FEARING BREXIT
The Changing Face of Europeanization in the Borderlands of Northern Ireland

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In the United Kingdom's "Brexit" referendum in 2016 the majority of votes cast in Northern Ireland were in favor of the UK staying a member state of the European Union. This support was strong, and remains so, in the Northern Ireland borderlands, where ethnographic research shows particularly widespread identification with Europe among Irish nationalists. This article explores ways that Northern Ireland borderlanders see their relatively strong association with the Europe of the EU within the context of the Brexit process that has engulfed all of the people of the British and Irish isles since 2016. Borderlanders fear that Brexit may bring back a "hard border," which would subvert over twenty years of peace, reconciliation and cross-border economic and political development.

Keywords: borders, Brexit, Europeanization, European Union, Northern Ireland

It is 25 years since we [United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland] both joined what was then the EEC. We have had different approaches… But increasingly, we share a common agenda and common objectives… There is no resistance to full-hearted European co-operation wherever this brings added value to us all. (Tony Blair, Prime Minister, United Kingdom, 1998)

Today our partnership [UK and Ireland] in the world is expressed most especially in the European Union. Our joint membership has served as a vital catalyst for the building of a deeper relationship between our two islands. Europe forms a key part of our shared future…. a new political model that enables old enemies to become partners in pro-

gress. (Bertie Ahern, Taoiseach [Prime Minister], Republic of Ireland, 2007, as quoted in Morrow & Byrne 2017)

This article is about how people who live and work in the borderlands of Northern Ireland today fear that the departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) will damage if not destroy the added value that EU membership has brought to the UK's relationship with the Republic of Ireland (ROI), and, in so doing, transform life at the border for the worse.[1] The cooperative relationship between the two countries was especially significant in Northern Ireland because of the role that the Europeanization of that region played in the peace process that took shape in the 1990s. This process hinged on a

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political agreement in 1998 that established many new forms of political and economic cooperation between the UK and ROI, and has been both cause and effect of an increasingly important identification with Europe in Northern Ireland. This article addresses some of the changes in European identity in Northern Ireland which ethnographic research in the borderlands of South Armagh suggests have been highlighted, and in some cases strengthened, by the UK's decision to exit the EU.

The Brexit Project, Process and Threat

On 23 June 2016, by a slim majority, the people of the UK elected in a national referendum to leave the EU. This vote, which has been labelled *Brexit*, that is, the British exit from the EU of 28 member states tied together in a complex political confederation and social, economic and cultural configuration, revealed major regional differences in British responses to the "Europe" of the EU and to the forces of Europeanization it has brought. Although support for and opposition to Brexit ranged widely over many social and economic statuses, such as class and gender (Evans 2017), it was clear that three regions of the UK, namely Scotland, Northern Ireland and the capital region of London, saw their future interests as tied to those of the EU.[2]

For Northern Ireland in general, including the people of its borderlands who are among the most to be affected by it, Brexit is very much a local and life-threatening matter. In Northern Ireland the Brexit referendum led immediately to great speculation on what aspects of local life will change – a speculation that has not abated. This is because of the widespread opinion, held almost unanimously in Northern Ireland among Irish nationalists and also among many unionists I have met and interviewed, that membership in the EU has helped to transform the region from a state of war to one of relative peace and prosperity.

Although it is a product in the making, and a process without end in sight, Brexit is a political project driven by populism and neonationalism that threatens the fragile peace in Northern Ireland. It represents the possibility of a return to the open hostilities of "The Troubles," as the war in Ireland in the years 1968–1998 is known. The fears are real and immediate. Brexit is almost certain to remove the institutions and practices of transnational governance that were set up under the Belfast Good Friday Agreement of 1998 (GFA), making null and void the GFA-mandated new forms of political cooperation between the two national governments. Brexit will also change cross-border relations of all sorts, including the disruption of an all-island economy established over five decades of community-building, trade, and legal integration under the umbrella of the EU. Brexit has forced the people of the Northern Ireland borderlands to publicly reconsider how their national and European identities are related to each other.

This article is based on approximately twenty-two weeks of ethnographic research in Northern Ireland, in the summers 2016–2019, on issues related to Brexit.[3] It examines how various people in the border region known as South Armagh are responding to Brexit, in some ways that reflect longstanding nationalist politics, and in other ways demonstrate a new sense of being European.[4] The nationalism at the heart of many political responses to Brexit is perhaps best represented by the two largest and opposing political parties in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin (SF) is the principal party of Irish nationalism and republicanism, and by far the most significant and powerful party in South Armagh. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is the main party of unionists and loyalists in Northern Ireland overall, but its influence is largely confined in South Armagh to a few towns, villages and isolated farms.[5] But while these parties have largely championed many of the key points of debate over Brexit in Northern Ireland, there are other voices to be heard in places like the borderlands – voices that my research has discovered often do not converge with the positions of the main political parties. This has been particularly clear to me in regard to issues of European identity.

Brexit offers threats but also opportunities to various groups in the Northern Ireland border region. For some republicans, although perhaps not for the majority of Irish nationalists that I have met in the

borderlands, the Brexit situation provides some possibilities for the welcome return of an armed struggle, if a "hard" border is re-imposed between the UK and the ROI. Not only does Brexit imperil a fragile peace built over two decades (*Irish Times* 2017), but the Northern Ireland border represents for many, in the melodramatic byline of the *Irish Times* (2019), the EU's newest frontier, Britain's oldest problem, and Brexit's biggest obstacle. This attention to the border has been generated in Brexit because Northern Ireland in general, and its border in particular, have been major negotiating points in the "deal" to be struck over the UK's departure from the EU, which formally occurred on 31 January 2020.[6]

Brexit thus matters a great deal in the borderlands. My recent research has led me to conclude, through my interviews with local people, my observations, and my review of print and virtual periodicals and social media, that the majority of nationalists in the border region see Brexit as a fundamental threat to their welfare. Brexit undermines the gains made in the "Peace Process," as the efforts at cross-community peace and reconciliation have been known since 1998, when the GFA created conditions that put most of the violence associated with The Troubles on hold. Brexit threatens the economic relations that have thrived since the 1990s, that in less than a generation have changed the fundamentals of everyday life. Beyond its perceived assault on the peace and economic dividends achieved while in the EU, however, Brexit is also seen by some nationalists I interviewed in the borderlands as a political agenda, created by English elites and fostered in Northern Ireland by DUP leadership, that will in all likelihood end Northern Ireland's beneficial relationship with the EU and other member states.

This Northern Ireland association with the material benefits of being a peripheral region in the EU is in keeping with much that anthropologists have discovered in their studies of Europeanization, in and outside of the EU. As Borneman and Fowler (1997) have argued, Europeanization is a process and a spirit which, while analytically distinct from EU integration, often emanates from EU institutions and policies. In their view Europeanization is a strategy of self-representation and power, which has fundamentally reordered territoriality and identity across the continent. Their emphasis on the Europeanization of everyday life has focused ethnographers on language, money, tourism, sex and sport as reflective of this process and spirit.[7] In addition, anthropological interest in Europeanization across Europe has shown many ways in which the EU has transformed local political relations and institutions, particularly in regard to migration (see, e.g., Feldman 2011) and security (see, e.g., Goldstein 2016; Jansen 2009).

Regional and national political culture have also been transformed across the continent due to EU integration, as may be clearly seen today in the borderlands of Northern Ireland. This is especially apparent in regard to questions of European identity. The people I have encountered in my recent research in the Northern Ireland borderlands see Europeanization as an ongoing process that has become a fundamental aspect of local life. This is contrary to the situation that existed from 1973, when the UK joined the then Common Market, to the 1990s. Over that period, as widely expressed to me as part of my earlier research in the region, European integration had come to be seen as a process to which local people had to *adapt*, but not *adopt* as significant in their lives (Wilson 2000a, 2000b). However, since the 1990s, as shared with me particularly but not exclusively by nationalists, European citizenship and identity have nested easily with, and have enhanced, regional and national economy, society, politics and identity.

This acknowledgment of the significance of Europe to border life represents a sea-change in culture and identity from the time I first conducted ethnographic research on matters related to European integration in the early 1990s.[8] Much of the response to Brexit that I have encountered in the borderlands is understandably emotional, where local residents and workers have demonstrated and shared with me various notions of fear, uncertainty and anxiety. In the sections that follow I consider the effects of Europeanization on the borderlands, including how it has changed some fundamental dimensions of social, political and cultural identity in local society. Brexit has highlighted more clearly than ever before

the transformations in national and European identity in the Northern Ireland border region that have developed at least partially but certainly significantly within the slowly moving but effective forces of Europeanization that have been part and parcel of the region's participation in the EU.

Since its accession to the European Communities in 1973, and particularly since the 1990s, Northern Ireland has been part of an EU-induced re-examination and redefinition of all sorts of political identities, "as individuals, cities, regions and states come to terms with the dynamics of the 'new Europe'" (Laffan 1996: 83). This new Europe reinvents itself often if not continuously, as various "new Europes". It has slowly but inexorably shifted from an economic and social problem-solving support for member states, and a potential solution to the economic dimensions of nationalist war in Europe, to a wide-ranging entity that challenges its citizens and residents to consider its role in political identification, legitimacy and order. To foster identification with the EU and a more general everyday acceptance of its legitimacy in its member states, one goal of European integration has been to create conditions for the establishment and growth of what might be seen as "banal Europeanism". As an implicitly accepted framework for quotidian life, banal Europeanism does not replace national identity but complements it, as one way to perhaps break the habits of older forms of nationalism (Cram 2009: 102). Thus, the conclusion to this article considers some ways in which European and national identity may have a better chance of everyday symbiosis in peripheral regions of Europe. In relatively peripheral regions like Northern Ireland, as my investigations in the borderlands indicate so far, this "banal symbiosis" between national and European identities might have a better chance of taking root among marginalized minorities than among disgruntled majority populations.

Europeanization, Northern Ireland and the Border

An unplanned effect of Brexit is its manifestation of how European integration has reconfigured the place of Britain in the world (Green 2017). It has also shown how Europeanization has reconfigured relations between Northern Ireland, the ROI, and the UK. Brexit has taken what had become over the last twenty years an "invisible border" (De La Baume & Marks 2017), and made it one of the most visible and attractive borders in the world, as may be judged by the scores of journalists, academics, politicians, Europhiles and border-spotters, who in the vein of British train-spotters have flocked to the region since 2016.

The Northern Ireland border, which dates to the partition of Ireland in 1921, is 499 km (310 mi) long. It separates the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland from the 6 counties of Northern Ireland. County Armagh, which is south-west of Belfast (Northern Ireland's capital), is divided between its Protestant population, who inhabit much of the county's north, and its Catholic population, who are the majority in the south of the county. Since partition almost a century ago South Armagh has been one of the most marginal social and economic areas of Northern Ireland, due in part to its geographic proximity and close social and cultural ties to the ROI, and its long-standing resistance to the British state.[9] Brexit offers a particular threat to South Armagh because it promises to marginalize that area even further.

My ethnographic research in the Northern Ireland borderlands today suggests there is great and continuing support for the EU, due in large part to the perception that Europeanization has been a motoring force in the peace process that has existed since the 1990s. Appreciation of the EU's advocacy for the peace is not surprising, given that the Northern Ireland border has been both symbol and location of the longest ethnonational territorial border dispute in twentieth-century Western Europe (Anderson & O'Dowd 1999). The importance to the EU of the border and the Northern Ireland peace process was not widely known outside of Europe, however, before the debates associated with Brexit received worldwide attention. This media coverage has demonstrated the EU's decisive and conscious role in creating conditions for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, during and after the open conflict. Since the GFA in 1998, the transnationalism fostered

by European integration has made the Irish border region into a cultural space where both nationalists and unionists have begun to understand their divergent and shared experiences, "through cross-border, cross-community contact and communication in small group encounters" (McCall 2001: 201).

This new cultural space was framed by the GFA's guarantees that the future governance of Northern Ireland would have a transnational dimension (Phinnemore et al. 2012: 569). Over the last twenty years formal and informal modes of governmental cooperation have been established between the devolved government of Northern Ireland and the government of the ROI. Formal areas of joint governance in North-South Implementation Bodies now deal with special EU funding, support for minority languages, aquaculture, trade, business development and food safety (McCall 2014). Other cross-border bodies, consultative committees, and institutional arrangements cooperate on agriculture, health, transport, education, environment and tourism.

Besides the changes in the governmental landscape of Northern Ireland, which have helped to achieve some parity between the two communities, South Armagh has benefited enormously since the 1990s from EU indirect and direct economic subvention. This capital has supported tourism, agricultural efficiency and marketing, local community cultural programs, and local, regional and transnational networking (Wilson 2000a, 2007). Northern Ireland farmers have been principal beneficiaries of EU policies. Brexit will take farmers out of the guaranteed prices, markets and subsidies of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, which has planned to inject €2,299 million euro (approximately $3 billion in 2020 values) into Northern Ireland's economy from 2014–2020 (Eurolink 2018), to be added to €228 million in development funds (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2019).

Other aspects of social and economic life will also be affected by Brexit. Food quality and safety standards will change. The illicit economy of borderland life may very well be revitalized and transformed, presenting a veritable bonanza to paramilitaries (Anderson 2018), depending on the hardness of the new border, the expected widening gulf in commercial legislation between the UK and ROI, and currency fluctuations (e.g., the UK pound has lost almost 10 percent of its value against the euro, the currency of the ROI, since the Brexit vote).

Commerce is certain to be changed by a new border (Centre for Cross Border Studies 2018b). In 2016, 35 percent of Northern Irish exports went to the ROI (Full Fact 2018). This amounted to £4 billion worth of goods and services, with almost £1.3 billion of goods being imported from the ROI. Northern Ireland is so dependent on trade with the EU, including the ROI, that it has been estimated that the region will likely see a 3 percent reduction in its GDP after the UK leaves the EU (Tonge 2016: 341). The border region also depends on an all-island EU-standardized economy in terms of labor markets and working conditions. Every day tens of thousands of commuters cross the Irish border, many of whom work legally, but many who "do the double" by working in construction and agricultural jobs off the tax records, while being gainfully employed elsewhere or collecting state unemployment benefits.[10]

The EU economic infusion in Northern Ireland has been staggering. In this current round of direct EU support, it is projected that the EU will invest €3,533 million, or approximately $4 billion (Eurolink 2018; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2019), in an area, with a population of about 1.8 million, that is smaller than the state of Connecticut. This funding is in the form of agricultural policy, regional development policy, the European Social Fund, fisheries policy and the cross-border regional policy known as INTERREG. But foremost among the policies that the EU has used to better the quality of life, and one especially designed by the EU for it, has been the Northern Ireland Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. From 1995 to 2013 this program injected €1,524 million into the border counties of Northern Ireland and the ROI (McCall 2014: 207), and in 2014–2020 the EU Peace money should total €229 million.

The Peace Programme in particular has been recognized as a successful attempt by the EU to build

peace from below, by promoting cross-border and cross-community dialogue, "with a view to the acceptance of difference and the recognition of commonality" between and among all participants (Phinnemore et al. 2012: 570). And while the GFA-related peace process has not resulted in widespread economic development based on foreign direct investment and a revamped social welfare agenda that would spread economic benefits equally across community and class lines (O'Hearn 2008; Coulter 2014), it has achieved many of the desired political effects. This is why the EU is holding out for special status for Northern Ireland, to try to maintain the gains in conflict amelioration it has helped to achieve. Northern Ireland represents the EU's singular achievement in a peace project "wherein ethno-national, ideological, political and cultural incompatibilities between conflictual parties are addressed" (McCall 2014: 198). As such, keeping the border open as part of the peace process is as close to a policy imperative that the EU can have in dealing with the internal affairs of a member state.

European and National Identities

Keeping the border open and maintaining the new spirit of peace are also imperatives for most of the people of Northern Ireland, who have seen the border transformed over the last decades. The Northern Ireland borderlands have long been studied by anthropologists as an interstitial, indeterminate and liminal space (Donnan & Wilson 2010: 76–78) because of their role in both marking and masking political divisions related to citizenship, sovereignty and belonging (Donnan 2010; Donnan & Simpson 2007; Kelleher 2000; Wilson 1993, 1994). For many nationalists, the border was always a symbol of British imperialism, and of a divided nation that armed struggle and electoral politics would see one day united.

Today, for most of the people I interviewed in my current research, the border has morphed into a symbol of a new Northern Ireland in a new UK in a new Europe. Thirty years ago, when I first researched the border it was a patchwork quilt of blocked, army-patrolled roads, signs warning about sniper activity,

and a kaleidoscope of green/white/orange and red/white/blue bunting and flags, posters, and curbstones that marked sectarian and nationalist territory, with the colors of the flags of the Republic of Ireland and the UK, respectively, molding a social landscape of threat, skepticism and uncertainty. While some of the symbols remain, Northern Ireland today looks and feels like it is part of a different country, another world, one that even attracts waves of tourists seeking its natural beauty, shopping, and *Game of Thrones* tours. It feels like a different country because it is a different country, as experienced and expressed by the people of South Armagh.

This new reordering of territory and identity has many causes, one of which to the people of South Armagh has been the EU. They recognize that the EU has helped motor the peace process through its impact on government, transnational governance, and the economy of the region, but they also acknowledge that it has helped to reconstruct the identities of the opposing actors and defuse ethnonational conflict (Hayward 2004, 2017; Hayward & Murphy 2018). This weaving of the structural and the processual has become a key feature of everyday life in the borderlands of Northern Ireland. This was not always the case. "During 'The Troubles' European integration was for many people in Northern Ireland a policy issue of only marginal concern" (Phinnemore et al. 2012: 567). Nonetheless, before the 1990s many if not most people were reasonably positive about EU membership because it had improved their lives by enhancing human rights, including rights of women and minority groups, providing access to the single market of the EU, improving working conditions, advancing environmental safeguards, and bolstering the UK's overall role in world trade negotiations (Murphy 2018: 13; see also Farrell 2018).

This generally positive attitude, in which Europeanization was important but secondary to the issues of nationalism and unionism that were at the heart of the conflict, was clear too in my research in the 1990s. At that time, I found that European identity was both passive and shallow, overshadowed by local peoples' national identities, in what was largely perceived as a zero-sum game of identity. The EU

was seen as an arena of funding, an alternative or complement to state funding, that led to the creation of a new class of consultants and advisors to help farmers, small businesses and even academics to get money "from Europe" (Wilson 2000a).[11]

My research in South Armagh has uncovered changes in this passivity and instrumentality, changes that may themselves be cosmetic, or perhaps just more instrumental.[12] On balance, though, my respondents have convinced me of their sincerity, and that the changes are deep and fundamental. Brexit perhaps has been a watershed in local borderlanders' identification with Europe, or perhaps it has just provoked more awareness of what had become a cumulative and gradual process of political and cultural change. Some of this process undoubtedly is to be associated with the EU's role in the peace process. European integration has helped to mitigate some militant aspects of republicanism and loyalism across Northern Ireland, and to make the Catholic minority more comfortable in a Northern Ireland still in the UK (Geoghegan 2017a). But affiliations, identifications, identities and political support are dynamic if not volatile, and Brexit has made them more so.

European identity in the borderlands is no longer about just or mainly getting a grant, but is about being and belonging in an economic, political and social system in which national and European identities are not mutually exclusive, but more symbiotic than just two decades ago. While the main thrust of this article's argument is that the nationalists of South Armagh testify to their acceptance and practice of European identity, as citizens, residents and adherents of the EU and European integration, this has not removed their association with Irish nationalism. But Europeanization has made the stuff of everyday life more European, in ways that make it simultaneously more Irish (McCall & Wilson 2010). Europeanization has also provided a platform for the changes in nationalism and unionism in Northern Ireland to be played out as part of ongoing transformations in relations with Westminster, Dublin and Brussels.

This is not to say that barriers between the communities in Northern Ireland have disappeared or become meaningless since the GFA. It is clear that some violence and other forms of overt conflict have continued, in such things as rioting over parades, intimidation in neighborhoods, and disputes over schools. Sometimes the conflict is more symbolic and implied, in what has been termed a "negative peace" (Murphy 2018: 3), that is played out in electoral contests, including referenda. In the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly elections the "Brexit factor" was one cause for the large gains SF made (Geoghegan 2017a). In the snap general British election in 2017 Brexit also played a role, and it was widely concluded that SF's gains in that election were due in part to a vote *for* Europe and *against* Brexit (Geoghegan 2017a, 2017b).[13] This is evidence of what my own recent interviews and observations in South Armagh have led me to conclude. In South Armagh, the Brexit process has demonstrated that at least among nationalists in the borderlands nationalism and Europeanism seem to be symbiotic.

Hard and Soft Borders, Hard and Soft Choices

This conclusion based on my recent research reflects the fact that there is today all but unanimous support for staying in the EU among nationalists in the border region. However, I have also encountered modest support for continuing UK membership of the EU among unionists in the borderlands, although this has been expressed privately and confidentially, most often by people involved in agriculture, who have a stake in whether the border becomes "harder" or "softer" as part of Brexit. It seems that farmers of all political backgrounds are aware of the dangers to their way of life. In fact, farmers in the border region have been unanimously clear in their projections to me of a post-Brexit agriculture: Brexit will devastate the all-Ireland, one-island integrated agricultural market, where, for example, dairy farms and creameries are tied to each other daily across the border, in what has comfortably developed as an EU-inspired economy of scale. These borderland farmers were perhaps the most anxious people whom I interviewed about Brexit, and for good reason.

One prominent local community and farming leader, with a long history of involvement in European

funding programs in Northern Ireland, opined that there were two key issues related to agriculture and politics in regard to Brexit. In his words Brexit was sure to destroy "the agricultural economy of the whole island, the border economy in South Armagh, and the Northern Ireland economy".[14] He had no faith that the British government, either through a restored Northern Ireland Assembly (then dormant) or through continued direct rule by Westminster, would subsidize Northern Ireland agriculture at the level it has enjoyed for decades. This is because in his view The Troubles created the need for high levels of state subvention, and the British government in Brexit "did not budget for the return of hostilities". He predicted that the state subsidies needed for Northern Ireland, even if the violent conflict is not renewed after Brexit, as many fear, will devastate the British exchequer to a degree that would never allow it to fully support Northern Ireland agriculture at the level to which it has become accustomed in the EU.

My interviews with farmers, full-time and part-time, of both communities, and in many types of agricultural production and marketing, show that they perceive Brexit to be a threat to their businesses and overall way of life. As one small farmer in South Armagh concluded in a talk we had in 2017, "Northern Ireland agriculture cannot survive without the South [ROI], and that includes Protestant and Catholic farmers… [because] the future of farming in Northern Ireland has to be as part of a one-island economy."[15] He also concluded that a hard border, with full customs, immigration and security apparatuses established at the borderline, or a Brexit no-deal without a continuing customs union on the island of Ireland, would leave Northern Ireland farmers at the mercy of UK agricultural policy, outside of the integrated agricultural market of 27 EU member states. In the EU ROI farmers would continue to benefit from the subsidies, price guarantees and guaranteed markets of the Common Agricultural Policy. In this farmer's perspective, and those of others I interviewed, the net losers in any of these Brexit scenarios is sure to be Northern Ireland farmers.

It is clear that opposition to Brexit in South Armagh still demonstrates a high degree of instrumentality, in that local people are predicting the winners and losers in the Brexit game. But every person from the nationalist community whom I interviewed since 2016, with one exception, offered Europe as a system that provided so much more than grants, subsidies and workers' rights. The value-added for so many of my respondents was in regard to the empowerment that Europeanization had brought to their lives, as citizens, workers, women, and ethnic and religious minorities. Brexit represents a fundamental threat to the quality of their lives, a quality that goes beyond the simply or principally economic, a position reiterated by my respondents no matter how hard I pressed the question. To them Brexit promises to be transformative and perhaps catastrophic, engendering new forms of precarity and fear in the population.[16] As one community activist from South Armagh, a farmer and public representative, told me in the summer of 2017, the people in his community at the border "lived every day for years with fear," as part of their daily routine, in ways similar to situations of conflict and post-conflict elsewhere in Europe (Green 1994). But to him, over the last decades, this feeling, although not altogether gone, "has given way to a new feeling of confidence". He expressed this as confidence in the future, but confidence that Northern Ireland might actually "get it right". Although he is from a self-identified nationalist background, he demurred when I suggested that getting it right meant an eventual united Ireland. "It might come to that, eventually as you say, but even if it does not, I would be fine with living in a Northern Ireland, in the UK, in Europe."[17]

This activist was responding to the Brexit-induced worries over what sort of border would be the result of the negotiations between the EU and the UK. Irish nationalists fear a return of a Brexit "hard border" which would undo decades of peace, reconciliation and cross-border economic and political development. The British and Irish Prime Ministers have shown support for a continued open border after Brexit, as demonstrated in the deal brokered between the UK and EU which was set to be in effect until the end of December 2020. However, as late as October 2020, this deal is in doubt due to British

governmental pronouncements and other negotiating tactics. This agreement, now under threat, ensured that Northern Ireland could remain for some time in the EU customs union, to allow the all-island economy of Ireland to be sustained.

Keeping the Irish border open is proving to be a handicap for deal making, if not an actual deal-breaker, for Brexiteers in the British Parliament, including the MPs of the DUP, who publicly favor Brexit. DUP support of Brexit has many sources, including longstanding traditions of British loyalism that make it very difficult for unionists to agree with any proposition that is seen to weaken British sovereignty, a major argument of the Brexit lobby before the referendum. But while unionist support is sometimes contradictory and ambivalent, to some critics it is also self-injurious. This is because the DUP "places its own zero-sum conception of tribal identity above the interests of the people of Northern Ireland," and resists efforts to give Northern Ireland some sort of special status after Brexit that would give Northern Ireland an economic advantage over the rest of the UK (*Irish Times* 2017). To confuse the issues even more, while the DUP has insisted it wants Brexit and to leave the customs union, because as one of its leaders concluded, "You can't be half pregnant… We are either in or out of the EU," the DUP is also on the record as wanting a soft border (Connelly 2018: 324).

In Northern Ireland overall, there is still a continuing and widespread unionist mistrust of the British government because of the latter's support for the GFA, which in their eyes may lead to a betrayal of Northern Ireland unionists and a united Ireland. In the borderlands of eastern Ireland, like other parts of Northern Ireland (Geoghegan 2017b), the Tories and recent Prime Minister Theresa May were very unpopular among unionists. My own research suggests, based on a dozen interviews and media coverage, that in the border region unionists still publicly support Brexit, but privately some worry about the economic devastation it seems likely to cause to what is still a region dependent on agriculture, industry and way of life that have become integrated in an all-island economy (Allen 2017). Boris Johnson has

not been faring much better than May, because of his combined efforts to deal with Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. Neither problem for Johnson is likely to go away any time soon. As the new leader of the second most popular unionist party argued in November 2019, in regard to Johnson's announced deal with the EU that would temporarily keep Northern Ireland in the customs union of the EU and make the Irish Sea the regulatory border between Ireland and Britain: "If the Conservatives deal goes through, Northern Ireland will, well and truly, be a 'place apart' – we will be separated from our largest market, with differing legal systems, tax regimes, and held 'accountable' by special and joint EU committees … for us, the union, of our whole United Kingdom, must come before anything else" (Moriarty 2019). Unionist fears that the Tories will abandon them may not be unfounded. Almost 90 percent of Tories who voted to leave the EU concluded that "destabilizing the peace process is a price worth paying for Brexit" (Geoghegan 2018).

The betrayal of the Union is of course precisely what many unionists fear, and on what the DUP bases much of its appeal for Brexit. It was not surprising to me that the few unionist farmers I have interviewed so far in this research said that they had voted the DUP party line in all recent elections, including the Brexit referendum, but now had private reservations about Brexit's impact. Publicly, however, the DUP still supports Brexit, and has until recently shown support for the Tories. In 2017 May needed the DUP as parliamentary allies because she was unable to form a government after the UK parliamentary elections. She promised £1 billion to the DUP for use in Northern Ireland on infrastructural improvements, education and agriculture, and in return the DUP agreed to support her in all motions of confidence and all Brexit legislation. But the DUP also had to reaffirm that agriculture was a "critical policy" area for them and thus signaled that they too might be comfortable with a soft border in Northern Ireland (Geoghegan 2017c), a position from which they have had to retreat once the Johnson government called for keeping Northern Ireland in the EU customs union. In late 2020, however, Johnson's

rhetoric about the EU's intransigence, and his assertions that the UK can and, if necessary, will leave the EU without a deal after December, gives some hope to some unionists. But these recent developments notwithstanding, overall, the political machinations over the border and Brexit have weakened some unionists' political resolve in the borderlands. As one unionist farmer saw it in 2018, the DUP's "blind rush to support the Tories to get the cash" might end up "gutting agriculture in the province."[18] He feared both a British betrayal of the union and a DUP betrayal of unionist farmers, and in response to my query he could not pick which outcome he feared more.

Unionist fears of Brexit leading eventually to a united Ireland are understandable. The Europeanization of society, politics and identity in South Armagh are evident in the changing personnel and practices of Sinn Féin. Its representatives have gone on the record with me to assert how the GFA, with the aid of the EU, has facilitated the creation of conditions in Ireland that in their view will eventually achieve Irish national unification. This is because of the principle, enshrined in the GFA by the UK and ROI, that the majority vote of the people of Northern Ireland and the ROI are needed to peacefully achieve a united Ireland. Some Irish nationalist respondents in my research thought that the expression of the new Europeanism, that was clearly aroused as part of the response to Brexit, had awakened similar notions of national sharing and cross-border siblinghood among the people of the ROI. In this hopeful view, Irish notions that the Irish nationalists of Northern Ireland have yet again been "betrayed by the Brits in Brexit" (in the words of one SF supporter and businessman),[19] and "sold down the river by English elites who couldn't care less about our peace process" (as expressed by another SF supporter and worker in the tourism industry),[20] might "kickstart" interest in voting for a united Ireland in the ROI as well as in the North. In this line of argument a few republicans thought that things had moved on to such a degree from the 1990s that Britain had become weaker, as had the unionist hold on Northern Ireland, and Ireland in all of its forms had become

stronger. A united Ireland might be the endgame of a war that the IRA could now win. One unionist with whom I discussed this drew a similar conclusion. In his view: "Unionism is fragmented …we cannot trust the English, and we will not have a European safety net."[21] His prediction: a united Ireland might be the only way to save his business and to achieve a lasting peace.

One great fear hangs over the entire Brexit process. Worries about the fate of the GFA, the one-island economy, and Tory support of the Union are dwarfed by the possible return of The Troubles. As one former IRA prisoner explained to me in the summer of 2016,[22] a hard border will give many local "hard men", as men who have used violence for political and other ends are known across Northern Ireland, the excuse they will need to take up arms. These hard men, both old prisoners who feel that they could and should have won the armed struggle against the Brits, and young firebrands who have never really known the violence of The Troubles first hand, may very well see the discord caused by Brexit as a political opportunity. As the former prisoner saw it, "the Brits will set up a customs post, or a watchtower, and one of our lads will kill one of theirs, and then the army will come back, and then it will be game on!"

This prediction hinges on Irish nationalists' memories, so distant in time to some but just yesterday to others, of having their rights abused under a sectarian state. The people of the borderlands, particularly nationalists, point out that as European citizens they would have more rights, more freedoms, and more safeguards in the EU, and wonder what a peripheralized UK will do to maintain these rights. Even migrants to the region see this as an obvious reason to oppose Brexit. As one Italian migrant, now working in a shop in a small border village, concluded in a conversation with me in summer 2018, "with all this working for you how could you not feel more European?"[23]

The threats that Brexit brings to the Northern Ireland borderlands thus also involve other peripheralized groups within the two major communities. Foremost among these are women, who, while

gaining some influence and political momentum during and after the GFA negotiations, now fear that the debates over Brexit will have a similar effect to what is happening across the UK, where social policy and equality agendas have been side-lined and the interests of women marginalized yet again (Guerrina & Murphy 2016). This was a core concern among women I interviewed who were political party representatives. One community leader distanced herself from SF specifically because the party paid great lip-service to women's issues but made them secondary to the national question overall, and to Brexit debates.[24] A different SF representative decried what she called the "old politics of the party and the movement". To her, the new politics of her party, which she admitted was influenced by the changing nature of Northern Ireland life due to the EU and other "global actors," should be "more forward thinking … and more in line with ideas of empowerment, for women, minorities and working people."[25]

The EU has been the basis for new and sustained human rights legislation and guarantees, for all minorities in Northern Ireland, including migrants and refugees (e.g., some border communities have been enlarged through the influx of workers from other EU countries, such as Portugal), religious minorities (there are small Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist communities in Northern Ireland), and women. Much of the human rights protections are embedded within the GFA itself (Humphreys 2018: 68–72), and community groups in the border region have been quick to point out the impact that Brexit is sure to have on the safeguards now in place that were absent before European membership for so many of the most vulnerable in society (Centre for Cross Border Studies 2018a).

This assertion of greater justice and equality within the EU suggests that since the peace signaled by the GFA, nationalists in the border region have come to grips in many ways with the forces that silenced their past, in what they have long held to be a sectarian "Orange" state that since the partition of Ireland has tried to stifle many aspects of Irish national history and culture.[26] They, like many unionists who

also recognize, particularly recently, forces at work to silence their remembrances of the violence they suffered (Donnan 2010), have found new ways to announce, promulgate, and even share with members of other communities the trauma they have endured. But as one republican ex-prisoner put it in an interview with me in the summer of 2016, Brexit now threatens to "muffle their voices as Irishmen from Northern Ireland, and as Europeans".[27]

He is not alone in this notion. In my recent research I have encountered a steady and skeptical awareness, on the part of nationalists and unionists alike, that Brexit not only promises or portends a return to The Troubles, in itself a move to silence their respective pasts once again, but also threatens to silence their present. This perspective on the oppressive potential of Brexit is surprisingly true among the few unionists I have engaged on Brexit, who worry that the Brexit negotiations will leave Northern Ireland and its British heritage behind in a re-made UK. It is also certainly true of the nationalists in the borderlands of Ireland with whom I have discussed Brexit. They see their dual roles as Irish nationals and European citizens as both forward-looking and acknowledgements of the past, in a perspective similar to that of the Eurocrats in Brussels who have no rear mirror in the metaphorical vehicles that are motoring European integration (Abélès 2000). But if being European in a post-peace Northern Ireland has given Irish nationalists new voices, and new opportunities to be heard, it has also, through Brexit, become a European identity that may suffer its own silencing.

Conclusion

Much of this local recognition of the importance of the EU in everyday life at the Northern Ireland border continues to highlight the benefits of European subvention in Northern Ireland. In this regard the identification with Europe by Northern Ireland people is in keeping with the longstanding instrumentalist notion, found elsewhere in the EU, that as long as the money flows to a region from "Europe" people will identify with it and support it. This type of support for the EU was widespread in the 1990s,

and was one of the key conclusions of my earlier research, when it was clear to me that local people, in the midst of The Troubles, were, to paraphrase one of my respondents, as European as they needed to be to get a grant.[28]

In my current project an alternative version of this European effect has emerged, reflecting a new affective dimension of European identity that was not apparent, and was perhaps even impossible in the days when national identity had to be the primary political affiliation of both Irish nationalists and unionists caught up in the middle of a sectarian, anti-imperialist, civil, terrorist conflict.[29] My ethnographic research over the last four years at the eastern end of the Irish border has suggested that, particularly but not exclusively among nationalists, borderlanders are identifying themselves as Europeans in a manner that is not as clearly instrumental as it was in the past. Brexit has highlighted for them the importance of being and remaining Europeans within the EU. For some this identification is expressed in terms of keeping their European citizenship. For others it is expressed as a spirit or a sense of belonging, to something wider and bigger than the affiliations and loyalties that in the past meant so much to their communities, and their ancestors, in Northern Ireland.

However, while it is clear so far in my interviews that a European identity has been moved to center stage among respondents in my research on Brexit at the border, this identity has not replaced or supplanted national identities. Rather, it has been recognized as a legitimate correspondent, as an identity that can be comfortably inhabited and performed alongside others that matter so much. Surprising to me, in recognizing how much of this affective dimension has taken root since the time of the GFA, the borderlanders of South Armagh have adopted what amounts to a scholarly perspective on identity as both a descriptive and an analytical category in their lives (Brubaker & Cooper 2000).

This leads me to question whether European identity and identification have changed due to Brexit, or are simply marked by Brexit, or just more publicly expressed as a result of Brexit. These are difficult questions to answer accurately at this early date, with the Brexit process begun but far from over. In addition, all identity questions and answers come with blurring at their edges. Some of my respondents have been known to me for over twenty years, for example, and have acknowledged with some certainty, embarrassment, and even a bit of incredulity, the change their present attitudes represent when compared to earlier notions they once shared with me, and about which I have recently reminded them. Some of these respondents offered the addendum, in response to my queries about what Europe has meant and means to them today, that Ireland was always European, and they, as Irish, have been as mainstream as any other Europeans. But most in my recent small sample of the border population have also attested that, since, and perhaps partly due to, the events surrounding and framed by the GFA, and now put into sharp relief by Brexit, they recognize that a shift has occurred in their identification with the EU, and in their identity as European. Brexit has been the "othering" force that has made their symbiotic European identity come to the fore. In this process Brexit has exacerbated the liminality that seems to characterize so much of what Northern Ireland has been and is today. Its people are caught between the UK and ROI, Irishness and Britishness, and various forms of sectarianism and nationalism that have plagued Europe for centuries. Now, Northern Ireland is firmly placed between Britain and Europe, despite its geographical location to Britain's west.

This still leaves Northern Ireland in a marginal position in relation to the UK, ROI and the EU, a position with which both the nationalists and unionists are well acquainted. What is novel, however, is the realization among the people with whom I have interacted since 2016 in South Armagh that a European identity and an Irish, and in some few cases a British, is not mutually exclusive, but perhaps even mutually constitutive. A European identity there has apparently been fostered as part of a conscious program, and an unconscious process, of Europeanization that has had an impact for almost fifty years. This Europeanization has given new life to a regional identity that can see options in a

nationalist agenda that might include continued accommodation as a minority people and culture in a region within the wider EU. Brexit promises an end to that possibility, and forces people to confront the potential return to the old options of achieving national unity as a way of guaranteeing their equality as a national minority. The English nationalism at the heart of Brexit has put fear back into the lives of the people of South Armagh, which must serve as a warning of further populist threats to European integration. The anthropology of Brexit is simultaneously an anthropology of European regionalism, nationalism and integration, which together demand greater scholarly attention to how efforts to construct or deconstruct Europe may also construct or de-construct nations.

Notes

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2 Many predicted that Brexit would have wide and deep support across the whole UK, as may be discerned in the "UK belongs in the EU" celebration that was planned in the offices of the UK delegation to the EU on the night of the referendum (Connelly 2018: 1–2).

3 I have conducted three ethnographic research projects in the Northern Ireland and ROI borderlands since 1990, but my interest in the changes that have occurred in local society, culture, polity and economy over the last thirty years has been continuous, due to and aided by my residence in Northern Ireland from 1990 to 2002

and my annual return visits since then. This article is based on approximately 54 interviews I conducted, in semi-structured and conversational environments in the summers of 2016 to 2019, with local and Northern Ireland government and elected representatives, and party officers, activists and supporters, of Sinn Féin (38 of the interviews conducted) and the Democratic Unionist Party (8). I also discussed these matters with other residents and citizens of Northern Ireland, including civil and public servants, who did not identify with those two parties or support them in any formal or public role. This research relied too on contacts I developed in previous projects in these borderlands. In 2016–2019 my research included elected government representatives, political party members, farmers and their families, shopkeepers/publicans, professionals in service-related positions (such as solicitors, financial advisors, clergy), the workers and managers of a major heritage/community center, and other residents of the border region, some of whom were blue-collar employees or on the dole. A sizeable number of these people were self-identified supporters of republicanism, and some of them had actively supported the armed struggle in the past or had been convicted of such support.

4 A wider examination of some of the effects of Brexit on notions of populism and nationalism in South Armagh can be found in Wilson 2019.

5 The two main communities (Coulter 1999) in Northern Ireland are usually identified as Irish nationalists and British unionists. The former identifies mostly with the Roman Catholic Church and faith, the latter with various forms of Protestantism. Some Irish nationalists, often termed republicans, have adopted strategies, including violence as perpetrated by various groupings of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), to achieve the political unity of the Irish nation. This unification would involve the dissolution of Northern Ireland and the integration of its six counties within the ROI. British unionists seek to retain Northern Ireland as a constituent region of the United Kingdom. Loyalists are those unionists fiercely loyal to the British crown and way of life, some of whom have also adopted violence as a strategy of their own paramilitary groups.

6 At the times of revising this article for publication, first in October 2019 and then continuing from June to October 2020, the conditions under which the UK has left the EU, in a deal brokered between the UK and the EU by Boris Johnson's government, remain in doubt, in part because of the heavy-handed rhetoric of the British Prime Minister. Any final deal between the EU and UK will revolve around Northern Ireland's role in that agreement. This situation in 2020 has temporarily left Northern Ireland in the EU's customs union, guaranteeing for a time a relatively smooth continuation in

the goods and services traded and shared with the ROI, in what was referred to at the beginning of Brexit as the Northern Ireland "backstop" (Lowe 2018).

7　For reviews of the anthropology of Europeanization and European integration up to the end of the 1990s, see Bellier & Wilson 2000a, 2000b; Wilson 1998. For a recent review of Europeanization and identity as approached by the various anthropologies and anthropologists of Europe, see Demossier 2012.

8　In the earlier projects, I examined the changing dimensions of local and European identity as they related to the transformation of the Northern Ireland border due to European integration, particularly in the establishment of the single market in 1992 and subsequent European Commission direct economic support in the INTERREG and LEADER programs (see, e.g., Wilson 1996, 2000a, 2010).

9　In one trope of this marginalization, during The Troubles South Armagh was known to the British media and security forces as "Bandit Country" because of its support of republicanism in general and the IRA in particular.

10　"Doing the Double" has been a longstanding worker strategy in Northern Ireland, which was examined ethnographically in Howe 1990.

11　Whitehill (a pseudonym), a village just a few kilometers from the international border, was the main site of my previous ethnographic research on European funding (Wilson 2007, 2010, 2012). It is midway between Newry, home to one of the two local government councils that are part of my current study, and Crossmaglen, the market town and informal capital of republican South Armagh. These three sites are known for their remarkable economic development since the GFA of 1998, and for their strong support of the republican movement.

12　My thanks to one of the journals' anonymous referees who correctly pushed me to clarify this point.

13　In recent elections in Northern Ireland electoral support for Sinn Féin has remained strong. My ethnographic investigation and media reports both indicate that this support is due in large part to Sinn Féin's opposition to Brexit. However, while voter support for the DUP has dropped slightly across Northern Ireland, perhaps due to its continued defense of Brexit, the local elections and the general election in 2019 also show a rise in support for other parties, notably the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, as well as for some independents. These two parties both oppose Brexit, as do the majority of independents, but some indications in local borderlands also point to this recent upsurge in popularity as perhaps evidence of Brexit malaise, and worry that Brexit will just serve as a platform for a return to old political ideologies and practices by the two main parties.

14　Respondent 2017/6, Interview July 2017.

15　Respondent 2017/7, Interview July 2017.

16　It is widely predicted that Brexit will have serious consequences in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and UK society, culture, economics and politics overall. Some predictions have the Republic of Ireland as the European country that will be hardest hit by Brexit.

17　Respondent 2016/2, Interview August 2017.

18　Respondent 2018/6, Interview August 2018.

19　Respondent 2018/3, Interview August 2018.

20　Respondent 2018/5, Interview August 2018.

21　Respondent 2017/8, Interview August 2017.

22　Respondent 2016/4, Interview August 2016.

23　Respondent 2018/11, Interview August 2018.

24　Respondent 2016/3, Interview July 2016.

25　Respondent 2018/9, Interview August 2018.

26　Orange is the color in Northern Ireland associated closely with Protestantism and unionism, and green is associated with nationalism and republicanism.

27　Respondent 2016/5, Interview August 2016.

28　Respondent 1994/17, Interview February 1994.

29　These are in the main mutually exclusive referents for The Troubles, each of which might have been used by various sectors of Northern Ireland society then and now. It is also a suggestive list and not exhaustive.

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