

# The Antinomies of Brexit

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## 1. Brexistasis

It is now coming up to the end of May 2019, as I finish writing this essay, and for the last few weeks there has been a kind of lull in this thing called Brexit, the process by which the United Kingdom was supposed to have left the European Union a few weeks ago, on March 29th. However, the departure did not happen. Nearly three years after a national referendum demonstrated a 52-48% preference for leaving the EU, the UK government had yet to conclude negotiating the terms of the divorce successfully, and after a frenetic several weeks of febrile politicking, the departure day had passed. An emergency extension to the exit deadline was agreed to by the EU, and the Brexit drama was suddenly slightly defused, no longer the inescapable, ever-changing main headline every day. Several weeks of parliamentary theatre and of scurrying renegotiations with the EU hushed a little. The witching hour had now moved to October 31st, and people in the UK could get a small breather from Brexit and could consider their votes in local elections in April and in the European Parliament elections in May. Those local elections did not turn out well for Theresa May's Conservatives, and the European Parliament elections (taking place as I write this) were expected to be similarly damaging for the major political parties. The Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, after a few fruitless conversations with the opposition Labour Party in an attempt to thrash out an agreeable formula for departure, finally bowed to pressure from her own unhappy party colleagues and announced her resignation. That opens the door for a leadership struggle in her party and presumably also for another frantic round of Brexit negotiations under new management. Meanwhile, the EU's clock is ticking towards Halloween.

The 2016 national referendum had controversially offered the British people a straight up and down choice between leaving the European Union and remaining in it. No particular conditions were stipulated or voted on, and so it was left to Prime Minister May to try to negotiate the terms of the divorce with the EU. Although she did manage to forge a 'deal' with the EU, it could not pass muster in the House of Commons—and nor could any apparent alternative idea. The several weeks before departure day were taken up by a series of increasingly desperate and recondite votes in parliament, rejecting May's plan but never agreeing on any other feasible plan or prospect. Thus, a mere week before the assigned departure date, the object 'Brexit' still had no fundamental definition and no plan.

At that point, all kinds of options remained on the table which might have helped define Brexit: the revocation of the declaration of departure, Article 50; or oppositely, the extension of Article 50 to give more time for a deal to be cut; a no-deal Brexit, widely assumed to be the harbinger of political and, most of all, economic chaos; the possible passage of May's deal, even if it displeased or maybe infuriated numerous constituencies; a putative "people's vote" on any deal that happened to make it through Parliament; a brand new referendum as a kind of re-do; Theresa May's resignation or ouster, and perhaps a new general election. Or some combination of the above: anything was possible. But what looked most likely at the time was a no-deal Brexit—a prospect that appeared to dismay all concerned apart from the most extreme Brexiteers on the right wing of the country's political spectrum.

The multiple parliamentary votes in the run-up to the departure deadline led to a fundamental and debilitating conclusion: the divorce "deal" worked out by May with the EU could not win even a simple majority of votes in parliament, but Britain's politicians could not agree on any other plan either. So, now that we are coming up to the end of May, in this relative lull but with the clock still ticking, nobody knows, or knows yet, what Brexit is or will be.

In a way, this limbo seems fitting and even predictable, given that the original referendum gave no definition either: people voted without much of a clue what their vote would mean in reality. In a sense, it is this lack of definition, this non-identity, that is the very identity of Brexit. Brexit has become a kind of stationary storm, loud and unsettling, but not really going anywhere: Brexistasis.

Of course, there has been no shortage of efforts to try to imagine or predict what Brexit will look like on the ground. The direst warnings of a socio-economic meltdown to come, or blithe predictions that Britain will regain its greatness, and anything in between, fall foul of a simple fact: nobody knows, because the terms of Britain's departure are still to be defined. Necessarily, then, understanding Brexit entails trying to take stock of the current lack of definition, seeing how it is constructed, so to speak. My feeling is that the current stasis can be illuminated at least a little by looking at a longer history of Britain's relation to the project of European integration. That longer view reveals a set of difficult antinomies, of choices that you cannot or do not want to make.

## 2. 1975

The uncertainty and lack of definition that have been the consequences of the 2016 referendum are underlined by the fact that the final vote was a divided one: 52% to Leave, 48% to Remain. This is in stark contrast to the clarity that appeared to result from Britain's first ever foray into the dicey territory of referendums. That is to say, the first national referendum ever held in the United Kingdom, in 1975, was when the British public was asked whether or not the country should remain in what was at the time called the European Economic Community (or more popularly the Common Market), with which the UK had become increasingly entangled for a couple of decades and which it had finally joined in 1972. The 1975 referendum overwhelmingly affirmed the people's desire to stay in the Common Market, with 67.2% in favor.

At the time, I was an undergraduate, and also a member both of the Communist Party and of the National Union of Students (the latter led by a fiery radical, Charles Clarke, who later became a somewhat regressive Home Secretary under Tony Blair). Both of the organizations I belonged to advocated leaving the EEC, as did the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties and most Northern Irish politicians. On the face of things, it seemed pretty clear what path I should follow—especially since on the pro-European side was no less a monster than Margaret Thatcher, a newly installed as the Conservative opposition leader and already a hated figure for the left after her 15 years in Parliament and her tenure as Education minister. Thatcher's Conservative Party joined with the various centrist parties to enthusiastically endorse continued membership.

The left-of-center Labour Party, by contrast, was essentially divided. The Prime Minister, Harold Wilson (a moderate leftist at best), and his Cabinet advocated for a Yes vote, but the party itself voted against a Yes policy and eventually there was no official Labour Party campaign for one side or the other.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, one of the loudest and most persistent voices in the national debate was that of the Labour Party's Tony Benn, one of the very few Labour politicians that those of us on the radical left could tolerate. He was outspoken and lucid about the demerits of the EEC. He saw what was coming. His fundamental position was that the EEC was essentially a mechanism to entrench the power of capital and of the ruling classes across Europe, that it would be a machinery for increasing inequality amongst and within nations, and that its legal mechanisms would eventually land up superseding national legislation. He also warned of more expensive food supplies and decreased protections for workers, and increased EEC-related taxes and fees. He already partially blamed the EEC for the United Kingdom's industrial decline, pointing to "cheap EEC imported goods, expensive EEC agricultural products, and a huge annual Common Market tax demand" (Benn 1982: 158). Benn was sufficiently correct in his assessments that he could allow himself a 'told you so' in a book a few years later: "Britain is now," he complained in 1982, "in law and in practice, a colony of this embryonic West European federal state.... Britain has been reduced by successive governments to colonial status" (Benn 1982: 15).

In the run-up to the 1975 vote, it was Benn's position, in addition to the influence of my political affiliations, that made me pretty certain that I would send in my vote against membership. It turned out I would have been on the losing side, of course, but I would have been in good company with the likes of Benn himself and even the current Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, voting No.<sup>2</sup> But in the end, I was amongst the few who decided to boycott the referendum entirely. It was not difficult to conclude at the time—and still isn't—that the choice as it was posed in the referendum was really no choice at all: between remaining within what was self-evidently a vehicle for capitalist integration and rationalization on the one hand, and on the other hand, embracing a kind of go-it-alone nationalism

and insularity. The idea of boycotting the poll seemed less like a rejection of a democratic choice than a refusal to be fooled by the smokescreen that was being used to normalize the ideological assumptions and arguments on either side.

By the same token, it is true that even while I was boycotting the vote I felt that Benn's position was essentially correct. Throughout the many months of national debate, I developed a simple ideological objection to what I understood (and still now in 2019 understand to be) the essential nature of the European project as it is exemplified in its famous 'four freedoms.' The 1957 Treaty of Rome, which established the constitutional basis of European integration, committed member nations to the ideal of free trade across Europe, and codified that commitment in the enshrined 'four freedoms.' These principles guarantee the free movement of goods, services, money, and people across European national borders.<sup>3</sup> As an editor of *The Economist* recently put it, "the EU's veneration of the single market's 'four freedoms' is theological...[and] the notional indivisibility of these freedoms has been a central principle of the bloc since 1957" (Wainwright 2019: 23).

So, in 1975 I concluded that Karl Marx's words on free trade from way back in 1848 spoke exactly to the case at hand, where the borders between European nations were being erased for the convenience of capital:

when you overthrow the few national barriers that still restrict the progress of capital, you will merely have given it complete freedom of action. But so long as you let the relation of wage labour to capital exist, it does not matter how favorable the conditions are under which the exchange of commodities takes place, there will always be a class which will exploit and a class which will be exploited. (Marx: 206)

### 3. Chiasmus

Anyone with even passing familiarity with the discourse around Brexit since 2016 will have noticed that the sides have radically changed since that moment in 1975. At the time of the first referendum, the Yes votes were mostly from the right, led by Thatcher and devoted to the blatant interests of capital, and joined by a whole range of liberal and centrist constituents. The No votes came largely from the far left and from the left wing of the Labour party, as well as from the regional nationalist parties. In 2016 it was almost the opposite. Much of the left and all the regional nationalist parties had migrated to a Remain position. Meanwhile, most of the impetus for the Leave vote came from the Conservatives and their increasingly extreme right-wing fellow travelers.

Without thoroughly rehearsing the history of Britain in the last half-century, it would be difficult to explain this chiasmatic shift in positions in any convincing fashion.<sup>4</sup> But some possible reasons do present themselves, nonetheless. The left's shift from No to Remain is, as Susan Watkins has pointed out, broadly consistent with what happened with other European "left parties who had initially read the Common Market as a Cold War project, or as a 'bosses' union', but had slowly come round to it: the Italian Communist Party from the mid-60s, the post-dictatorship social-democratic parties in Greece, Spain and Portugal from the 70s" (Watkins 2016: 11). That 'coming round' probably had everything to do with European spending on regional economies, as well as the codification of workers' rights across Europe, and with the freedom of movement and establishment of people vouchsafed in the 'four freedoms.' One might also suggest that leftist support for the freedom of movement has encouraged a rather strange outcome, namely that it is now misconstrued as a **de facto** individual freedom, allowing passport-free travel and removing all kinds of barriers to easy transactions with other European countries, and so on. Indeed, it is hard to escape the feeling that the left and many ordinary citizens of all classes have become so accustomed to the very conditions that the EEC-EU project was always likely to produce that a Remain vote would be intended to preserve their many attractive, cosmopolitan boons and conveniences.

In regard to the right-wing, the chiasmatic shift is perhaps slightly more mysterious. Why, after all, would the party of Thatcher and her pioneering proselytes of neoliberal faith in markets have become increasingly disillusioned with the EU? It would seem that some of the shift can be attributed to Thatcher herself, for whom, as Watkins has it, "the bureaucratic-diplomatic ethos of the EU was anathema to [her] Chicago School way of thinking" (Watkins 2016: 10). Thatcher's difficulties with institutionalized EU politics was allied to a growing sense in her party that the EU was a threat to national sovereignty—an idea that reached its full-throated expression in the right-wing anti-EU campaign in 2016. The commitment to free trade by way of European integration was undercut by an increasingly disgruntled sentiment about this loss of national sovereignty in the face of EU trade regulations, taxation, and (especially after the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty) the increasing sway of the European Court of Justice (all things, by the

way, about which Tony Benn had warned in 1975). At the economic level, and after Thatcher's departure, the creation of the Euro and the Eurozone in 1999 was seen by many as another sign of European encroachment on sovereign powers, and Britain's refusing to join the monetary union was an important measure of an increasing Conservative distrust of the EU and its institutions—or, bluntly, its power.

One of the central issues that guided the conversations in both 1975 and 2016, and around which the chiasmatic change that I am pointing to revolved, was this question of national sovereignty. But, as Robert Saunders has shown, in 1975 national sovereignty did not immediately involve an issue that it inevitably invoked in 2016. That is, one of the most important issues in 2016 was that of immigration—a word that was used in the campaign to refer to non-EU immigrants, migrant workers from within the EU, asylum seekers and refugees. As has been widely reported, discomfort with exactly the fruits of the freedom of movement within the EU proved to be a huge motivation for people to vote Leave. Apparently, that one of the four freedoms diminished British national sovereignty in that there was no longer national control over immigration and people were being denied the right to decide who could live and work in their communities. This is in stark contrast to 1975 when the idea that the free movement of European workers might one day prove problematic was hardly mooted at all. Indeed, the only region of Britain where immigration was an issue in the referendum was, according to Saunders, Northern Ireland where “the real concern focused on Catholic immigration from the South” (Saunders: 310). Whatever immigration anxieties existed generally concerned the brown subjects of the former colonies, rather than European migrants like the white Polish immigrants who were held to exemplify the problems in 2016.<sup>5</sup> The kind of xenophobia to which those Polish migrant workers were subjected was stirred up in the 2016 debates, principally by the right, and in particular by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage (who is now the leader of the brand new Brexit Party).

In amongst all these shifting lines, at the fulcrum of the chiasmus, as it were, there is the official Labour Party. As I said earlier, in 1975 the party was divided between the Cabinet that wanted to stay in the EC and the party members who mostly wanted to say No. In 2016, and ever since then, while the Conservative government has tried to negotiate the exit deal, the Labour Party has been divided between Leavers and Remainers (though it should be said that Remainers are probably in the majority). Maintaining party unity has been a challenge for the leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and he has taken a lot of criticism for refusing to commit Labour to supporting Brexit or not. Rather, his strategy is to commit Labour to respecting the referendum result and putting forward Labour's own a plan for a deal—one that, apparently, Theresa May could not agree with when she and Corbyn tried to negotiate a way out of the Brexit impasse.

So, while this new chiasmatic structure remains in place, as almost the mirror image of 1975 and with Labour in the middle both times, and although there is a certain symmetry to the way sides and issues have changed (aside from irruption of the immigration issue), there is still one huge and hugely important difference between the situations after each of the referendums. That is, in 1975 two-thirds of the votes were for Yes, to stay in the EEC; in the 2016 referendum, on the other hand, there was a hugely different, much more ambivalent, result: 51.9% for Leave to 48.1% for Remain. While the particular conditions under which the two referendums took place were very different, those figures seems to me important in that the most recent poll almost predicts the kind of Brexistasis I have been talking about. At any rate, the figures show a more or less evenly split populace.

#### 4. Demoticocracy

On the weekend before March 29th, Brexit day, London was taken over by an enormous anti-Brexit demonstration (its organizers claimed over a million people were present). Meanwhile, a people's petition to Parliament asking for Article 50 to be revoked was busy garnering millions of signatures. The petition was from the start obviously “an expression of dissatisfaction,” not just with the Brexit vote itself but also with the subsequent bootless negotiations conducted by Theresa May (Leston-Bandeira 2019). It reached 5 million signatures in the weeks running up to Brexit deadline, becoming the largest such petition in the country's history. The weekend protests and the petitions had, and are unlikely to have much effect. (The last time I saw such a huge demonstration in London it was in protest to Tony Blair's upcoming war against Iraq. An estimated 4 million people failed to sway the prime minister's course... and the rest is history.) But from a certain standpoint that is how things are actually supposed to work. Britain is formally a representative parliamentary democracy in which the elected chamber makes decisions on behalf of the

‘people,’ rather than acting at their direct behest. Leston-Bandeira reminds us that “a petition is no substitute for representative democracy” (Leston-Bandeira 2019), and nor is a referendum.

Right at the start of his excellent history of the 1975 referendum, *Yes to Europe*, Robert Saunders points out that that first one—the first national plebiscite ever on any issue, as we recall—was a completely unprecedented and therefore abnormal irruption into British political life. What is more, he suggests, in practice it fundamentally “challenged the right and even the capacity of Members of Parliament to embody the will of their constituents.” Saunders recognizes that this referendum—or indeed any referendum—is **de facto** an anomaly in a representative democracy exactly because it bypasses the representative function of elected politicians while purporting (pretending?) to give ‘the people’ a direct say in their political affairs. The 1975 vote, Saunders argues, had the effect of “striking a lasting blow against the sovereignty of Parliament” (Saunders 2019: 3). The force of that lasting blow was certainly felt again with the 2016 referendum, and this short-circuiting of the normal decision-making functions of Parliament is at the heart of Brexitasis.

The 2016 plebiscite is, then, what amounts to a democratic detour, but its result was taken by Mrs. May and her Brexiteers to be an inalienable indication of the *vox populi*. Indeed, they have claimed over and over again that to attempt to abrogate the Leave decision would itself be undemocratic, even though the margin of Leave’s victory was notably narrow (52%-48%). Nonetheless, the government’s strategy ever since the referendum has depended utterly on its unwillingness to challenge in any way at all the absoluteness of the Leave vote. But since the referendum’s question was so rudimentary as to be stupid (a straight-up choice between Leave and Remain, with no guidance as to what kind of divorce settlement was acceptable), it left the government in the position of being able to define for itself the terms of exit. And equally part of their strategy has been an adamant refusal to subject any final deal to a second referendum. In other words, democracy means listening to the people’s voice, then filling in the details of what you think they want, but then not asking them to speak again once they’ve spoken or checking back with them to see if they approve of what you have done.

Obviously the government’s position here is specious and self-contradictory. They have been eager to cover the fact that Brexit can be described as a democratic venture only by dint of an abnegation of the proper role of Parliament and by encouraging a form of democratic participation that properly warrants the epithet ‘populist’ (at a moment when that term is being thrown around with abandon). In many ways this is an inevitable development from decades of what I have elsewhere described (after a phrase of Alain Touraine’s) as our era of “meaningless politics,” a way of describing the civil dysfunction that arises when “the political functions of contemporary Northern states have become more and more disjunct from the social and responsibilities that the state has traditionally assumed in post-Enlightenment modernity” (see Smith 2007: 71-75). I refer to this trend as the construal of ‘demoticocracy,’ a kind of populist elision of institutionalized democratic processes that nonetheless calls itself democratic.

The Brexit debates exemplify the tone and texture of what I mean by demoticocracy. The Leave campaign was remarkable for its disregard of procedural integrity and honesty, and its rhetoric was often so inflated as to be risible. Its exemplary moment was perhaps the ‘Brexit Battle Bus,’ plastered on the side of which was Brexiteer Boris Johnson’s infamous (and baseless) claim that the UK was sending £50 million to the EU every day, money which after Brexit could be spent on the National Health Service instead.<sup>6</sup> Such false promises and misleading information became the norm for the Brexiteers, and to disseminate them the demoticocratic voice simply turned up its volume rather than aspire to logic or consistency. Indeed, it could be argued that Brexiteers such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage actually made a point of sounding and acting like bullies and oafs; they reckoned that their best tactic was to be loud, precisely, and to outweigh rather than out-argue their opponents.

Meanwhile, a more genteel, but perhaps more chilling version of the demoticocratic voice could be heard when Mrs. May, trying to win last-minute support for her ‘deal,’ went on British television and attempted to set up a direct conflict between her imagined audience, the people, and a static and indecisive Parliament. An editorial in The Observer newspaper commented on her performance:

“I am on your side,” [May] intoned to voters. “Parliament has done everything possible to avoid making a choice.” She embraced populist language that could have been uttered by any tinpot dictator looking to trample the democratic institutions frustrating their personal agenda. In our parliamentary democracy, May’s mandate to lead the country comes purely from any support she commands from the House of Commons. Her words were not only self-defeating but bordering on the dangerously unconstitutional.<sup>7</sup>

So, if the original referendum was a certain kind of mutation in the democratic process, then its verdict being taken to be written in stone is a mutation of a mutation. Very little has been done in Parliament to counter the

bludgeoning effect of the Brexiteers as they operate this double mutation. The Speaker of the House, John Bercow, has sometimes stood up for the traditional functioning of parliamentary democracy, and he has tried consistently to encourage MPs to take control of the process away from the government. His refusal to allow Mrs. May to ask for a vote for a third time on a substantially unchanged motion for her “deal” was perhaps his most significant intervention. His effort came during those particularly fraught (but finally indefinite) couples of weeks of votes in the House, including the so-called indicative votes that offered a choice of specific alternatives and options; yet all of them failed as the members declined Bercow’s invitation to take charge of the democratic procedures.

The whole process has revealed a choice that few would ever have thought to actually be a choice: it has opened up a division between parliamentary democracy and popular democracy. It has shone an unflattering light on both, while at the same time setting them up as alternatives to each other in the most unhealthy manner, or in a manner that cannot possibly produce a resolution that satisfies.

## 5. Populists and Imperialists

In the space between the populist audience and a parliament that has been effectively declared (or has declared itself), Theresa May set up her laboratory, and she there has concocted the elements of her ‘deal’ with the EU. The politics that surround that work are complicated and there have been many, often conflicting requirements on the ‘deal.’ But two aspects, in particular, seem to have survived all the laboratory work. These have come to be known as May’s ‘red lines’ that she will not allow herself or her ‘deal’ to cross. The ultimately non-negotiable elements for her are, first of all, the end to one of the four freedoms so dear to the EU’s heart: the freedom of movement and establishment of people. The second is an at least temporary customs union between the UK and the EU such that Northern Ireland, as part of the UK, would not have to re-erect a hard border with Ireland (more on this later). Neither of these elements was mentioned in the 2016 referendum, of course, and it is merely a Conservative party conceit to suggest that Brexit **necessarily** entails any particular measure or stipulation over any other. Indeed, these two particular elements together demonstrate the difficulty of May’s political position as she tries to play to several different constituencies at once while also claiming to be respectful of the will of the people.

The scrapping of freedom of movement plays directly to the nastiest elements of the politics of the Brexit debate, where ‘freedom of movement’ became synonymous with ‘immigration’ (and where, as I said before, immigration was a blanket term for refugees, asylum seekers, EU migrant workers, and non-EU immigrants). May here is trying to placate, in other words, the anti-immigrant/migrant sentiments that appear to have largely driven the Leave vote. Even though Britain has been less affected than most of Europe by immigration, by refugee and asylum crises, and so on, nonetheless anti-immigration sentiment before the referendum was consistently higher in the UK than elsewhere in Europe and was relentlessly nourished by many of the Brexiteers. Meanwhile, May’s second ‘red line’ element, remaining in a customs union, seeks to satisfy a different political logic—one that says that Northern Ireland should not have to re-establish a border with Ireland. But the problem here is that staying in a customs union is seen by Brexiteers as tantamount to essentially staying in the EU, and it enrages them. But whatever the virtues or otherwise of one or the other position, it remains true that neither has been embraced by any known or demonstrable public sentiment.

May’s political gamble has been that she can negotiate a ‘deal’ which has not been and would not be voted on by the very public whose views she says she will not countermand. One of the many dangers of this approach is exactly what seems to have happened so far: she could not negotiate the deal that would satisfy her various political constituencies, with the result that ‘the people’ see her as not delivering Brexit at all. It was clear that she could not get her ‘deal’ through parliament, and that the EU itself was giving her very little leeway in negotiating with them. Meanwhile, at the first opportunity they had after the passing of the Brexit deadline, the British people handed her a defeat in the local elections of May 2nd, when her Conservative party lost over 1300 seats across the country. Furthermore, Conservative prospects in the European Parliament elections (elections that are being held only because the prime minister could not deliver Brexit on time) are looking very dim, with Nigel Farage’s Brexit party predicted to hand the Conservatives a further electoral humiliation. The political logic is clear here. While there is a stasis, an institutionalized indefiniteness, about Brexit, May’s government was seen as having failed to deliver. May’s appeals to the unimpeachable will of the people seem not to have been able to convince those very same people. Her populism, in other words, was not especially effective. Indeed her inability to get Brexit across the finishing line

was seen in some circles as exactly a defiance of the popular will. The Northern Irish branch of UKIP, for example, recently tweeted that “By brazenly defying the very people who elected them, those in the Westminster bubble have made a mockery of British democracy. They think they know better.”<sup>28</sup>

If May herself failed to persuade the populists (and that failure more or less directly led to her resignation announcement on May 24th), some of the other politicians to her right seem to have succeeded in doing so. I refer to the Brexiteers in the Conservative party (and some outside of it, even further to the right). These are the politicians and public figures exemplified by Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage who have consistently propelled the Leave argument and resisted May’s efforts in Parliament. These are the same people whom the commentator Bagehot in *The Economist*, confronted by the impasse over Brexit that they have helped create, called an “elite that failed.” In Bagehot’s analysis, “the country’s model of leadership is disintegrating. Britain is governed by a self-involved clique that rewards group membership above competence, and self-confidence above expertise. This chumocracy has finally met its Waterloo” (Bagehot 2018: 48). To be more precise, this “chumocracy” is in fact made up of the entrenched British upper class, mostly male, mostly educated at a handful of expensive private schools and then at Oxford or Cambridge universities; the chumocracy is better described as contemporary Britain’s aristocracy.

Bagehot might have been wrong about the chumocracy’s Waterloo, since most of them seem to be managing nicely enough. Despite the inherent irony of the prospect of populists being led by a crew of aristocrats, the Brexiteers’s central populist messages were effective throughout the 2016 debates—and indeed, judging by the current popularity of Farage’s Brexit Party, they continue to be effective. As we have already seen, these messages largely revolve around the invocation of the diminution of national sovereignty as a result of EU membership. Brexiteers like Johnson persistently spread misinformation about various EU regulations that appeared absurd or unfair to the popular audience. The notorious myth that the EU had banned the sale of ‘bendy bananas’ (bananas with excessive curvature) was often repeated, along with false claims that various other unnecessary and excessive EU regulations cost the UK £600 million a week.

Those kinds of propositions were and still are the stock in trade for the Brexiteers as they seek to whip up popular antagonism around the EU’s bureaucracy. But complaints about the loss or diminution of national sovereignty often come accompanied, not just by the predictable racist and xenophobic sentiments, but with a fully-stocked imaginary about Britain’s former imperial greatness. That imaginary constructs a simple but comforting narrative that suggests that joining the EU diverted Britain from greatness and that leaving would allow the effort to re-install that greatness. Crucial to this fantasy is the British Commonwealth and the former colonies of the Empire. Those countries not only guarantee the greatness of the imperial past, but they can also act as convenient replacement trading partners once the UK has left Europe. It is this latter idea that is behind the Conservative government’s adoption of the phrase ‘Global Britain’ to promote their vision of a post-Brexit renewal of links with the rest of the world, particularly with the former colonies (most of which have not yet been consulted as to their willingness and many of whom could be presumed to be reluctant to set up new trade links with their former master).

It is sometimes hard to credit that such hankerings and yearnings for—and indeed plans to re-animate—a lost Empire are really alive and well in British culture. But you do not have to look far to see them. For example, one of the leading Brexiteers, Boris Johnson (Eton, Oxford U.) long ago showed what he felt about British imperial power by suggesting that “[Africa] may be a blot, but it is not a blot upon our conscience. The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge any more.” And as recently as 2016 he boasted of Britain’s imperial role in the world, pointing out with pride that there were “178 nations of the world we either conquered or invaded” (quoted in Sarkar 2018).

These kinds of sentiment are at the beating heart of the Brexit movement. There is a refusal not only to understand the pernicious effects of Britain’s imperial past but also an almost psychotic refusal to believe that it is all over. What is more, there seems to be an active agenda on the right-wing to actually rebuild Britain’s empire once the inconvenient EU membership is curtailed. That project is behind a recent speech by the current British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt (Charterhouse, Oxford U.), who recently assured an American audience that “once Brexit has happened, be in no doubt that Britain will retain all the capabilities of a global power” (Hunt 2019). (Both Johnson and Hunt, incidentally, have announced that they will run in the Conservative leadership election now that Theresa May has resigned.)

Mehdi Boussebaa has aptly criticized this idea of a ‘Global Britain’ and the imperial fantasies behind the phrase:

Global Britain appears to be more of a neo-colonial fantasy. Rather than being motivated by a clear economic rationale, the project is largely motivated by a nostalgia for the UK’s imperial past evident in the language used by the Brexiteers

in the last few years—for example UKIP’s James Carver’s assertion that, outside the EU, “the world is our oyster, and the Commonwealth remains that precious pearl within”. This fantasy is symptomatic of, and directly fuels, the “post-colonial melancholia” that has afflicted Britain since the decline of its empire (Boussebaa 2019).

## 6. Ireland

Amidst the reanimation of so much obviously imperialist and colonialist fantasy in the run-up to Brexit, it is more than a simple irony that what is probably the central obstacle for Britain’s ‘deal’ with the EU, and a crucial cause of the Brexit impasse, very much concerns “Britain’s oldest colony”—Ireland (Hallas 1969). As if anyone needs reminding, Ireland had been under the British yoke since the 17th century before being partitioned by Britain in 1921. The border between the so-called Irish Free State in the south (renamed the Republic of Ireland in 1937) and Northern Ireland, which remains a part of the United Kingdom, was a site of contestation and violence for a large part of the 20th century. The so-called Troubles of the last decades of the 20th century, spectacularly memorable for the British deployment of atrocious police and military violence against Irish civilians, came to a point of truce with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. That Agreement remains in place in 2019 and as a result of it the border between the two political entities is now more or less non-existent. However, Brexit would mean that Ireland, as an EU member, would then have a border with a non-EU member in Northern Ireland. The political problem with that scenario seems almost totally intractable.

The EU’s proposed solution—or at least, a temporary band-aid—for the border problem is known as the ‘Irish backstop.’ This is a provision in the May/EU deal that would rule out the re-establishment of a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. As an emblem of the political (and indeed, historical) impasse that Brexit constitutes the backstop is a remarkably freighted phenomenon. Once activated, the backstop would thereafter keep Northern Ireland in an operative customs union with the Irish Republic and thus with the EU itself. Northern Ireland would thence become anomalous in regard to the rest of Britain and would essentially still be *de facto* a part of the EU. This possibility, combined with uncertainty about how long such a backstop would remain in place, has given the Conservative Brexiteers conniptions. But none are more indignant than the Democratic Unionist Party, the group of ten right-wing Northern Irish politicians whose votes have for almost two years now provided the Conservatives with a slim parliamentary majority; but who yet have refused to support May and her deal so long the backstop is an article in that deal. A huge part (though by no means all) of the explanation for Brexitstasis is right there, in this political stalemate whereby May’s deal needed the votes of the DUP, but where the DUP could not countenance the backstop, at the same time as the backstop was a *sine qua non* for the EU. The EU has so far been adamant, appealing to the high moral ground of support for the “goal of peace and reconciliation enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement,” and maintaining “the aim of avoiding a hard border, while respecting the integrity of the Union legal order” (quoted in Hayward: 14).

While the EU’s appeal to the importance of the Agreement, and its frequent reminder of the EU’s mission to maintain peace in Europe, are perhaps a little opportunistic, not to say disingenuous, it is not wrong to suggest that the prospect of a rebuilt border might threaten peace. Certainly it provokes opposition from Irish Republicans who naturally still entertain hopes of a united Ireland and for whom the border would constitute a renewed act of partition and signal a re-establishment of British imperial power. So when the British Parliament thrice voted down Mrs. May’s ‘deal’ in March, the republican party Sinn Féin was dismayed and saw it as a sign of British disregard for the Good Friday Agreement. On their website they claim that “Sinn Féin and the majority of parties across this island, know there is no good or sensible Brexit. [May’s] withdrawal agreement is imperfect but it is the only deal on offer. The ‘backstop’ contained is a guarantee that no hard border will be imposed on this island and protects the Good Friday Agreement.”

The 310 mile long Irish/Northern Irish border was, of course, a hated symbol for Irish nationalists for most of the 20th century and the prospect of its restoration is a blunt reminder of Ireland’s colonial history. If the Good Friday Agreement had essentially brought a kind of postcolonial peace to the island, then British disregard for it automatically raises anti-imperialist hackles, and it does not take much for the accusation of British imperialism to get leveled. This is what we saw, for instance, in 2018 when the Conservative government’s appointment of an egregiously incompetent political hack, Karen Bradley, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland seemed to demonstrate a certain nonchalance in regard to the agreement and indeed to the whole question of Ireland. One of

Bradley's first acts was to express her ignorance about the history and politics of her new bailiwick. And later, at the very moment that discussion of the backstop issue was shining a spotlight on Ireland, Bradley decided to pronounce upon the British killings of Irish civilians during the Troubles. She claimed that those killings "were not crimes, they were people acting under orders and fulfilling their duties in a dignified and appropriate way."<sup>10</sup>

This sort of carelessness from London presumably comes as no surprise to most Irish republicans. But it is particularly notable that it should be thrown in their face at the very moment when the Irish border has become a political lightning rod. Irish understanding of British imperialism has been deep for many decades. In previous decades the militant Irish Republican Army had targeted that imperialism fiercely and effectively, not least in their assassination in 1979 of Lord Mountbatten. Amongst that British aristocrat's imperialist crimes was another partition—the partition of India—which stands out as one of the most casually catastrophic moments in the whole history of British imperialism. For that action, if for no other, Mountbatten was seen by the IRA as a legitimate imperialist target. When he was killed, Sinn Féin, the political arm of the IRA, noted that "What the IRA did to him is what Mountbatten had been doing all his life to other people."<sup>11</sup>

So, even after the Good Friday Agreement, the shadow of British imperialism is never far away from Ireland. Indeed, since the Agreement was signed a new generation of radical Irish republicans appears to have been starting to grow. In the weeks of Parliamentary Brexit debate and voting in April, Saoradh, a small but vocal republican group, made its presence felt, as did the New IRA. Their appearance was, if nothing else, a bracing reminder of how fragile the postcolonial peace is in Ireland, and how quickly sectarian violence might re-ignite. Coincidentally, the week of Parliamentary votes had a somber but very much related backdrop. In Northern Ireland the prosecution services had been reviewing the official killings of civilians in Belfast on Bloody Sunday (January 1972) upon which Karen Bradley had already opined; the review led to only one officer (out of 19 investigated) being charged with civilian deaths.<sup>12</sup> Again, the specter of the imperialist past is very close to everyday proceedings in Ireland.

Both Saoradh and the New IRA combine their antagonism to the Brexit process with an anti-imperialist critique. As Ellen Meiksins Wood has pointed out, in regard to the British relationship with Ireland in particular, "It is a distinctive and essential characteristic of capitalist imperialism that its economic reach far exceeds its direct political and military grasp. It can rely on the economic imperatives of 'the market' to do much of its imperial work" (Wood: 257). Thus, for these Irish radical groups, it is not just the direct imperialism of the UK, with its guns and policing, that is at stake. But also, they recognize the economic imperialism of the EU—it might be cheque-book imperialism, not supported by actual physical force, but it is a form of imperialism nonetheless. And for radical Irish republicans, there is surely not much to choose between one kind of imperialism and another.

## 7. "I Can't Register"

In this essay, I have been trying to forge a perspective on Brexit by way of the dynamics of its history, more than through its strictly current stasis. After all, both the definition of Brexit and the future trajectory of the narrative of Brexit are yet to be resolved—even as every day brings some kind of shift in the narrative direction or the definitional possibilities. And yet Brexit's central questions and issues, as well as its determinations and ideologies, seem to me tolerably easy to identify and have been so for a very long time. And they depend, I want to claim, on the longer rehearsal of the antinomies that I have been trying to point out. In taking a step back to 1975, and by invoking the air of British imperialism, for example, I hope to have pointed to some issues that clearly need to be taken into account if we are to eventually understand the Brexit process, whatever it becomes.

Indeed, it might even be worthwhile to go back even a few more years even than 1975 to help thicken this perspective and to help explain more what I am trying to get at. Tom Nairn does this in his 1972 essay, "The European Problem." That essay remains as good an exposition (adjusted for inflation) as we can get of the various fundamental antinomies—the Yes/No or Remain/Leave conundrums—that have swirled around for years in British culture in relation to the European question. Nairn, in fact, looks back to 1962, a decade before Britain actually joined the Common Market but a moment when the matter was being widely debated. He points to no less a figure than Raymond Williams giving his view in the course of a symposium put together by the magazine *Encounter*. Williams sees the question of joining Europe or not as a distraction for the left: "I'm sorry," he says, "but if you are taking a poll on the apparently existing choices—to go 'into Europe' or to stay 'out of the Common Market'—I can't register" (quoted in Nairn 1972: 106). Correctly seeing 'Europe' as a project of capitalist integration

and rationalization, Williams also correctly saw the dangers of a kind of nationalist recidivism.

Nairn, in fact, takes Williams severely to task for his ‘plague on both their houses’ approach. And I have some sympathy with that, even despite the fact that I myself effectively did not register when I boycotted the 1975 referendum! However, it is also true that Williams’s position is characteristically careful: “apparently existing choices,” he says, perhaps challenging us to find some new and different ones. Earlier I quoted Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy* to support my undergraduate notion in 1975 that it was best to boycott the referendum. But in that same text Marx offers a limited but rousing justification for registering one way or another:

.... the free trade system is destructive. It breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point. In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favour of free trade (Marx: 108).

Even if I think that Marx’s optimistic outlook would not be shared by many on the left today, it is nonetheless a reassurance that it is possible to find grounds for making a choice. Marx’s exhortation would, in my view, be a better justification for choosing Europe than, say, being reluctant to give up the many consumerist benefits that the EU’s freedom of trade and movement has brought.

But on the other hand, the left case against choosing Europe is still enormously strong. That case is well represented by Costas Lapavistas in a book that resonates with Tony Benn’s fears about European integration that I cited earlier. Lapavistas’s argument against the EU is heavily filtered through the experience of Syriza in Greece during its financial crisis and in his account, the problems in that story derive mostly from the predominance of Germany within the EU and from the effect of the Euro and the Eurozone. The two things combined are what forced the surrender of Syriza to pressure from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the EU. Indeed, there can be no question that the EU’s treatment of Greece was an exercise of naked power and a ruthless strategy that did nothing to help Greece and everything to enforce the cohesion of the EU itself. It was, if you like, its own kind of imperialist policy. And the problems are exacerbated by the so-called democratic deficit in the EU and its institutions; in Lapavistas’s view what happened in Greece “provides clear evidence of the hollowing out of democracy in the EU as neoliberalism has marched on relentlessly” (Lapavistas 2109: 113).

Lapavistas’s critique of the EU is echoed in many places on the left and here I shall point to just a couple. John Gillingham’s book, *The EU: An Obituary*, makes a pretty watertight case that the EU is essentially dysfunctional, and he concludes that as a result “the EU cannot manage any of the present crises it faces” (Gillingham 2018: 245). His work analyses a whole host of those crises and the problems facing the EU: from the humanitarian problem of the current refugee tragedy, to the social and political one of inequality caused amongst and with nations by the one-size-fits-all Euro, to the financial one of a stressed banking system, to the general economic problem of slow European growth, to the political problem of the rise of authoritarian populist governments around Europe, to the institutional one of its own undemocratic and inflexible governance. And the list goes on, but the EU remains unable to handle its problems and crises because it is, ultimately, “undemocratic, inefficient, blinkered, inflexible, and unpopular” (Gillingham: vii).

Gillingham’s objections to the EU often sound more pragmatically oriented than ideological. By contrast, Alex Callinicos, while he obviously recognizes the EU’s dysfunctional characteristics as a flaw, makes a generally more ideological case:

The EU today is best understood as a dysfunctional would-be imperialist power. We can see its imperialist character most clearly in its promotion of neoliberalism—through its expansion to incorporate Central and Eastern Europe, in its policies towards neighbouring states in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe and now, within the EU, through the disciplinary mechanisms enforcing permanent austerity. But the dysfunctional nature of this imperialism is evident both internally [the Eurozone] and externally [Ukraine] (Callinicos: 2015).

There seems to me no denying the power of these kinds of criticism. Any Remainer needs to take them seriously. Certainly, if it turns out that Brexit does not happen, or happens only in some partial or diminished form, these are the kinds of critiques of the European project that will need to be addressed immediately. It would necessarily be a case, in my view, of accepting Lapavistas’s position when he claims that “If the Left intends to implement radical anti-capitalist policies and effectively confront the neoliberal juggernaut of the EU, it must be prepared for a rupture” (Lapavistas: 131). For him, such a rupture would involve undoing the Eurozone first of all, and this would be followed by a systematic rejection of the other components of the EU’s institutional structure. The aim of such a rupture would be, of course, to find the space again for the kinds of radical anti-capitalist policies which the EU

currently stands in the way of.

On the other hand, if Brexit does happen, and in whatever form, surely the very same aims must apply. Britain has been subjected to an exceptionally cruel neoliberal regime which has applied unusually stringent austerity measures over the last decade or so. Yet the left opposition to such a regime can scarcely get off the ground and, since the 2016 referendum, has struggled to make itself heard over the din of the Brexit conversation. It is perhaps time now to remember that the left's expansive goals of economic and social justice do not depend upon the particular nature of the regime or regimes in which we find ourselves. The left in Europe and in the UK today should reject the imperialism of the EU as much as the imperialist fantasies of the British Brexiteers; and it should reject neoliberal austerity policies whether they are imposed on Greece by the EU or on the British working class by a Conservative government; it should oppose racism and xenophobia whether its symptom is Islamophobia in Paris or prejudice against Polish migrants in Manchester. The tasks and responsibilities for the left are, in other words, independent of the false choices offered by capitalism's idea of democracy.

I hope, as a final word, that this is something like the perspective that the Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, has been espousing all throughout the Brexit drama. He is, at any rate, clearly impatient with the terms of that drama. While campaigning just before the European parliamentary elections in May, he posed a rhetorical question to his audience: "We could allow ourselves to be defined only as 'remainers' or 'leavers' ... But where would that take us? Who wants to live in a country stuck in this endless loop?" (quoted in Stewart 2019).

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## Endnotes

1. Tony Benn later described the division, while accusing the party membership of not being forceful enough in resisting Wilson's Cabinet: "...in March 1975 the Cabinet decided to recommend a 'Yes' vote.... There was no consultation with the parliamentary party which, when it met after the Cabinet had made its recommendation, came out in favour of a 'No' vote. The Cabinet took no notice. The special Labour conference also opposed our membership in the Common Market, yet those in the Cabinet who upheld party policy were described as 'dissenting ministers.'" (Benn 1982: 189)

2. See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/11859648/Jeremy-Corbyn-admits-he-voted-for-Britain-to-leave-Europe-in-1975.html>

3. The four freedoms have also been further codified in the 1986 Single European Act that effectively established the beginning of the European Union itself in 1993; in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, currently the central governing treaty of the EU; and in an attachment to all consolidated versions of the various EU treaties, Protocol 27, which lays out rules and guidelines on competition in the internal European market.

4. The best efforts seem to me to be Watkins 2016, and the Epilogue to Saunders 2018.

5. See Sudarshan 2016 for a helpful and lucid dissection of the way that Polish migrants have been treated in the UK since the accession of Poland to the EU in 2004. Sudarshan makes a brave attempt to explain how the prejudice faced by Poles (and other eastern Europeans) relates to—and differs from—the quotidian racism of British culture, and how their presence affected the

populist imaginary in the run up to the referendum.

6. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/01/16/leave-campaign-bus-claim-britain-will-save-350m-week-brexiteers/>

7. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/23/the-observer-view-on-the-brexiteer-march>

8. [https://twitter.com/UKIP\\_NI/status/1105990081548967936](https://twitter.com/UKIP_NI/status/1105990081548967936)

9. <https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/52734>

10. "Karen Bradley faces calls to resign over Troubles comments". *BBC News*, 6 March 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-47471469>

11. Quoted from Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis\\_Mountbatten,\\_1st\\_Earl\\_Mountbatten\\_of\\_Burma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Mountbatten,_1st_Earl_Mountbatten_of_Burma). Mountbatten was for me personally a very proximate object lesson in British imperialism and in the ways of the British aristocracy since I grew up in the shadow of his family estate, Broadlands, Romsey.

12. *The Guardian*, March 14th, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/14/one-soldier-to-face-charges-over-bloody-sunday-killings>

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