

Brexit, Culture and Identity

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No culture is an island entire in itself. This play upon John Donne's famous line fits perfectly with the feelings expressed by the vote of a majority. In a nutshell, to sever British ties with continental Europe would mean to regain a national / imperial identity somehow synonymous of a wealthier and more prestigious standing among other powers. Moreover, it would meet the natural geophysics of insularity.

The urge to lighten the burden some considered the European regulations imposed on them in many fields of their national identity — judicial sphere, economy, and people's mobility and right to citizenship, for instance — may be the root of the well-known portmanteau word:¹ Brexit. What stands out is the notion of departure — exit — while the supposed national identity prefix is reduced to the onomatopoeia's sound of a shiver — brrr.

Hobsbawm (1990) considered that the idea of nationality only came into being in the nineteenth century, thus coinciding with the rise of the empire and associated to political assertions of citizens "whose collective sovereignty constituted them a state" (p. 19). In consequence, the shiver encapsulated in the British / Britain prefix would have been triggered before the separation from Europe with the crumbling of the empire. However, the national-imperial

1. Portmanteau word, also called blend, a word that results from blending two or more words, or parts of words, such that the portmanteau word expresses some combination of the meaning of its parts. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/portmanteau-word>.

feeling seems to have lingered up to June 23, 2016, when it burst out with the referendum's result, and is still present in public opinion, at least partially.

The past, however, shows evidence that there has been an oscillation between moments of integration in the European space and moments of rupture. Apart from the Roman occupation which lasted almost four centuries (from AD 43 to AD 410), during the Middle Ages, William of Normandy's conquest forged an unbalanced union between France and England which came to an end in the aftermath of the Hundred Years war (1337 to 1453). This war's goal was not to cut English ties with France. It was a typical dispute of sovereignty and vassalage bonds between the leaders of these two kingdoms, both aiming at a clear claim on the other's territories and service. In the last phase of the war, the loss of most of the lands in France by the English army resulted in a forced "English exit". In the aftermath of the conflict, France got the upper hand insofar as the continental lands were recovered, with the exception of Calais, and the French crown gained prestige, whereas England's defeat brought to the crown neither fame nor fortune. Nevertheless, a relevant consequence of that exit shared by both kingdoms was the burgeoning of a national consciousness which meant that any project of union — even a merely personal union of the crowns as envisaged by Henry V — was doomed to failure. In Le Goff's words, "even if the Hundred Years' War was not at the origin of true national feeling, it did bring about a change of capital importance that was to fuel its development among the English" (2005, p. 175).

Insularity also played a role in the schism with Rome, a more political than religious decision, brought off by Henry VIII. The English exit from Roman-centred Christendom was followed by the foundation of a national protestant church with a name closely linked with the kingdom's identity: the Anglican church, thus designated in Elizabeth I's rule.

Again, the insularity factor played a significant role in the building of English national consciousness, both in the development of their maritime enterprises and later in their transatlantic empire. Moreover, the golden years of the British empire — the Victorian era — contributed to strengthening this notion of belonging to Great Britain, with the emphasis on "great", feeding the need of belonging and identity. This emphasis on greatness sometimes raised feelings of uncertainty or anxiety derived from the duty of setting an example, to beacon to other countries, especially other empires. Shannon Gilstrap in "Charting Cul-

ture: Cartography and National Identity in Matthew Arnold's 'Ordnance Maps'" (2013), compares the demand of having accurate maps Matthew Arnold claimed in his essay with the urge to control: "Maps and culture share an involved and reciprocal history. The desire to map is, at its root, the desire to control" (p. 89). Reality changed with the world wars and the new political order, and decolonisation mapped the world wiping that British self-image as a global power. As Eric Hobsbawm wrote in the last decade of the twentieth century:

The anguish and disorientation which finds expression in this hunger to belong, and hence in the "politics of identity" — not necessarily national identity — is no more a moving force of history than the hunger for "law and order" which is an equally understandable response to another aspect of social organization. Both are symptoms of sickness rather than diagnoses, let alone therapy. Nevertheless, they create the illusion of nations and nationalism as an irresistibly rising force ready for the third millennium. (1990, p. 177)

There have also been moments when the pendulum tended towards integration. Military interventions in Europe's political chess with European allies, as well as European enemies, evidence this notion of belonging and, so, of having a say on then-current issues, as for instance the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), when England took part to avoid the political union of Spain and France, or The Seven Years' War (1756-1763), staged both in Europe and in the New World colonies.

In more recent years, aircraft development and the widespread of communicational technologies effaced the insularity factor facilitating convergences in businesses, in tourism and in many other activities. These elements were not a British choice but part and parcel of the globalisation process as Giddens, Hobsbawm, Harari and so many others have pointed out. The decision to join the then European Economic Community in January 1973 was a national desideratum sanctioned by parliament — in spite of the opposition from the Labour party — and reinforced by the majority vote in the 1975 referendum.

Another conscious gesture towards integration materialised in the building of the Channel Tunnel, also known as Eurotunnel, a project launched in 1988

and whose opening in 1994 connecting Folkstone, in Kent, to Coquelles (Hauts-de-France, France) has facilitated commerce and travelling in general between England and the European mainland. It also went against the insular attitude cultivated for so long.

The more globalized our way of living became, the more poignantly this yearning to belong and to make sense of our bearings prevailed. Transnational instead of nation-rooted economies are feeding non-western countries' influence developments in the West, a phenomenon known as "reverse colonisation" (Giddens, 1999, p. 16); peoples' mobility — in business, work or pleasure, or in refugees' diasporas — fast and effective communications webs, all these gave rise to the foundation or development of wider unities, such as the European Union and the weakening of the nation-state concept. In tandem, regionalisms and individualism also grew as a reaction to that uprooting feeling.

Curiously, Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), considers that the idea of nation as a unity beyond and superior to individuals' wills is a distant notion to his contemporaries:

We have not the notion, so familiar on the Continent and to antiquity, of the State, — the nation in its collective and corporate character, entrusted with stringent powers for the general advantage, and controlling individual wills in the name of an interest wider than that of individuals. (1993, p. 83)

Notwithstanding this distancing from a centralised and, in Arnold's view, superior national entity, when confronted with an even wider and more distant entity of political and economic power, a foreign power with its headquarters across the channel, in continental Europe, British citizens, or at least a significant number of them, seem ready to embrace a national perspective as a group identity.

The media, in its variety of means and approaches, somehow reflects Arnold's stratification of society. Ranging from deep and well-research analysis of the features and consequences of the rupture with the EU to emotional responses in social networks, intertwined with the celebrated British sense of humour, it is possible to distinguish a line of reaction akin to the so-called popular culture and another closer to high culture or intellectual culture. The former appar-

ently impart more emotional responses, whereas the latter provide analytical approaches supported by context and theoretical framework.

In Matthew Arnold's words, the former would be reacting according to their propensity to bathos, whereas the latter would seek a higher order of collective welfare:

If our habits make it hard for us to come at the idea of a high best self, of a paramount authority, in literature or religion, how much more do they make this hard in the sphere of politics! In other countries the governors, not depending so immediately on the favour of the governed, have everything to urge them, if they know anything of right reason (and it is at least supposed that governors should know more of this than the mass of the governed), to set it authoritatively before the community. But our whole scheme of government being representative, every one of our governors has all possible temptation, instead of setting up before the governed who elect him, and on whose favour he depends, a high standard of right reason, to accommodate himself as much as possible to their natural taste for the bathos; and even if he tries to go counter to it, to proceed in this with so much flattering and coaxing, that they shall not suspect their ignorance and prejudices to be anything very unlike right reason, or their natural taste for the bathos to differ much from a relish for the sublime. (1993, p. 114)

Arnold's stratified view of society goes against the democratic principle of every citizen's participation in the public sphere, that is, all the voices must be listened to, and all the opinions taken into account. Today's media paves the way for this full communication amongst individuals, communities, countries... but it also allows the tampering with information: *inter alia* false data, hate messages, trivia to divert the receiver from important issues.

Consequently, when such an important issue as Brexit is on the lips of so many, within a national and international scope of relationships, for so long a period, it stands to reason that the message — whatever its origin, objective,

or targets — holds sway in the lives of a huge number of British and European citizens.

It took several cabinet and parliament compositions to debate on the issue of Remaining or Leaving the European Union. The tug of war between the two factions reflected various ruptures in English / British Culture as far as generation gaps, regionalisms, urban versus rural ways of living, immigrants versus natives, etc. are concerned. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, Tom Peck asked himself: “Where is the common ground on which our people will unite?”. He recognised “[t]here is a divide in the nation”, and that “the urbanites that have rushed to dismiss their fellow countrymen as xenophobes and racists, and all the rest, will no doubt now be the ones who will speak in pious tones about the wounds that must be healed” (Peck, 2016, para. 6), which begs the question: can those wounds be healed?

Even before the referendum, the notion of a so-called national identity seemed an elusive concept at best. In the lead-up to the Referendum, the diverse newspapers’ approaches to the vote seemed to reflect the polarisation of the voters themselves some of the actions and reactions to Brexit as they appeared from day 1 in several media channels were fairly diverse. Although Britain’s broadcasters are not allowed to report while polls are open, nonetheless some British newspapers took the opportunity to make their final case for remain or leave, or simply to urge their readers to vote, as shown in the front page of their editions on April 23, 2016, the day of the referendum (Brady, 2016), with very different editorial lines.

As to newspapers which opted for neutral headlines, *The Times* titled their article “Final Polls leave Britain’s future on a knife edge” and illustrated the uncertainty of the results with a graph showing a 51-49 per cent advantage to the Remain Vote. The *Independent* also adopted a more neutral stance in its title “The Day of Reckoning”. Their article included 40 key facts to inform the reader on the matter. The emphasis is put entirely on the voter, regardless of their vote: “All that remains is for you to decide — as you see fit.” The *Scottish Sun*, with a more “colourful” approach, so to speak, also puts the decision in the hands of the voter, whether “Innie” or “Outie” and urging them to “go with [their] gut”.

Regarding newspapers who favoured the Remain Vote, the *Daily Mirror* urged its readers not to “to take a leap into the dark”, to “Vote REMAIN today”, “for [their] family... for [their] children... for [their] pension... for [their] pay pack-

et... for jobs and the NHS...”. The *Daily Record* includes the following plea in all caps: “TODAY WE URGE YOU TO VOTE REMAIN”, warning, also in all caps: “YOU BREXIT... YOU PAYS FOR IT”. Finally, a bit more discreetly, *The Guardian* asks the nation “Who do we want to be?”, highlighting the ‘I’ and ‘N’ in their logo to spell IN on a day of a “last-ditch push to stay in Europe”.

Among the newspapers pushing for votes on Leave, *The Sun* uses the title of the film “Independence Day”. On the top right, a play with words, “BeLeave” in Britain, “free from clutches of EU today”. The Referendum is touted as a chance to “make history — by winning Britain’s independence from the crushing might of the Brussels machine”. The *Daily Express* reminds its readers their country needs them and urges them to “VOTE LEAVE TODAY”, all in caps. The text reads “The Moment of Destiny has finally arrived [...] At stake today is nothing short of the survival of Britain”, adding that “The outcome of the Referendum will be either the trumpet blast of freedom or the death knell of our nation”.

On the following day, April 24, 2016, the front pages of the newspapers we have just examined also offered different approaches. *The Times*’ “Britain Brexit Revolt” hints at the national identity divide. It also mentions Nigel Farage’s prophetic warning: “the genie is out of the bottle”. *The Independent* chooses precisely UKIP’S then leader to feature on its cover, mentioning his “crass victory speech” which many found distasteful. There is also a note regarding the plummeting Pound and the unravelling of financial markets. *The Scottish Sun*, unsurprisingly, highlights the national “[d]ivide as Scots back[ed] EU by 60-40”. They chose to feature Boris Johnson, the former Conservative mayor of London who had been touted as favourite to take over as Conservative leader after David Cameron said he would step down from the role by October 2016, following the defeat of Remain, for which he had strongly campaigned. Also noteworthy is the hint that the referendum results did not simply mean an “exit”, but an effective political and economic “split”, due to irreconcilable differences. Or was it divisions?

The Daily Mirror highlights the “Referendum Shock as Leave head for Victory”, and simply states “We’re Out”, also mentioning the “Freefall of the Pound”. The *Daily Record*, foreseeing troubles ahead, warns “Be afraid, be very afraid... we’re on our way OUT”. The larger photo is of Boris Johnson, the man “tipped to replace David Cameron as prime Minister”. It should be noted the reference “of a constitutional crisis [in Scotland] after voting to remain in the European

Union [—] as the rest of the UK backed Brexit". It is also worth mentioning that Northern Ireland, as a whole, also voted to remain in the EU (55.8-44.3). *The Guardian* focuses on David Cameron's "fight for survival as Britain sets course for Brexit", and similarly reports that the "Pound plunge[d] by 9%". The photo, by Rob Sothard, bluntly shows the dismay of Remain supporters.

The Sun gleefully bids the EU goodbye: "See EU later", and shows delighted Leave supporters while the *Daily Express* boasts of how the "world's most successful newspaper crusade end[ed] in glorious victory for [the] *Daily Express*", dubbing it "an historic Brexit victory spearheaded by the *Daily Express*". It also reports Boris Johnson is to become next Prime Minister after David Cameron

The question Tom Peck asked ("Where is the common ground on which our people will unite?") is neither new nor simple, as illustrated by the referendum results (BBC, 2016). The referendum results show national divisions, but it would be too simplistic to reduce it to divisions between popular and high culture, between urbanites and xenophobic and racist countrymen. The results show that Scotland and Northern Ireland favoured remaining in the EU (62% in Scotland and 55.8% in Northern Ireland), whereas in England and Wales the percentage of the Remain was 46.6 and 47.5 in England and Wales, respectively. Of particular mention is the fact the urban population, particularly in London, voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. Be it as it may, there was a clear divide as to what voters consider the "glue" that binds them together.

However, not only in news pieces was Brexit a prolific (albeit at times bitter) topic of controversy. It also provided inspiration for numerous cartoons and memes. Plunkett's (2018) compilation of "12 Brexit stamps to commemorate [UK's] glorious departure from the EU" depicts, for example, an archer ready to shoot an arrow pointed at himself, a man shooting himself in the foot, or Henri Vidal's Caïn (1896) facepalming in despair.

One of the most recurrent themes was the regret some felt when they realised how the country suddenly seemed plunged into chaos and crisis. Indeed, cartoons and memes satirising the vote and its consequences popped up everywhere. Patrick Chappatte's *Brexit Hangover* (2016) shows a "Vote Leave" mural in London (The Big Ben is on the top right) with the words "Let's take our country back". On the floor there are a couple of newspapers: one reads "OMG" on the front page and the other "Brexit: They Lied". On the right-hand side of the

cartoon, a smartly-dressed man holds a newspaper alluding to "Brexit Chaos" and asks "Can I take my vote back?"

Continuing with the theme of regret, Steve Sack's appropriately-entitled cartoon, "Brexit Regrexit" (2016), depicts a man hanging on to a EU plane mid-flight with a "Brexit Vote" backpack wondering "I say, old chap, is it too late to change my mind?..."

Still on the aviation theme, Marian Kamensky (2016) also offered her take on the matter with a EU plane as a set of her cartoon. A polite flight attendant asks a passenger carrying a British flag who is about to jump off the plane: "Pardon me sir, may I suggest you take a parachute with you?" Unsurprisingly, the reply is: "Thanks the flag will do", which hints at the total unpreparedness of the Leave voters regarding the aftermath of the elections.

As stated elsewhere, Brexit was achieved on the back of English and Welsh votes, despite Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to Remain. A popular Brexit Joke circulating on Twitter reads as follows: "An Englishman, and Irishman and a Scotsman walk into the bar. / The Englishman wants to leave so they all have to" (Charlieee, 2017).

The Scottish frustration at the Brexit vote, specifically, provided copious substance for numerous images. During the campaign of the Scotland Independence Referendum (2014), the argument out of London was that in breaking ties with the UK, Scotland was simultaneously breaking with the European Union, which constituted a most unwelcome consequence. Then came Brexit and that is exactly what happened. Countryballs, which is "[a] special genre of memes in which countries are represented by spheres with their respective flags on them" (Urban Dictionary, 2017), presented "Leaving the EU" (Polandball, 2015), recreating two conversations:

First dialogue:

"Scotland: I want out!

UK: Leaving me is leaving the EU

Scotland: Fine I'll stay then"

Second dialogue:

"UK (to the EU) I'M LEAVING YOU!

Scotland: Son of a...."

Unsurprisingly, the idea of an independence poll to exit the United Kingdom, and to return to the European Union, championed by Scotland's premier, Nicola Sturgeon, gained momentum right after it was known Brexit would become a reality. In a prophetic cartoon by Patrick Chappatte, *Elections britanniques* [British Elections] (2015), as England is preparing to cut with the EU, Scotland is preparing to cut with the UK. The image literally shows a Scotsman sawing the island it is on to part from the rest of the UK as an Englishman (next to a UK flag) saws the English Channel to sever from the European mainland (portrayed by the EU flag on French territory). As Bryson sardonically highlighted,

The fact is that the British have a totally private sense of distance. This is most visibly seen in the shared pretense that Britain is a lonely island in the middle of an empty green sea. Of course, the British are all aware, in an abstract sort of way, that there is a substantial landmass called Europe nearby and that from time to time it is necessary to go over there to give old Jerry a drubbing or have a holiday in the sun, but it's not nearby in any meaningful sense in the way that, say, Disney World is. (1998, p. 36)

The referendum results exposed longstanding fissures in a not so United Kingdom. The images we have been examining depict that fracture in the British sense of identity. Numerous cartoons portray Irish and Scottish turning their backs on the UK and heading towards Europe. Perhaps one of the best examples is Nicolas Vadot's cartoon (2018). It depicts the solemn European Union members on the shore noting "and they say they are fed up with being part of a union",² as they look across the English Channel to contemplate the chaos and explosions. All four flags (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) are flying and there is a toddler with a pacifier crying on the bank, suggesting a childish, ergo immature, temper tantrum.

Brexit confirmed the reaction foreseen by George Mikes, a Hungarian-born "naturalized Briton" who "poked fun at the British" (Gale, 1996, p. 763) who, in the mid-1980s, humorously remarked: "I hate being a prophet of doom but I must speak up. When the furlong, the chain, the rod, pole and perch, the peck,

2. In the original: "Et dire qu'ils en avaient marre de faire partie d'une union..."

the bushel and the gill are gone, Britain as an island will have disappeared and the country will have become a suburb of Brussels" (Mikes, 1986, p. 260). It was against this doomsday atmosphere that the outing was schemed, thus bringing about another cloudy forecast for British economy and society in this liquid world of ours.

Circling back to Tom Peck's question, "Where is the common ground on which our people will unite?" Is the insular option the answer to national union, or is this a stale utopia in our globalised reality?

Briefly, to be or not to be United, that is the question.

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