Simply put, the European Union is a nineteenth-century solution to a twentieth-century problem. Therefore, the question of whether it can ever be made fit-for-purpose in the twenty-first century is a perfectly valid one for us to ponder. Even the staunchest Remain voters who eagerly lined up starting in the early hours of June 23, 2016, to cast their vote—in Cardiff and Birmingham and Glasgow and Newcastle and Brighton and Richmond upon Thames—for Britain’s historic Brexit referendum would have been hard-pressed to argue that the European Union was actually “democratic” in the way that it operates.

It is interesting to note that the most democratic nation in Europe—Switzerland, which possesses a thousand-year history of electoral democracy—has never been part of the European Union. The fact that Britain—with several hundred years of democratic experience under its belt—decided to part ways with the Brussels-based reenactment of the Holy Roman Empire should have come
with less shock and surprise around the world than it did when
the results of the referendum were becoming clear the following
morning.

If we are being candid with ourselves for a moment, the demo-
cratic experience of much of the rest of the EU membership varies
between “periodic” and “very recent.” By contrast, more people
voted for Brexit than have voted for anything else in the history of
voting for things in Britain. These are important points to bear in
mind when we consider the long road to Brexit in the years preced-
ing the referendum.

Whether it’s “breaking away” or “breaking up,” countries
regularly reconfigure themselves in response to important politi-
cal imperatives of the day. The disintegration of the Soviet Union
and Yugoslavia was a direct result of the collapse of Communism,
with the former spinning out its constituent parts relatively peace-
fully and the latter somewhat less so. The creation of Eritrea from
Ethiopia in 1991 and South Sudan from Sudan in 2011 are only
two recent examples of citizens deciding that their best future lies
outside their current political configuration.

Unsurprisingly, Brexit was quickly co-opted on the other side
of the pond into the US presidential political brawl during the
summer of 2016. For Donald Trump and his supporters, Brexit was
an example of populist forces shifting the direction of a country
while bypassing a distant political elite that was either unable or
simply unwilling to make necessary decisions. For Hillary Clin-
ton, Brexit demonstrated the uncertainties that can result from
rash decisions that are motivated by anger and fear, rather than
more measured and nuanced responses hammered out with due
consideration.

For those seeing visions of secession in the Brexit vote, the
most important question is probably when and how people should
make decisions about the type of democratic structures they do—
and do not—want to be a part of. People making decisions and
then changing their minds is one of the key aspects of democ-

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clothes and dating. These various choices are then woven into a definition of ourselves. This definition will inevitably change over time.

Of course, it was somewhat odd that so many international commentators—including countless American talking heads—reflexively came out as such strong champions of the European Union after the Leave camp’s unexpected victory. It was especially odd given how few Americans are able to describe the European Union’s structure and operation in even the most general terms.

There exists a significant disconnect between the idealist expectations that observers outside of Europe have developed in recent decades for this supranational behemoth and the mundane contradictions and shortcomings of its various pronouncements—often arriving in a style and manner not easily distinguishable from Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*. I decided in the days that followed the Brexit result to sit down and attempt my own portrait of a continent in transition in part to bridge this gulf in understanding.

At its heart, this book is a portrait of the failure of leadership across Europe. The campaign for Brexit put a Remain camp backed by the great and the good of British political leaders across the ideological spectrum against a ragtag Leave team almost completely devoid of establishment players. The primary exception was former London mayor (and eventual British foreign minister) Boris Johnson, who was able to reposition his buffoonish persona, replete with frequent A-Level Latin references, to successfully attack Brussels and advocate effectively for Britain’s departure from the European Union and the Bonapartist dream of a reunified continental empire that it had come to represent in the minds of many Britons.

This, however, is not a book about Brexit. It is a book that tells a series of stories about events across the European continent in recent years that laid the groundwork for a growing popular dislike and distrust of Europe’s political classes. It is about a vision of European harmonization and integration championed by the great French military and political leader Napoleon Bonaparte,
who brought radical changes to the continent, sweeping away the lingering vestiges of feudalism in all of its various guises. Although Bonaparte is celebrated in the popular imagination as an unparalleled general, one of his great regrets as he lived out his last few years in exile on St. Helena was that he fell short of his dream of a “European association” that would have shared a harmonized system of governance, law, and even currency and measurements. He would have looked upon the Brussels’ bureaucracy with a paternal fondness—and probably chuckled to himself that Brexit was ultimately for the best!

Although Theresa May quickly replaced David Cameron in Number 10 Downing Street after the votes were counted and declared, “Brexit means Brexit,” almost all of the most important questions about what will follow the referendum result still remain unanswered. This book, therefore, will focus on the long road to Brexit. It will recount how sentiments in Britain and on the continent diverged more and more in recent years as neighbors faced common challenges but with significantly different perspectives. It will detail how Europe got to where it was that solemn day in June 2016 when British people decided to once again go their own way.

But first, before we begin our tour back and forth across the greater European continent—from the Atlantic Ocean to the Urals—we should pause briefly and prepare for our journey. We would benefit greatly from some context within which to analyze our large and weighty topic. Some experts would recommend a sojourn into the annals of European historical arcana, others a quick recap of economic theories underpinning today’s globalized economy. Not here, though. Instead, I would beg your indulgence to spend a few minutes with me, casting a skeptical eye on a prestigious sporting institution.
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Sports? Surely there must be a better way of orienting ourselves to the Brexit debacle than an excursion into sports, even if that sport is—unsurprisingly!—“football,” or as Americans, Australians, and a few recalcitrant souls still refer to it, “soccer.” But what better way to start to appreciate and understand Europeans than by studying their favorite competitive pastime?

Despite Britain’s uncontested paternity in regard to the beautiful game, there is perhaps no more quintessentially European organization than Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the sport’s global governing body. The scandal that finally unfolded within FIFA in June 2015—after years of twists and turns—displayed many of Europe’s current leadership shortcomings in vivid and gruesome detail. It can easily serve as a parable for us as we consider in more detail in the chapters to come the long road to Brexit and whether British and European leaders could have done more to avoid the rupture.

In this cautionary tale, we observe that just days after winning yet another term as soccer’s untouchable and unaccountable Grand Pooh-bah, Sepp Blatter was forced to submit his resignation. Even with his multibillion-dollar organization in disarray and rumors circulating that he was himself the target of FBI investigations into corruption, the unexpected move still took many by surprise. Observers worried about how best to reform FIFA—a sprawling, opaque, multinational leviathan—to make it fit-for-purpose in the twenty-first century. Comparisons to the European Union almost make themselves!

Blatter’s electoral success the prior week ended up being a Pyrrhic victory. He was able to demonstrate to his critics that he had command over his constituencies, but the pressure of simultaneous investigations by US and Swiss authorities provided too much for him. In his resignation speech, Blatter seemed a deflated man. Where was the bold figure who casually deflected and disregarded the mounting evidence that his organization was rife with bribery and dirty dealing? He defensively claimed that he would use the time left to him in office to start the process of far-reaching reforms...
that the footballing world demanded. After seventeen years as FIFA president, though, it was unclear how much reform Blatter would be able to push through in the final months at his disposal, having pushed through so remarkably little of it previously.

Response from within the world of international football was immediate. Key figures in the game as well as many fans and players expressed their relief that a post-Blatter world would soon be upon us. Not all voices were in unison about Blatter’s demise, though. No less a soccer fan than Russian president Vladimir Putin dismissed the anti-Blatter witch hunt as a thinly veiled American attack on Russia’s selection to host the 2018 World Cup!

There is, unfortunately, an awkward truth sitting at the heart of the FIFA scandal and FIFA itself. Many people today champion multilateralism and international organizations as far superior to arrangements where the United States wields disproportionate power on the international stage and only a handful of other countries have any effective say on important decisions. Such visions can be enticing. Surely everything would be better if every country had an equal vote!

Sadly, FIFA gives us a particularly vivid picture of what multilateral organizations such as the European Union are capable of when they are awash with cash and free from effective oversight and transparency. Just as we can ask who the ruling elites of FIFA actually serve, we can and should ask who do the ruling elites of the European Union actually serve? In addition, international soccer can also provide us with a particularly interesting window into the passions, prejudices, and privileges of Europeans and their leaders. Hopefully this quick sojourn into the beautiful game will place Brexit in a wider cultural and historical context, making it a little easier for non-Europeans to understand.
When Europeans think sport, they think football—the round variety rather than oval. Many Americans would name the New York Yankees, the Dallas Cowboys, and the Los Angeles Lakers as the towering brands of professional sport. But even added together, they fail to have the global media presence and mindshare of a Manchester United or a Real Madrid.

When walking down an American street today, passing teenagers and adults in an Arsenal, Bayern Munich, or Barcelona jersey is a common occurrence. This was not the case ten years ago and certainly not when I was a young boy growing up in Southern California in the 1970s. My memories of watching the 1982 and 1986 World Cup finals on Spanish language television at a friend’s house in a barrio a short bicycle ride from my suburban tract home are unique ones and not widely shared. What a difference three decades makes!

One important feature of soccer outside the United States is the frequency of international matchups. Unique and powerful emotions are opened up when eleven men from one country line up on the same pitch across from eleven men from another country. In Europe especially, few cross-border matches can occur without some deep and harrowing reference to history or deep, lingering animosities. The various battles, with their victories and defeats, may be many miles (and years) away from the stadium, but on the night of the match, those memories can rise to the front of people’s minds.

My own favorite soccer chant (which also benefits from being suitable for a family audience) is the one frequently heard whenever the Dutch play the Germans: “Can we have our bicycles back?” I am touched that when reflecting back on the brutal and bloody Nazi occupation of their country, the memory surging to the front of the Dutch minds is quite simply the fact that, on their ultimate retreat, the German armies stole all the bicycles of Amsterdam.

“Can we have our bicycles back?”

Nationalism at a very basic level requires comparisons to be made between countries—and their cultural traits, stereotypes,
histories, and faults—in order for a particular country to come up as the better of the two. Regular soccer matches between the rivals’ national teams provide ample opportunities for such comparisons to be made on the playing fields and in the tabloid newspapers.

Until recently, soccer in Britain and across much of Europe was also very closely tied to class. As the working man’s sport, soccer served as a regular focus around which individual and family loyalties could be developed and passed on from one generation to the next, father to son, standing side by side in the terraces. But recent years have seen players rewarded with ever greater sums of money, their teams become the gaudy baubles of billionaires, and the impact of “celebrity status” have a larger and larger impact on the modern game. David Beckham’s brief “summer holiday” in the Los Angeles suburb of Carson was perhaps as good an indication as any of the celebrity lifestyle that features so prominently in soccer today.

Regardless of the recent flood of money into soccer and the distorting impact that this has had, the sport’s prominence in twenty-first-century daily life is still undeniable. As the founders and codifiers of the game, the British have much to be proud about when reflecting on their legacy here. However great is the reach of the English language, the reach of soccer is greater—even if the United States remains largely excluded from this conversation.

The debacle surrounding FIFA’s selection of the host countries for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup paints a very disappointing portrait of both international decision-making and European leadership styles. The “secret report” prepared by former US prosecutor Michael Garcia was finally released in July 2017. Investigating the decision-making process for those two tournaments paints
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a shameful portrait of expectation, entitlement, and disregard of ethical standards.

Allegations of rampant corruption and vote-selling had very quickly surfaced in the days immediately following the controversial decision to award Russia the right to hold the games in 2018, to be followed four years later by the tiny Middle Eastern country of Qatar. In effect, the two bidders with the weakest technical infrastructure won out over the stronger contenders. The clearly articulated standards for evaluating the bids were simply ignored. The three countries that were judged by FIFA to have the strongest technical qualifications—England, the United States, and Australia—received the fewest numbers of votes.

In the vast mountain of WikiLeaks material that was eventually released, Russia was described as a mafia state and Russian fans as notoriously racist. Qatar is a tiny country with a summer temperature exceeding 120 degrees Fahrenheit, where Amnesty International continues to identify serious human rights issues. Rumors quickly began circulating that China was FIFA’s preferred bidder for 2026. If true, this would mean that we must look out twenty years for the mere possibility of a potentially fair and transparent World Cup selection process.

The presence of a culture of bribery at FIFA put the credibility of the world’s most popular sport at risk. Widespread outrage erupted at the shadowy, politburo-style operation of the twenty-two-member FIFA executive committee. Appeals for root-and-branch reform of the FIFA oligarchy were being loudly made. Unfortunately, there was little clear indication that the current regime would be replaced with a more transparent and accountable one. The line between inducements and bribes cannot always be clear. When intense lobbying meets opaque decision-making, the risk of crossing that line increases exponentially.

Although the direct quantifiable economic benefits of hosting a World Cup or an Olympics are fleeting (if not illusory), the prestige and prominence that comes with being in the global media spotlight is the ultimate prize. Of course, these exercises in
national self-promotion are motivated in large part by vanity. The powerful desire of a country to demonstrate its place at the top table of modern life is both completely understandable and totally irrational. Unsurprisingly, individuals in positions of influence often seek to profit from insecurities such as these.

Fortunately, FIFA may provide us with some useful insights of another type of world order and its practical consequences. Decision-making in a truly multipolar world, where no single country is able to play a disproportionate role, may not be as inclined to moralism or legality as many of its champions would have us believe. Perhaps in such circumstances, where no effective referee can be seen to consistently oversee and enforce agreed codes of behavior, we will see instead an environment clouded by corruption and collusion, where secret side deals and pay-offs between nations (and individuals) who enjoy intense, yet brief, periods of importance become the norm.

Such a world may, in fact, not be an improvement on the world we live in now.

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There is a frustrating tendency among many American commentators to see the issue of race in the United States as a template for all racial debates and discussions around the world, as if we possess some moral monopoly on the subject. Many others are almost entirely ignorant of the role that racism plays in other countries, whether in ways similar to or different from the American experience. It is difficult at times to know which perspective is worse.

In the spring of 2011, France found itself in the midst of a sporting scandal that called into question the country’s most cherished notions of “equality” and “fraternity.” A transcript had surfaced of a meeting between top French soccer officials. These coaches and administrators openly discussed imposing quotas at leading
national sports academies for young players with dual nationali-
ties. Although a number of French citizens also have passports
from countries such as Spain, Hungary, Germany, and Italy, the
officials’ concerns centered very specifically on young boys whose
parents or grandparents came from North Africa and sub-Saharan
Africa. France has a rich colonial history in these regions, and in
recent years a steady stream of immigrants had moved from these
countries back to France.

The French sports minister, Chantal Jouanno, quickly and
controversially cleared the national team coach, Laurent Blanc, of
any legal charges under the antidiscrimination laws. Even though
racial quotas were clearly and unambiguously discussed, they were
not actually implemented. Regardless of this legal contortion, she
soundly criticized the remarks made during the meeting, judging
them “racist.”

France famously won the 1998 World Cup with a multiracial
team, which actually included Blanc himself. Apparently, such
personal experiences were not sufficient for him, in his current
role of soccer supremo, to dismiss out of hand suggestions of racial
quotas. Under FIFA rules, once a player has represented his coun-
try at the highest level, he is prohibited in the future from playing
for any other country. By contrast, a player who represents a coun-
try (e.g., France) at “age group” levels (e.g., under eighteen) could
go on to represent another country (e.g., Senegal) and play for their
national team at the World Cup.

Perhaps Blanc was simply naive and not actually racist. His
focus could have been that French money should only be used to
benefit players who would eventually play for the French national
team. Unfortunately, for a country such as France that still seethes
with violence in many ghettos where generations of recent immi-
grants remain isolated and unassimilated, such allegations can
prove incendiary.

In an attempt to address these issues, the French sports min-
ister announced that a committee would be established to fight
discrimination in French sport. This committee followed on
from a similar panel established the previous year that targeted homophobia. However, wider criticisms were made in the French press that their national team and its management were adrift and out of touch with the realities of the twenty-first century, especially after the high-profile embarrassment of a first-round elimination at the previous World Cup.

Soccer, as the world’s game, can be a useful prism for breaking down the issues and challenges that a country faces and making these comparable between countries. In France, the controversy focused on race, but across the English Channel, British soccer bore witness at the same time to a reprise of religious-based violence in Glasgow.

In Scotland, the beautiful game has for the past century sat tenuously atop long-standing Catholic-Protestant resentment and aggression. Recently, this has been expressed only in terms of songs and chants. A longer tradition of actual violence had been fading from public view. However, the line was again crossed in spring 2011 when parcel bombs were sent to the manager of the Celtic Football Club, the historically Catholic team in Glasgow, and other high-profile fans.

Clearly, the stereotypical Islamic extremist bomber has no monopoly on bomb-related violence!

The summer of 2011 saw the world’s game submerging deeper into crisis. FIFA was wrestling with a corruption scandal that threatened its continued stability and success. Sepp Blatter ran unopposed for reelection to yet another four-year term. His only competitor, Mohammed bin Hammam, withdrew after he was drawn into ongoing investigations of bribery allegations. Bin Hammam was suspended after accusations were made that he paid $1 million in bribes to help secure the 2022 World Cup for Qatar.