

# BREXIT

## A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

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The articles in this special issue contribute not just to a better and much-needed understanding of Brexit and its impact on ordinary lives, inside as well as outside the UK. The Irish, (ex-)Yugoslavian, Hungarian and French histories throw the Brexit conundrum into interesting and timely perspectives. They teach us to appreciate that we can no longer afford to regard Brexit as an exception to the rule. We have to take it seriously as both a sign of the times and a harbinger of the future. The rise of populism has thrown this question into sharp relief. More and more member states experience Eurosceptical tendencies, and although the strength and form of these vary substantially among nations, they all pivot around popular and political emotions that hanker for more national sovereignty and less European integration.

*Keywords:* Europe, (il)liberalism, democracy, nationalism, populism

### **Exceptional or a Sign of the Times?**

Britain, or rather the UK, has always been an awkward partner within the EU (George 1990).<sup>1</sup> It applied for membership twice during the 1960s and was twice rejected on the initiative of President Charles de Gaulle, who did not fancy the UK as a member and did not trust its loyalty. When de Gaulle had died and the UK was finally allowed to enter in 1973, it happened at the worst possible time – one characterized by economic, political and moral crisis, not just in Britain but internationally as well. It immediately led to domestic demands for Britain to exit the EU – demands that were put to a vote in a 1975 referendum but were soundly defeated. Nevertheless, this did not put the matter to rest. The UK proved to be a continuously reluctant member and did not mince words. Margaret Thatcher from the very start of her premiership wanted her “money back”<sup>2</sup> and

only agreed to the Single European Act of 1986 because she thought that on balance it would benefit the UK. Basically, however, she was engrossed by the idea of developing the “special relationship” with the USA, regaining the dominant position of Britain in the world, and she detested the idea of surrendering any part of UK parliamentary sovereignty (Crown-in-Parliament) to the EU (Gamble 1988; Solomon 1994). Interestingly, her premiership did not end because of controversies about EU membership, but due to internal Tory rivalry about the introduction of a poll tax in Scotland. Subsequently, John Major kept the UK out of the single currency union, well away from closer economic commitments.

Tony Blair and his New Labour, on the other hand, tried to introduce a new British EU policy, according to which the UK was to assume a core role in the EU and take the reins of leadership into British hands.

The strategy was a failure. Nevertheless, it left a political legacy of optimism and confidence, which in 2013 prompted David Cameron – irked by vociferous resistance to the EU represented primarily by UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) – to call the ill-fated referendum on membership – in the belief that it would silence UKIP’s Nigel Farage and oppositional voices within the Conservatives while giving the final blueprint for continued UK membership. However, as we know, things did not work out as he imagined. On June 23, 2016, the UK electorate voted to leave the EU. *Brexit* was a reality and has now – four and a half years later – been “done.” The UK has passed from “awkwardness” to outsider status and now needs to negotiate deals of engagement with the EU, its largest trading partner.<sup>3</sup>

British EU behavior of this kind was initially regarded as the exception to the rule, as the peculiar rant of a deluded child, dissatisfied with its destiny and dreaming about the glorious days of Empire. And true it is that the UK does not stand comparison with any other EU member state when it comes to disagreements and divergences with EU policies.<sup>4</sup> The UK has not been unique in asking for exceptions and specials arrangements in a number of policy areas (Denmark, Hungary, Italy, France, Sweden and others have these as well), but in its basically grudging acceptance of membership and its rising swell of popular skepticism and opposition to being a formal part of the EU. In that sense, Brexit can be seen as the exceptional case of the odd-one-out.

On the other hand, as this special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* makes it very clear, Brexit has come to matter for the rest of the EU as well, and has, in Thomas M. Wilson’s precise formulation, taken “on proportions in European life that dwarf its initial dimensions” (Wilson 2020a: 12). The phenomenon that we call populism has spread to other member states; old-school nationalism has found new fertile breeding ground; and skepticism to globalization and Europeanization has been growing beyond what most of us would have imagined ten years ago. *Exititis* even predated Brexit, as Hayden points out in his contribution on (ex)Yugoslavia. And the me-

dia has regularly addressed the fear of other EU exits following from Brexit, entailing a whole new glossary of Dexit (DK), Spexit (Spain), Grexit (Greece) and Frexit (France), while Catalan secessionists keep clamoring for independence from Spain, and Scotland now is warming up to try its hand at the same game, again. We are thus back to the UK and Brexit – or, rather, its imminent consequences.

### **Brexit and Nationalism: Four Nations, One State**

I have recently (Hedetoft 2020: chapter 10) analyzed the peculiar national situation of the UK. In the book, I refer, inter alia, to the Irish Times journalist Fintan O’Toole, who has written on the same subject and reached much the same conclusions (O’Toole 2018, 2019). In January of this year (2020), he expanded on it in the following incisive way.

But here there is a great irony: Britain is not and never has been a nation state. For most of its history as a state, it has been at the heart not of a national polity, but of a vast multinational and polyglot empire. And the UK is itself a four-nation amalgam of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is no single pre-EU UK “nation” to return to. There is no unified “people” to whom power is being returned. And this is the contradiction that the Brexit project cannot even acknowledge, let alone resolve.

Scotland and Northern Ireland rejected Brexit even more emphatically in the general election of 2019 than they had done in the referendum of 2016 and a clear majority of voters in the UK as a whole voted in 2019 for parties that promised a second referendum and an opportunity to stay in the EU. So while Johnson likes to talk of 31 January as “this pivotal moment in our national story,” there is neither a settled nation nor a shared story. Brexit is not Northern Ireland’s story. It is not Scotland’s story. It is not even London’s story. It is the national origin myth of the place that Anthony Barnett, co-founder of open Democracy, calls “England without London”. (O’Toole 2020)

*Touché!* Once referred to as a “composite state” (Clark 1990), “the Atlantic archipelago” (Bradshaw & Morrill 1996) or “the four nations” (Kearney 1989), this UK malaise is now coming to the fore in a serious way, although problems have been brewing for decades. However, they have been papered over, first, by the memories of imperial Britain and its global reach; second, by the illusions of the transatlantic “special relationship”; and third, by the undoubted European and global influence of the City of London as a financial center with tentacles all over the world. Europe was a problem, certainly, but appeared as the last on the list of international commitments – as it did in Churchill’s famous concentric circles of UK relations: the USA, the Commonwealth, and only then Europe. Within this bubble of fantasies, the cohesiveness of the UK – always liminal – started to crack, because – as O’Toole rightly points out – it had never been the nation-state that most other European states could rely on and did not have one national people or one national popular culture to underpin it. The glue in the past was the Empire, the colonies, the Commonwealth, the wars, which all did not crave a nation-state cushion; but once it had disappeared, the reality of what Michael Hechter (1975) termed *internal colonialism* started to make itself felt. Tom Nairn referred to the phenomenon already in the 1970s as the imminent “break-up of Britain” (1977), while the Troubles haunted (Northern) Ireland, and Scotland in 1979 missed independence (i.e. devolution) by only an inch.<sup>5</sup> The Irish problem – analyzed by Thomas M. Wilson in this issue (2020b) – was temporarily settled by means of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, but that solution is now seriously threatened by Brexit. And the Scots, having missed full secession by a few percentage points in 2014 – no doubt due to their European rather than UK attachment – are now once again eyeing an opportunity for realizing their dream of independence *and* their reintegration into the EU. The UK is challenged by its imminent demise. The rump state in the offing is further compromised by the disloyalty of London – as European and global a British entity if ever there was one, notwithstanding being the pivot around which the Brexiters’ gibberish about a “Singapore-on-the-

Thames” might be turning.<sup>6</sup> And also by the fragility of an “English identity” which has never found its footing and seems to be culturally homeless.

Although there are reminiscences of the break-up of Yugoslavia, as Hayden suggests in this special issue (2020), all this constitutes the specific and unique tragedy of the UK problem. However, it should not be overlooked that there actually is a relatively large majority of UK citizens who want to leave the EU, primarily in the parts of England that are not London. This uncomfortable fact was confirmed in the general election of December 11, 2019, which was *de facto* an election about Brexit. As researchers, we need to be able to explain this fact though it might seem incomprehensible. In order to get to grips with this challenge, there is a need to understand the nature of populism and its British variety.

### **Culture and Economics, People and Elites: One-track Populism and other Varieties**

In his introduction to this special issue, Thomas M. Wilson makes the important point that “Brexit has reverberated across Europe, if not the globe, as a sign of changed relations between citizens and the state” (2020a: 9). And a little later he continues to identify a key component of both Brexit and other eruptions of populism: “the perceived loss of, and the need to take back, control, even if what was lost and how to take it back are as vaguely defined as is the notion of control” (ibid.: 10). Wilson here pinpoints a core element of all populism: the feeling that sovereignty, cultural as well as political, is going down the drain and that “we” are losing control of “our” destiny. Populism thinks that the “elites” are to blame for this, because they have either wilfully neglected “us” for the sake of their own narrow interests, or have been misguided by ideals of globalism and left the “people” by the wayside in the process. A consequence of the latter charge is that “they” have let too many of “them” into “our” country, but also that conditions of international collaboration have resulted in the increase of economic disparities and the gradual impoverishment of the masses. The general consequence is growing distrust of elites, particularly the political class, and the wish to take

matters into “our own hands.” Politicians who embrace this kind of position hence project themselves as an integral part of the people. This is as true for Boris Johnson as it was for Theresa May, and as it applies to Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, Italy’s Matteo Salvini and USA’s Donald Trump. They all want to “clear the swamp,” start anew and make xyz “great again.” This is at the same time the confirmation of their nationalism and their nativism all in one.

At the same time, populists manage to turn the traditional relationship between culture and economics, identity and growth upside down. Where the former was once the happy consequence of the latter, the (globalized) economy is now seen as leading, potentially, to unintended consequences (massive disparities, welfare paralysis, loss of sovereignty, elite betrayal), and culture and identity hence come to occupy the central ground. The reversal has recently been put into strong relief by the coronavirus crisis, which may not have strengthened the populist parties *per se*, but has without doubt accelerated the anti-globalist tendencies worldwide and in a sense made many mainstream politicians pursue nationalist policies. We must, at all costs, stand guard over our identity and our sovereignty, and if this entails sacrifices and lower growth, so be it. Not that populists scorn progress and wealth, as long as it clearly benefits “the people” and *not* the elites, on this or the other side of our borders, but it has been relegated to second place, as a dependent variable. As László Kürti makes clear in his contribution on Orbánism in Hungary: “Orbán has not hesitated to implement policies to intervene in the economy, especially to re-nationalize private enterprises in the name of public interest” (2020: 69). He poignantly further argues that Cas Mudde and Emilia Palonen are wrong to imagine that populists do not “make policies,” but are only effective in opposition or as representatives of a “thin-centered worldview”; “...the government of Viktor Orbán has been recognized worldwide not only for its flood of political slogans but for the implementation of key policies with regard to education, media, health, pronatalism, public utilities, and public constructions” (*ibid.*: 65). Later he adds

a reference to one of his research interlocutors, a Roma father, crediting one of Orbán’s “public works programs” with the fact that he has regained his job and a decent income. Populism is indeed a variegated and two-pronged policy cluster, which cannot be dismissed as pure discourse. But the touchstone remains whether policies – often backed by a new-found sense of religiosity – are seen to benefit the national feeling of belonging of citizens and thus to put the “relations between citizens and state” back on the right moral track.

Brexit partly conforms to this picture – but only partly. Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and other well-known populists no doubt make a point of representing “the people,” and the latter that his current administration embodies “the People’s Government.” They rant against immigrants and celebrate the lost, but now regained Crown-in-Parliament. And they hail the Empire, the golden hour of British supremacy. On the other hand, they are not overly religious, and their anti-elitism is subdued where the UK meritocracy is concerned. In fact, their populism is of a one-track kind, has only one overriding concern, which dominates all debate and all charges: their anti-EU position. The EU and its alleged bureaucracy, non-democratic features, ill-concealed power ambitions, and overt elitism makes up *the* object of resistance, *the* arch enemy, *the* stumbling block to be overcome in order to recover full British sovereignty and “take back control.” British “awkwardness” has finally emerged in full bloom and shown its true face: We are against cooperating with “the Continent” on conditions that we do not determine and where we do not keep full control of the outcome. We want out! And we do not really care about the costs! The Leavers have it – possibly for good.

There is a problem or two, however. The control the populists now believe they have regained is as illusory as the unitary identity of Britishness (or rather: UK-ness) they spearhead is fragmentary and about to collapse. Leaving will not save it, rather the opposite. Brexit has, unintentionally but dramatically, exposed the brittleness of the UK construction, the uncomfortable fact that the UK is not and never will be a nation-state proper. Its nationalism is

a figment of the imagination and can now no longer be papered over by imaginary enemies or the glories of Empire. Now, there are only domestic conflicts left to fight and resolve: the Irish question, the Scottish issue, the London globalists (who also are pro-European), and finally the Welsh, who have so far behaved quiescently, but whose dreams of independence might get a forward push by the rest – and by secessionist tendencies elsewhere.

Thus, the victims of Brexit are the British themselves. This is not to discount the real and serious background of all populism: that border-transgressing liberalism, called globalization, has increasingly tended to widen the gap between the very rich and the very poor and is stripping the once-prosperous middle class and the lower classes too of their status, income, welfare, and future prospects in the West (Hedetoft 2020). Precarity is inexorably on the rise. This is as serious a problem in the UK as elsewhere. The overriding question is, however: is populism (a reinvention of nationalism in adverse conditions) the solution that will restore income, level out disparities, and secure a better and more comfortable life for many more people? Probably not. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the decision to leave the EU (or other dramatic measures adopted by populists around the world) is democratic in the sense that we usually understand democracy and democratic rule – it reflects the will of the majority of citizens. Let me take a look at this vexed question, which has been riddled with controversy and which is also reflected in this special issue.

### **Brexit, Populism, Europe and Democracy**

Brexiters and populists all across Europe are in no doubt: the EU is undemocratic and oppresses the true will of the many different peoples of Europe. Hence it is not just a democratic right, almost a duty, either to withdraw from the European Union or to transform this (con)federal structure into a normal intergovernmental association with no claims on the sovereignty of its partners. The UK has now implemented the former option; populists like Orbán, Salvini and Marine Le Pen are set to reform the Union from within. Orbán in the meantime proudly

proclaims that he is the leader of an “illiberal democracy” (see Kürti’s article in this special issue, 2020) and, together with Poland’s Kaczynski and his PiS party, continuously fulminates against the European Union, its illegitimate power ambitions, and its liberalist ideology.

It has almost become a knee-jerk reaction by most intellectuals to poke fun of this position while showing up its authoritarian and nationalist import. At the same time, we need to consider the democracy question more closely. Jan-Werner Müller (2016: 94–96) posits that the EU finds itself between technocracy and populism and is part of a “comprehensive attempt to constrain the popular will” (ibid.: 95). Cas Mudde (2015) argues that populism is an “illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.” And also Robert M. Hayden, in his contribution to this collection, wavers on the issue. First, he posits that “the EU, of course, is very different from socialist Yugoslavia, not least because Yugoslavia was not democratic and the EU is” (2020: 52). However, he immediately introduces the caveat that “[o]r at least, the EU’s component states are – though Orbán’s ‘illiberal democracy’ in Hungary [...] stretches the limits.” Much later (ibid.: 58) he is, however, much clearer and less pussyfooting: “If the EU remains defined by a vision of nation-states whose sovereignty is subordinated to the regulatory processes of Brussels, its future seems unpromising. [...] unless the EU changes, its own future may be behind us.” In other words, can a future where the sovereignty and democracy of nation-states continue to be subordinated to a non-democratic set-up be contemplated?

Cynics would argue that the liberalism of the EU and its protective capacity are sufficient to legitimate its existence and its future – democratic principles must to some extent be sacrificed at the altar of security interests and economic necessities. Others argue that democracy is in any case a form of power execution intended to keep the people at bay, not to allow popular interests to have a field day. Orbán and his likes would counter that they are the true representatives of the people and that they, not the cynics, are morally in the right – and more democratic to boot. The Brexiters, for their part, have made a definitive

choice: they prefer non-membership to salvage their identity and their sovereignty and they have the backing of a popular and electoral majority – in other words, they have acted responsibly, have taken the matter directly to the people, and can therefore pride themselves on their democratic ethos.

What these kinds of controversies reveal is not just that there is no clear-cut definition of democracy that we can all agree on, but also that political normativities are hedged around with doubts, caveats and reservations. Democratic idealists meet, on the one hand, hard-nosed realists, for whom economic interests and national security are far more important than moral and ethical principles; on the other, multiple representatives of the new political and intellectual idealism: Europeanism and global internationalism. And when the latter are allowed to invade the former, even intellectuals, who see themselves as defenders of democratic processes, can sometimes be tempted to revise their definitions and see democracy and liberalism as co-extensive, perhaps similar, because the *results* of defending democracy within its traditional national boundaries seem unpalatable and normatively unacceptable. And so it happens, not rarely these days, that democratic idealists find themselves defending a non-democratic EU and opposing the democracy that brought us Brexit – among many other phenomena, such as Orbán's Hungary and Trump's USA. The world has been turned upside down.

The Brexit process illustrates this change well. The world (the British as well as the international) is full of commentators, most of them highly educated and well versed in democratic principles, who reject or even condemn the UK populists for their choice to leave the EU, and just as replete with people who defend, even hail this liberal, supranational regime. The reasons given are usually quite mundane. The UK will suffer economically. Citizens will have to accept living in abject conditions, which could have been avoided. The UK is pursuing an imperial illusion that makes no sense. The electorate was not fully informed of the context and consequences back in 2016 (though this point has virtually disappeared from the public agenda after the general election of

December 2019). Finally, a few note the potential break-up of the UK that I have discussed above, and most do take account of the Irish conundrum.

All this is certainly valid. What most commentators and analysts generally fail to mention, on the other hand, is the fact that all this happened according to democratic processes and strictly abiding by the (admittedly somewhat peculiar) UK rulebook. On balance, however, this does not seem to matter or at least matters less to the global perspective than the populist infringement of openness, porous borders, international human rights, freedom of movement, diversity, and tolerance. These are the core values of liberals and globalists, and they tend to override their commitment to democracy – or lead them to re-interpret the same.

In the midst of this scuffle, ordinary people and their real lives are often forgotten. For the liberal segment, the economic concerns of the corporate world take precedence and people presumably have their needs fulfilled because they can enjoy, at some point, the trickle-down effects of these processes. In the meantime, they have to endure the austerity of neoliberalism. And for the populists, the nation-state means everything, hence the material needs of citizens must take second place to the preservation and defense of their ethnic-national identity and its cultural heritage. They too risk having to face lives of sacrifice and modesty – but now supposedly in a morally righteous cause. The austerity of liberalism encounters the austerity of populism.

This is where the anthropological/ethnological perspective on these controversial issues is crucial, as this special issue documents convincingly. We learn about the worries of the Northern Irish population, whether Catholic or Protestant, in their own words, through statements of interviewees, and we sense the real lives behind the political showdown. We get to know ordinary Hungarians, their problems, hopes and dreams, and their reasons for supporting Fidesz. And especially Deborah Reed-Danahay illustrates vividly, empirically and totally convincingly the “social drama,” of French citizens in London, and the uncertainties, anxieties, ambiguities and difficult choices they are faced with

because of Brexit and the implosion of their daily routines and their taken-for-granted assumptions that it implies (2020). These three contributions take fieldwork seriously while uncovering the emotions, reflections and motivations of people on the ground – not “the people” as a political abstraction, but real, living, working human beings. These contributions are framed both by Thomas M. Wilson’s readable introduction on the Brexit process and by Robert M. Hayden’s fascinating account of Yugoslavia as “the first European disunion” in our contemporary age.

Together, these papers contribute not just to a better and much-needed understanding of Brexit and its impact on ordinary lives, inside and outside the UK. They also teach us to appreciate that we can no longer afford to regard this series of events as an exception to the rule. We have to take it seriously as both a sign of the times and a harbinger of the future. Brexit matters massively. At the same time we, as academics, need to take care that we do not replace the old pitfall of methodological nationalism with a new, but just as dangerous epistemology of methodological internationalism. Anthropologists and ethnologists, with their focus on lived cultures, the histories and lives of ordinary people, carry a huge responsibility for getting the picture right. This issue goes a long way toward fulfilling that task.

## Notes

- 1 The title of this piece has been lifted from John Donne’s poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (1611/12, published 1633), in which the male persona describes his anguish at having to face physical separation from his wife, but finds consolation in the fact that they will not just meet again but will stay in permanent spiritual contact: “Our two souls therefore, which are one,/Though I must go, endure not yet/A breach, but an expansion,/Like gold to airy thinness beat” (Donne [1633]1967: 36–37). This “metaphysical” idealism is an apt way to describe the isolation of the UK from Europe and yet its lasting dependency on “the Continent,” both financially, geographically and culturally.
- 2 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNLVcAQvzn8>. Accessed October 12, 2020.
- 3 See: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7851/>. Accessed October 12, 2020.
- 4 For evidence, see the excellent Wikipedia entry on Euroscepticism in the UK: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euroscepticism\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euroscepticism_in_the_United_Kingdom). Accessed October 12, 2020.

- 5 Devolution received a majority of the votes cast but failed to meet the criterion that a minimum of 40 per cent of the electorate should vote for the proposal in order for it to be accepted. However, the situation was reversed in 1998 when the Scotland Act was carried through and devolution was implemented.
- 6 In the words of Howard Davies, “[t]he phrase ‘Singapore-on-the-Thames’ is shorthand for Britain becoming a low-tax, lightly regulated economy that can out-compete the sclerotic, over-regulated eurozone from a strategic position only 20 miles or so offshore. The general idea was first mooted a couple of years ago by Philip Hammond, then Britain’s chancellor of the exchequer...” (Davies 2019).

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