year. One of whom was the posthumous voice of the British intellectual Stuart Hall, who had died, and his interlocutor was Bill Schwarz, who teaches at Queen Mary College at the University of London. We also had Fadi Bardawil, now at Duke University. Also, our colleague, Judith Walkowitz, who's professor emeritus at Johns Hopkins. So, it's a quite important and interesting, but much smaller seminar, and then we came to the possibility of working with the Center for European Studies through the European Union and the Title VI funds that could support again a much larger enterprise, and I'll give it to Cemil to talk about conceptually, the Global Brexit part of this.

**Professor Cemil Aydin:** I think the conference exemplified what UNC does best with the leadership of the Center for European Studies, which is that we brought all different centers and departments into interdisciplinary conversation, not only about Britain, but also about humanities and the debates on international order so we took Brexit as not just a peculiar, unique, British problem, but we took it as a sign of some of the turbulence that the world is going through with globalization, with the rising powers of Asia, but also with Britain's imperial legacy, Britain's and the EU's vision for the future, and we wanted to have a conversation that comprehensively looks at all these things. Because historically, the British empire did represent a kind of hopeful future of the world. We know that there were a lot of defects in that hopeful future, but nevertheless, for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment/liberal project, the British

empire was a model. But with the crimes of the empire or its decline, most of these hopes were then transferred to the project of the European Union. The European Union became a symbol of modernity and Britain joined the European Union. So, with Brexit, then, all of these normative philosophical/intellectual legacies are being questioned, not only in Britain, but also in Europe itself, and beyond Europe, of course, we also know, Europe became more provincialized. The world is not Eurocentric anymore, we are truly in a post-European world with the rise of China, India, and the rest of the world, and there are new visions about the future, new values being contributed and so we thought is that we'd take Brexit as a case study, but go beyond Brexit, all the way to China, India, to the U.S. and Latin America, and look at this crisis in England from an interdisciplinary perspective and bring history into the conversation and get historical insights into it. So, I think given the quality of the papers and the large participation from all departments and different campuses we feel very vindicated that questions and conversations were very fruitful, and I do think that we may need to continue this conversation with CES in the future.

**Mark Reeves:** What was exciting to me was the interaction between the workshop format, and the giving of papers, which there was a large audience for, and a lot of interaction across campus with, but also the large public panel that we had to discuss the political process of Brexit in this more global and more intellectual, historical sense. So, I just wanted to get some of your reactions too, to that panel and how it interacted with the themes of the workshop.

**Professor Pennybacker:** Well, let me just step back for a second as a British specialist and say that, you know, Cemil has said before, we were vindicated by this conference because of the complexity of what's occurred even before we first conceived of it. Not only the Brexit vote, which had been a kind of trigger, the UK vote, to our thinking, about a protracted crisis in democracy in the sense of the social democracy, but also the implications for left and right of all of this. Now, I think a couple months have passed since the conference, and both the complexity and the seriousness of the crisis in the political community and in the state in Britain is quite profound. I mean it's the worst set of issues about the juridical and constitutional features of the state that arguably Britain has faced since the end of the second war. And as we know there is now a leadership struggle going on, and not just simply as publicized in the Conservative party but also in the Labor party. And we've had the accretion of support to a new formation on the right which is a kind of morphed feature of Nigel Farage's politics, and some success of the parties of the center and the left which was unpredicted. Both the revival of the liberal democrats which is a morph of the old Liberal party with factions of the Labor party that had left during the period of the 80s and also the Greens who have also done, of course, exceedingly well in Europe.

So, we have a complex parliamentary and extra-parliamentary set of political realities that I think the panel spoke very well to, but its goal is also to say in these different possible scenarios, some of which have also ensued. Including for example, the robust electoral victory of Narendra Modi, in India. How will the crisis of, if you will, to use the old Marxist language, bourgeois democracy, how will that crisis affect the rest of the world, and how will it see itself responding? And of course certainly the parts of the world that were displayed prominently on the panel, were those where there was either a very strong mark of the British empire still on the political culture of the given place, great rivals with Britain now, that have subsumed her economy into theirs in certain sectors as in the case of China, but also European contenders in the way that Tobi Hof was representing around the issues facing Greece, Italy, Spain, and the German case. I think we feel like the, in retrospect, the panel spoke to an ongoing political crisis that has yet to come fully to its fruition, it contributed to a wider knowledge in the audience about the dynamics of geopolitics, and we sought to take the challenge that CES had presented to us of trying to globalize issues that are often treated in the silo of Europe. And I think this is a very complicated cognitive process I think for listeners who still elevate Europe to a superior place within their hierarchy of outlooks. I think that that stability of Europe and its fundamental progressiveness has been deeply challenged by the overall political context of the world and one of the effects of that is to create a more equal playing field both at the level of disaster and also democratic impulse so that we've seen with the Arab Spring, we've seen with the situation of Sudan right now, all these things a kind of affirmation of motions toward democracy, the present Hong Kong activity of the last few days. And I think this panel sought to speak to those wider themes, and that this is a project that the university needs to be committed to: not just sending people out to these places, but the intellectual discourse surrounding these kinds of global issues is important. And Europe provides still, on an intellectual basis some of the tools needed to look globally, and we felt that this was the challenge CES was meeting in this instance.

**Professor Aydin:** In some ways, I think in the public panel, one of the most interesting papers was a remark on Chinese history, a reflection on the power of China and its role in this debate. And obviously that reminder of China's big economic position is Southern Europe have been shown even recently with U.S.-Chinese trade wars which will probably extend to a new trading friction with the European Union as well. But what we have seen behind all these economic balancing acts between different parts of the world, we also see some sort of competition over the normative values of the future world. As Susan said, we did know that Europe had this dark legacy of the Holocaust and imperialism and colonialism, but we also have seen that a lot of non-European people have attributed Europe beyond its dark side and normative values and normative leadership. And because Brexit is about the future of the EU, and the EU in the post

World War II period represented that vision of democracy freedom and European values. So with Britain leaving the EU, and the liberals in the rest of the world, no matter how much they are critical of Europe, they are also left with a much weaker Europe and its leadership in the world, and I think we are seeing that in contemporary politics, that when there is a problem from Middle East, Africa, to Asia, we don't have now a strong moral leader who can intervene or make claims . maybe this expectation that Europe will be that place was wrong—I think that many of us as academics were critical of that position of Europe, but nevertheless, without Europe, we also don't have any contenders to fill that vacuum. In the end China and India are not interested in democratic liberal values, and Europe now seems very shy about asserting any of these things, especially after the refugee crisis recently. So, with Brexit I think we now are in a place where there are so many people trying to remake the world, to minimize its negative aspects, to make the world a better place for everybody, but we do not have a political unit, a political body that will actualize these values in world politics. Maybe Europe claiming that role was hypocritical in the past, that there was never a perfect match between Europe's political and economic leadership and their values, but we are now in a place where we need to discuss how the future world order will be shaped by this complex relationship between rising, new economic powers and a debate on values and the future of democracy

**Professor Pennybacker:** I would just add to this, that another thing the panel proposed, and I think the events that have ensued in the past two months propose, is that we must look at Europe again as a fractured set of political values across a spectrum, so that if we want to look for progressive figures, as we must do also in Turkey and in the Middle East, in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan. I mean, were also celebrating Taiwan's recent decision on LGBT rights and so on. So there's a number of forces that are often in the political minority, but if we think of them globally across a spectrum, were getting values that are so provoked by the power of the right, and so provoked by Brexit that they're reasserting a profound vision of a progressive global social democracy that does not have the same European chauvinism in that classic social democratic thinking has often had, so that it's a weird, surreal paradox of this situation which I think the conference did try to speak to, that even this lost futures notion speaks to: that at any moment you have the power of the right emerging, you also have profound challenges to it. So, there are some hopeful things, one could make the case that the situation in Spain is hopeful, you could make the case the European elections right now on the continent as a whole at least secured the arena of the European Union as a place of political struggle which was not going to be seized at this time by the right. I think that what Cemil is also being so helpfully transparent about, is that in the non-European context, no matter how much Europe is bashed, the intellectual currents and the discourses back and forth have been lifelines for people outside of the European

and UK framework, including people who are in exile or in refuge in the European framework. So, these things are now, I think, writ large, and we could reach, for example into the Arab-Israeli conflict, and we can see people on the Israeli left and within the Palestinian authority who represent enormously progressive values that some Europeans are responding to. The conference had an emphasis on the Middle East for a variety of reasons. It didn't resolve these issues, but it confronted these issues, and I think we are committed as intellectuals, to the free exchange of ideas. Those arenas also need to be preserved within the UK and the European framework right now. So, we take very seriously, for example, the jeopardy that the European University in Budapest has faced and its move to Vienna, and Vienna which also has gone through its own and is going through its own political crisis right now. These things, I think were all fed by the broad framework of the conference in an innovative, and we think, pedagogic and intellectually sound manner. Which is supposed to be the role of the university in our own democracy which is also in a crisis now, objectively. Including in this part of the country, so it's very important to pursue these arenas, and UNC needs to continue to play a role in fostering this kind of discourse, and were very pleased of course as academics as historians to have the support of CES right now in these endeavors, as well as the College of Arts and Sciences and other entities within the university really turned out and showed their commitment.

**Mark Reeves:** yes. If I could speak to that for a moment too, just thinking as someone who is a student at the university, as a graduate student, but is also teaching undergraduates, so I was at the conference as a student, but also bringing students to it. I really thought and was thinking about this at the panel especially, that this was a series of academics from lots of different places-- I think we had at least 5 or 6 different countries represented there in terms of people's home institutions-- and a range of perspectives wrestling with problems that they didn't quite have solutions to. And it seems to me that in a lot of the crisis of Brexit and in the crisis of liberal democracy around the world, that there has been a crisis of triumphalism in a way. A crisis of the idea that certain ideas are bound to, in the end, come out. Which is often I think how the European project has been framed in the post-World War II era. And I think that's so valuable for students because in educational institutions we can often fall into simply presenting triumphalist narratives of whatever kind that what the professor tells the student is "this is how things are going to turn out, this is how they work, this is how things are going to turn out" and in this case, we were wrestling with these things but we were also showing students and the public I think how we wrestle with these when were in the middle of a crisis. So, to me it was just an exciting intellectual time, and it still is even as the political uncertainties are so disturbing





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**Professor Pennybacker:** If I could just add that the structure of this also allowed the academic community without too much stress to actually participate and to show what they do. Which often our day-to-day here does not allow us to do and it also elevated students, both undergraduates and graduates students who were on the program to a level of participation—yourselves included here—that spoke to their highest intellectual achievement thus far, and their careers. This is a rare commodity within the day-to-day functioning of a very large university that is under considerable budgetary pressures and constraints. So, our department, I just want to say the history department as well as poli-sci and some of the other departments some of the programs here, in our department 30 or so people participated—that's like half of our staff, our faculty. And they were able to show the incredible capacity to respond spontaneously to papers that were not pre-circulated. So, we took a lot of the chains off conference participation, and yet people really rose to the occasion, really showed their stuff. And I think this was important too for the public and for other people who were attending. It's so often forgotten that it's not just the teaching endeavor-- not that that's separate from this, this was highly teachable and lots of students participated-- but it's our own capacity to try to make our academic research intelligible within these larger frameworks, and I think that was well demonstrated just structurally by the way this occurred.

**Mark Reeves:** Well, we've touched on this a little bit, but did I also wanted to give an opportunity to talk about some of the other outcomes that have come from the conference just in terms of people publishing some of what they've spoken about or speaking in other forums. So just to give you an opportunity to speak about that

**Professor Aydin:** Well, I think Susan knows more about publication plans, and we also had one of our participants appearing in a radio program, in NPR, but in most of these conferences, I think one of the most interesting and fruitful outcomes is that the participants begin to think about their topics in a different light, and in public begin to interpret the events around them in a new light. For example one of the most fruitful papers for me was on this recent Brexit movies like Churchill and Dunkirk and others, and I watch some of these movies and I'm aware of their public appeal, but a scholar then interpreting that most of these movies rely on a fiction, an invented fiction, and also a fiction that relies on the idea that Britain is separate from Europe, that it saved Europe, that it's great, it's this wonderful empire, and that this nostalgia is partly responsible for creating sympathies for Brexit. So, I'd never thought about that, you'd think it's just one director's attempt to make a movie, but you can see how scholarly knowledge about history and social sciences can help us better to understand public entertainment products, and why they are made and what kind of appeal they have. And more importantly the conference was something to allow the participants and inspire them to make new connections and new academic perspectives for example, political scientists and historians talking to

each other was very useful. Honestly, after all these events I was talking to my colleagues about the developments in Eastern Europe, the great democratic revolution after 1989-1994, and we all agreed that if similar things were happening today without a united, powerful Europe, we wouldn't expect the same results. That the post-socialist, all these republics in Eastern Europe, had a vision associated with all the benefits that come from the membership to the European cause. And now that doesn't exist. And the reason why it doesn't exist of course, is twofold. On the one hand, Europe performed very poorly from the Middle East to Asia; that when there was a coup in Egypt of a problem or in the Middle East, they didn't do what they were supposed to do they supported very undemocratic regimes, we were already aware of that. But we also in Brexit discussed the challenge coming from within, you know places like Hungary, the rise of the right-wing groups and the Brexit is another side of it, but its clear that many participants who attended these talks now had a different understanding of their own topics and projects that would reflect in their own scholarship and public writing

**Professor Pennybacker:** Again, just at a very basic level, we had graduate students producing material that will see the light in publication, that sees the lights in prospectus work that some are doing still on dissertations and dissertation research that's been awarded in the case of Joel Herbert, he just defended his PhD thesis, and that's going on the road now in the toward of a book. We also had people who were floating new research projects who had been award winning historians. Paul Okobock who communicated with us by skype has just won two major awards for his book on manhood in Kenya, and is now doing an economic history of the coffee industry which he floated as a paper, which this conference venue, without too many constraints, and without circulating online a very formal paper, allows people to experiment in ways I think that are very very helpful. We also had some papers that I think will achieve publication in other kinds of ways from quite senior scholars, including the Kenan chair in American studies at UVA, Penny von Eschen, who is a very distinguished americanist who works globally, and Caroline Elkins from Harvard gave a very memorable paper that's really part of the substructure of her boo that's forthcoming now, which is partly on counterinsurgency issues and the global nature of the military and policymakers within the British imperial and colonial framework with a focus on the Middle East. Cemil just mentioned a couple people on the big panel. Let me first say, well I'll come to that in a second, but John Perry from Cambridge published in the week of global Brexit the essential script of his text that he delivered to us as the lead article in the London review books of that week. So that was a very important intervention hat he was making as one of only several modern British historians and as someone within the professoriate, which is an achievement within the British context, a commentary about the importance of the parliamentary crisis in Britain, which was quite a prescient piece. Pradip K. Datta who came to us from Jawaharlal Nehru University, which is the graduate institution, the



leading graduate institution in Southeast Asia, was interviewed in NPR in the subsequent Sunday program, and that appears as a podcast online now, about the political history of Narendra Modi in the buildup to the election. So, we were very pleased to have him, he directs the political thought unit at JNU, and again, is a distinguished Indian academic and thinker in his own right. I was going to mention that I know now that Tobias Hof who served the Center very well as a DAAD fellow has just received a major award to continue his research that he spoke about in the context of the meetings we had on the Saturday, which was about the reception in Europe of the Ethiopian famines in the post-war era and how philanthropy, aid, and all that worked, and this will allow him to do research both in Italy and in Addis, he's just received that. We were very delighted to have him participate, and again to do on spec a project, he was particularly pleased to have the commentary of our Africanist colleagues who were in the room on that project which is a gain is a very important feature of the project is that you have people who work on the non-European areas critiquing Europeanists, this may sound to the listener that this is something that should happen all the time, but it really is still a relatively unpracticed part of academic life. And that provides just invaluable feedback of the type Cemil was also speaking about when one compares for example the developments of the Arab spring with the preceding 1989 developments and all of that. These are very important comparative frameworks that we find intellectually more rigorous than those that previously existed

I would like to add how much we appreciate Lily Herbert and other staff members, Mark himself, and the staff of the history department, of CES and of other units in the university who always go unnamed, but there are so many staff people who assist in making a conference like this possible as well as the members of the community who provided venues for people to have both accommodation and dining, it was an incredible output if we had a whole list it would be like 100 people who helped to make this possible so we are most grateful them

**Mark Reeves:** Well, we're also grateful to the organizers who do all the high-level stuff.

*[Ode to joy plays in the background]*

**Katie Lindner:** Please note that any opinions expressed in the EU Today podcast are solely those of our guests and our hosts, and not of the UNC Center for European studies, which takes no institutional positions. Be sure to tune in for more episodes, and subscribe to *EU Today* wherever you listen to podcasts.

*[Ode to Joy fades out]*

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