

A Farwell to Europe: Brexit and the Triumph of Nationalism and Identity Tension

الوداع لأوروبا: خروج بريطانيا من الاتحاد الأوروبي وانتصار القومية وتوترات الهوية

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Abstract

As many Western nation-states transformed into member states, several scholars, such as Fukuyama, hurriedly declared the finality of history. The disintegration of the Communist bloc and the proliferation of liberal democracy appeared to corroborate this presumption. Nevertheless, there has been a noticeable increase in the embracing of nationalism and a subsequent cultural backlash that has spread throughout Western countries. The outcome of Brexit, in response to these changes in identity and politics, has caused significant disruption to the idea of a unified superstate throughout the continent. This prompted a collective reassessment of Britain's position inside the European Union. The Brexit referendum served as a testing ground where the entwined British identity, based on historical stories of independence and exceptionalism, battled with the practicalities of a transnational European identity. The mood and political approach of nationalism drove a movement that viewed the EU as a danger to British independence. Consequently, this paper argues that Brexit surfaced as a manifestation of profound anxieties regarding identity, autonomy, and the safeguarding of culture, thereby creating uncertainty around the concept of a united Europe.

Keywords: Nation -states; disintegration; Brexit; nationalism; identity

المخلص

مع تحول الكثير من الدول القومية الغربية إلى كونهم دول أعضاء، سارع العديد من العلماء، مثل فوكوياما، إلى إعلان نهاية التاريخ. فقد بدا أن تفكك الكتلة الشيوعية وانتشار الديمقراطية الليبرالية يؤكدان هذا الافتراض. لكن بالرغم من ذلك، كان هناك ازدياد ملحوظ في تبني القومية وظهور رد فعل ثقافي انتشر في أنحاء الدول الغربية. فقد كانت نتيجة الاستفتاء على خروج بريطانيا من الاتحاد الأوروبي، كرد فعل على هذه التغيرات في الهوية والسياسة، اضطرابا كبيرا و خيبة امل في فكرة الدولة العظمى الموحدة عبر القارة. مما دفع إلى إعادة تقييم لموقف بريطانيا داخل الاتحاد الأوروبي. هذا وقد شكل استفتاء بريكست ساحة اختبار حيث تصارعت الهوية البريطانية المترسخة في قصص تاريخية عن الاستقلال والتميز مع واقعية الهوية الأوروبية. وأدت الحالة المزاجية والنهج السياسي للقومية إلى تحفيز حركة ترى في الاتحاد

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الأوروبي تهديداً لاستقلال بريطانيا. بناءاً على هذا، يقدم هذا البحث جدالية ترى في بريكست تجسيدا لتوجس عميق و حقيقي حول الهوية والاستقلالية والحفاظ على الثقافة، مما أثار حالة من عدم اليقين حول مفهوم أوروبا الموحدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدول القومية؛ التفكك؛ بريكسيت؛ القومية؛ الهوية

Introduction

The resurgence of identity politics brings about a whole set of issues which had intentionally or unintentionally been muted or neglected by the political establishment. The question of what constitutes “the people”, “the nation”, and “national identity” is becoming at the forefront of most Western elections. This either takes the form of asserting national sovereignty over the dominance of supranational organisations (as in the UK) or an assault on immigration and foreigners (as in the US, France, Sweden, and Hungary). In each case, the question of identity is addressed through a peculiar, retrospective vision of a time when “the nation” meant uniqueness, unity, pride, and self-enclosure. This interest in identity, and national identity in particular, has been articulated in party manifestos and campaign slogans, such as “America First”, “*Pour une Europe des Nations et des Peuples*”, and “The Netherlands is Ours Again”.

The way in which the issue of identity is introduced in political discourse is also significant. Most of the time, the question of national identity is presented by nationalists and populists with a tone of lament and loss. This is usually apparent in their claim of reclaiming a “lost nation” or “greatness.” Those who find these slogans appealing seem to agree that, indeed, there is something lost from them in terms of identity, although they are not exactly sure what it is, nor *how* it was lost (Fisher, 2015).

Brexit represented an opportunity to rekindle the flame of a lost prestige and status. For Brexiteers, Europe has always been a shackle rather than a partner. Accordingly, Europe is still the “other” and could not be fully incorporated within their national identity. “The tensions between multicultural, monocultural, and monoethnic versions of national identity were exacerbated by the turn towards a continental Europe that imperial Britain had defined itself against, ultimately leading to another set of debates over Britishness as part of Brexit” (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2021, p. 122) The relationship between Britain and Europe has been shaped, to significant degree, by the transformation in the perception of national identity before and after joining the EU. From isolationist to pragmatist, Britain could not rid itself of the national myth of British exceptionalism and Brexit has been the means to retrieve Britain’s former independent ties with its former colonies as well as its special relationship with the USA.

Perhaps more than that, the remaking of British national identity through Brexit appears to cause more confusion and division among the British. Scotland, for instance, which voted remain seems more willing to hold another referendum for independence in 2021, as the country-under the leadership of Nicola Sturgeon- thinks differently on its relationship with Europe (Castle, 2021). In Northern Ireland Brexit has reignited an old effort by the Nationalists to untie with the Republic of Ireland, with one-third of protestant unionists backing a Remain vote (Noonan, 2021). These differing attitudes

from two constitutive British polities show the fact that while the UK has chosen an inward-looking stance against Europe, some of its isles have an outward-looking aspiration with regard to Europe. For the Northern Irish and the Scottish, the EU has enabled them to bypass the claustrophobic limitations of Britishness after “being forgotten about in the corridors of power in both London and Dublin” (Guardian News, 2016)

As shall be argued, this kind of identity disorientation is a common predicament among Western countries, especially those that have experienced a status of global power and influence, such as the United Kingdom, the subject of our study. But before discussing how these sentiments affect the saliency of identity politics, first, we have to look at the reasons behind the existence and emergence of national identity and how it has become at the centre of today’s politics.

It is, therefore, timely appropriate and circumstantially pressing to revisit the shift in societal and political mood from the seemingly progressive perception of nationalism to an ethnic relapse to the nation-state. The United Kingdom, one of Europe’s earliest democracies, is adopted as a prime case study that allows for an exegesis of the current state of politics in the West. Accordingly, the aim of this analysis is not merely to revisit but rather to *critically examine and qualitatively revise the Brexit narrative from an identitarian standpoint*.

1. Historical Context

According to Fukuyama, the question of identity emerged in Europe as a by-product of industrialisation and consequent urbanisation (Fukuyama, 2019, p. 59). Villagers in rural communities, looking for better livelihoods, moved to urban areas where there were job opportunities in factories and other sectors of industry to secure decent wages for themselves and their families. Once in the city, they quickly realised that their new lives were missing the sense of cohesion and solidarity which their rural communities had once provided. The cultural and psychological void the new city dwellers experienced was further intensified by the often-degrading slum and tenant conditions which were associated with industrialisation in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This shift from “*Gemeinschaft*” (village) to “*Gesellschaft*” (urban), Fukuyama argues, brought about a sense of “psychological dislocation”, which had been the cornerstone in the emergence of nationalism (63).

The experience of displacement and misplacement this category of the populace went through engenders a nostalgic image of their past community among them. This image, often exaggerated, functions as a mental signifier for “home”, “homeland”, “heartland”, or “nation”. Subsequently, the imagined communities are then used as a reference for simplicity, solidarity, and camaraderie. The scholar who saw nations as “imagined”, Benedict Anderson, did not mean that these communities are not real, but they are imagined “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2016, p. 18). The “deep horizontal

comradeship,” can, therefore, be understood as a social, fraternal construction so genuine and powerful, for which millions of people are ready to kill and die (19).

The construction of “imagined communities” came at a time of identity loss to compensate for the void that was created by modernisation and its disruptive effects. The nation represents a space of belonging to all of its members regardless of their geographic location. Nationalism, as such, seems to invoke a sense of inclusion and a bond that keeps members of society in an enduring communion. However, beyond this image of togetherness, there are shared physical and cultural traits, such as race, language, and ethnicity. These characteristics often constitute a fixed national identity. Those who do not share these traits are not considered as part of the imagined nation. To put it in other words, individual identities are inescapably constitutive of national identities.

Understanding nationalism under these terms leads us to justifiably think of it as an element of exclusion rather than inclusion. This is mainly because, in any given nation, there is at least a minority that does not share one or all of the dominant group’s identity traits. Therefore, this minority will probably be subject to discriminatory treatment on the basis of their difference. When this happens, nationalism becomes exclusionary and divisive. Throughout history, nations that built their national identities on fixed identity traits were often dragged down the path of repression, deprivation, and, in extreme cases, genocide.

As we shall argue, nationalism does not always have to be confined to a narrow one-people/one-nation perspective. A more liberal understanding of nationalism suggests that members of the nation could bond on the basis of their universal values, equality, and adherence to the Constitution (Ipperciel, 2007). This type of nationalism has better chances of fitting in today’s liberal and pluralistic democracies: the degree to which an individual is a national is measured by the degree of his allegiance to the constitution and civic values. Contrary to ethnic nationalism, pluralistic (civic) nationalism not only avoids local tensions and conflict at home but also has an inclusive, welcoming outlook towards approximate nations.

Both types of nationalism represent a pattern of thinking about society(ies), which directs our actions and decision-making. Thus, we may think of nationalism as an ideology. Michael Freeden, who worked extensively on ideologies, considers “pluralistic nationalism” as the most capable of binding together a plurality of ethnicities, religions, and cultures under a state-sponsored framework of “supra-national identity” (Freeden, 1998). Otherwise, members of society will either be resistant to individual or group diversity (homogeneous nationalism), or they might be reluctant to tolerate divergence from national norms (holistic nationalism). By nature, liberal democracy, as a form of politics, requires a malleable form of national identity in order to adapt to contemporary political challenges. The risk of not adopting a flexible conception of national identity would automatically yield a nation of ghetto identities: self-enclosed cultural communities dominated by a hegemonic “national identity.”

In reality, there have been attempts to bypass nationalism by the introduction of global and supranational initiatives that aimed at transcending the old limits of the nation-state. The European Union, for example, was founded as a monetary union to

eliminate national rivalries among European states that had cost them dearly until recently. However, when this union initiated the final phase of a political union, there was significant resistance from nationalist political forces throughout the entire Union. These nationalist movements have stood against any attempt of upscaling the European project. Euroscepticism, thus, has become a vehicle for nationalists to express their rejection of the slicing of national sovereignty and the dissolution of identity. As detailed earlier, these movements are on the rise, and some of them have achieved unprecedented political gains at the national and supranational levels.

These developments confirm Anderson's argument about the potential power of nationalism on its subscribers. Today, the resurrection of nationalism in one of the most liberal regions on the planet certainly exhibits deficiencies and flaws in contemporary democratic practice. However, it also signals an urgent necessity to readdress previous remedies to nationalism in light of the current political and economic transformations. One way to do this is by revisiting the historic and intellectual development of nationalism in one of the most essential parts of Western Europe, the United Kingdom. After all, it is the UK that bore the brunt of the most consequential effects of the rising tide of nationalism.

2. The Exceptional Case of British Nationalism: Britishness and National Identity

The British case is an interesting subject for examining the development of national identity and nationalism. Unlike other nations, British national identity has been an evolving project throughout its history. The unprecedented territorial expansion, in particular, of the British Empire during the 19th century led to the emergence of different competing interpretations of "the nation" and national identity. As a multinational state, the British Empire consisted of scattered, non-contiguous territories and colonies around the globe. This sparked a long debate about whether the colonial settlements were to be deemed part of the British Empire or were to remain with the status of colonies. From a cultural perspective, the inhabitants of these colonies, indigenous and settlers, also faced an existential crisis of identity. Who among those living within the Empire's vast reach were British, and who were not?

The question of Britishness, of course, did not start as a result of the British colonial quest, but indeed, it was becoming more relevant during the formation of the Second Empire. The Empire's large swathes of land consisted of diverse ethnicities and cultures, none of which were identified as "English". Britishness, as opposed to Englishness, had been an identity umbrella under which all subjects of the Empire lived in relative harmony. As argued by Kumar (2000), the British policy-makers intentionally avoided the creation of a dominant-group identity so as not to stir sentiments of alienation or resentment among the colonies. The demise of previous empires, such as the Ottoman and Hungarian empires, came at a point when they succumbed to the idea of a national identity defined by a dominant ethnicity. Therefore, in the earliest days of the Empire, Britishness was employed as a form of "imperial identity" that transcended the superior/inferior categorisation between different segments of the Empire. By the

late 19th century, the debate over British national identity became the centre. The rise of global and regional powers, such as the US, Russia, and Germany, imposed a new reality on the only global power at the time, the British Empire (Bell, 2010)—the question of imperial identity needed to be readdressed through a redefinition of key identity concepts. First, there was the advocacy of a “translocal public sphere” beyond the distinction of national and settler. Second, the perception of the “domestic” was also redefined as “a space that stretched across the face of the earth” (199). The renovation of the Empire’s national identity to encompass all the diverse cultural and ethnic components was, thus, a means to create a more profound sense of attachment and belonging to all parts of the Empire. Moreover, this strategy also temporarily prevented the rise of local nationalisms among the colonies; which then viewed themselves as integral parts of the glorious Empire.

Britishness, as an imperial national identity, has played a significant role in holding the Empire together in a time of global volatility. Not only did it provide a common identity for British nationals to rally around, but Britishness also represented a new form of “a ‘world state’ that ‘transcends nationality’” (205-206). Although a multinational, the British Empire managed to absorb other nationalities through its imperial policy of equality between different ethnicities.

Britishness, as a national identity, was built on common myths and historical memories. It represents the political, religious, and cultural shifts the empire went through: from monarchy to parliament, from Catholicism to Protestantism, and from medievalism to Enlightenment. In addition, Britishness is also embedded in the missionary days of the empire, when it journeyed to “hearts of darkness” around the globe, planting the supposed seeds of democracy and human rights. These common memories and myths, Smith argues, are a fundamental feature of national identity. The imperial episodes of the British Empire represented a repository of collective memories, which has become a defining element of its identity (Smith, 1991, p. 14).

Englishness, on the other hand, embodies a narrow ethnic perception of national identity. It is a form of identity-based on the idea of England as the founder of the empire and the heir to the Anglo-Saxon heritage. Langlands (1999) states that “the British state established in the early eighteenth century was largely built upon pre-existing English institutions and governmental practices” (61). England, as the founder of the union, also represented a cohesive English ethnicity among other peripheral Irish, Scottish, and Welsh ethnicities. Moreover, key components that define Britain stem from the English Homeland: the English language, the Anglican Church, and “Westminster-style political institutions” are dominant English elements within the British national identity (Cohen, 1995, p. 7).

This major role Englishness plays in determining national identity blurs the line between Britishness, as a broader, more inclusive sense of national identity, and the concise scope offered by Englishness and the hierarchal assumptions it entails. Some scholars argue that Englishness is particularly appealing to those who feel disoriented or confused about their national belonging. These people seem to fill the identity gap they experience by claims of Englishness (Aughey, 2013, p. 19; Bryant, 2008, p. 677).

In other instances, Englishness might be understood as an assertion of self-determination on the part of the English. As an example, while Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales have their own bodies of legislation (parliament and assemblies), the English, by contrast, have neither (Kumar, 2010, p. 476). This asymmetrical arrangement might stir sentiments of political inequality among the English, who might be tempted to assert their higher English status as the founder of the union.

The Britishness/Englishness dichotomy continues to shape the debate over the question of the UK's national identity. As populist and nationalist movements in Western Europe are increasingly gaining steam, the issue of national identity is becoming politicised across the political spectrum. Policies of immigration, social care, healthcare, border security, and even international trade agreements are today being determined on the basis of narrow, shortsighted nationalist policies. From Putin in Russia to Modi in India to Trump in the US, the world is witnessing a transition from ideological political debates to identity politics. As Samuel Huntington noticed many years ago, politics is shifting from ideological debates over the nature and the size of governments to political identity, which is concerned with purely seminarian issues of national belonging (Huntington, 1993).

On the one hand, the rise of populist nationalist movements could be attributed to economic stagnation and anaemic recovery in the Western world after the 2008 economic crisis. On the other hand, a closer look at the political map shows that these movements have thrived even in countries such as Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands, which are doing quite well economically. Therefore, the alternative answer for this nationalist-populist burst could be attributed to popular uneasiness towards the increasing dissolution of their shared national identities as a result of the supranational governance model (Barber, 2010; Beck, 2018). These movements and parties have adopted an inward-looking nationalist perception of national identity that can hold them together in a rapidly changing world.

In the UK, national identity is inescapably associated with the nation's historical and political development. The rise and fall of the Empire, as well as both union acts of 1707 and 1801, have rendered British identity a layered identity. Ethnic groups all over the Empire thought of themselves simultaneously as British, but also Welsh, Scottish, and English (Colley, 2005). This form of identity seemed to work well during the days of the imperial nation, but since the mid-20th century, Britishness has become a source of vagueness and conflicting identities. The anti-colonial independence movements, the disastrous and exhaustive World War Two, and the rise of the United States as a new superpower marked the end of imperial Britain (McCrone, 1997). The disintegration of the Empire did not necessarily mean the expiration of Britishness, but it certainly changed the perception of Britons in relation to their national identity.

The challenges to Britishness today are both from the inside and the outside. The steady rise of nationalism among the British Isles intensified feelings of detachment among the British from Britishness. As more powers are devolved to former Welsh and Scottish dependencies, the link between Britishness and the former British subjects seems to weaken. It has been empirically established that people in Wales and Scotland respectively favour their Welsh and Scottish identities over Britishness (Bond & Rosie,

2002; Wyn Jones, 2001). From the outside, more integration with the European Union allowed immigrants to diversify the cultural identity of Britain and yielded more vagueness to the British national identity.

Tilley and Heath argue that pride in Britishness has been declining due to generational changes (Tilley & Heath, 2007). The older generation, who lived in imperial Britain, gave way to the younger generation, who were born amidst the global-scale retreat of Britain, whose identity “is less distinct and more frequently called into question” (674). The post-war generation does not have a strong attachment to the “imagined community” their parents and grandparents held in their memory. Rather, this generation was born in an era of rapid economic and cultural globalisation and interconnectedness. The global might and colonial stretch that had once provided national belonging and pride for the parents has been demolished by the degradation of the Empire.

Summing up the factors behind the decline of Britishness, Gamble writes, “The identities which arose from the Union and Empire which underpinned the expansion of England and the idea of Britishness for more than three centuries have been called into question by devolution, decolonization, by immigration, and by European integration” (Gamble, 2017, p. 9). Since 1992, the number of English who viewed themselves as primarily English rather than British had risen from 31% to 47% in 2006 (Kumar, 2010, p. 476). In Scotland, the figures show a significant decline in Britishness. In 1979, 38% of Scots identified themselves as primarily British, a figure which has fallen dramatically in 2006 when only 14% described themselves as British (“The Decline of British Identity,” 2012). Moreover, in 2014, the Scottish government held an unsuccessful Independence Referendum to split from the UK. These events and numbers show a significant retreat of Britishness as the defining character of national identity in the UK and the rise of local identities as a substitute that fills the identity gap left by Britishness.

Politically, the assertion of national identity has resurged with the electoral breakthrough of the UKIP and BNP in the 2004 European Election and once more in the landslide victory of UKIP in the 2014 EU Election. However, Brexit represented the ultimate expression of the rise of the nationalist-populist tide in the UK. Severing ties with the EU marked the ultimate victory of xenophobic, nationalist parties of the far-right in the UK, but it certainly can be interpreted as national independence for England. According to O’Toole (2016), Brexit “is an English national movement” which is blindly heading towards “accidental independence.” Indeed, in England, 53% of voters chose to leave the EU compared to 44% in Northern Ireland and only 38% in Scotland (“EU Referendum Results,” 2020). As mentioned earlier, English nationalism seems to defy both integration into the EU and dissolution into the United Kingdom; thus, Brexit has marked the emergence of a distinctive English nationalism that sets it apart from the rest of the European nations as well as the rest of the kingdom.

2.1 Brexit: An Assertion of National Identity

Brexit, as a Eurosceptic and nationalist movement, also came as an assertion of national sovereignty and identity. Many Britons saw the European Union as a contender for national sovereignty and a threat to national identity. Goodhart fervently argues that

the European Union has forced many countries to relinquish sovereignty in exchange for admission into the single market (Goodhart, 2017, pp. 1-14). Moreover, the Union has intentionally or unintentionally dragged some member countries, such as Britain, into a political union that was not intended when they joined the Union in 1973 (then known as the European Communities). This is a valid assumption to a certain degree, as it has been advanced earlier. The logic behind the foundation of the Union was that economic integration would yield further cooperation in other areas and eventually will lead to political integration. Jean Monnet, a French founding father of the European Union, is said to have stated, in a memo on April 3, 1952, that “the fusion of economic functions would compel nations to fuse their sovereignty into that of a single European state” (Quoted in Baudet, 2012, p. 148).

Proponents of this perspective, such as Goodhart, argue that the project of a united Europe had nothing to offer for Britain. Although Britain lost its vast empire after the Second World War, it quickly rebuilt itself into one of the most robust economic and military powers in the world. As Simms puts it, “Europe was designed to fix something that was never broken in Britain” (Simms, 2016). Indeed, as argued by Goodhart, Britain had a prestigious world status even before joining the European Union as a permanent member of the Security Council with nuclear deterrence and one of the strongest militaries on the planet (Goodhart, 2017, p. 99).

Reluctance towards Britain joining the EU, however, was not solely expressed from within Britain. The founding members of the EU, especially France, were hesitant to admit the UK into the union. Centuries of imperial rivalries, suspicion, and distinct traditions and values had created an adversarial environment between the old European rivals (Cohen, 2000). Joining a European union, therefore, was met with suspicion and mistrust from all parties.

From a cultural perspective, the EU has added another level of ambiguity to the already hazy notion of British identity. As an EU member-state, the multilayered Britishness has gained a supranational layer that seems to have exacerbated the crisis of the British identity. Most aspects that had previously been regarded as British, such as the unwritten constitution, were being integrated, replaced, or dissolved into a more extensive European set of legally defined rules and laws, which the British felt they had no say upon. Moreover, the territorial limits of Britain as a nation had been transformed into a European space. These defining national characteristics are at the core of national identity; therefore, the EU, for many Britons, had stepped outside its original economic aims to become a hegemonic cultural entity.

As a result, the people who previously wandered between Englishness and Britishness are now faced with another dimension of identity that goes beyond their traditional sense of national identity. For those who feel estranged by the rapid change of national identity, the return to the simplicity of their traditional national identity can only be attained through exiting the EU to save what little is left of Britishness. Rushing out of the EU, as shall be discussed in this paper, was a compelling desire that could not be deterred by the irreversible and consequential ramifications of abandoning the Union.

Writing for the *New York Times*, Ivan Krastev points out that both sides of the Brexit campaign had unrealistic expectations on the future relations between the UK and

the European Union (Krastev, 2016). These expectations were built up upon retrospective, nostalgic sentiments. The Brexiteers, or “the sovereignists,” wanted a kind of Brexit that would restore them their cherished classical perception of the nation-state “when governments guarded their borders, managed their economies and enforced social cohesion.” The remainers, on the other hand, also wanted to go back in time before the Eastward expansion of the European Union; when it was predominantly Western, the “golden age” of the Union. According to Krastev, between these two sentimental visions for post-Brexit lies the fact that neither lives up to the political reality.

Krastev wonders on whether Brexit may actually resolve the crisis of identity many British experience. He warns that attempts at reclaiming national sovereignty may very likely backfire. Brexit has revealed that there are conflicting interests and opinions when it comes to withdrawing from the European Union within the UK itself. As an example, Scotland has repeatedly expressed its will to hold another referendum for independence should Brexit jeopardise its economic interests with the European Union (Maxwell, 2020). Brexit has unveiled the diverging visions of England and Scotland on foreign policy. While the Tory government has been persistent in its determination to break up with the European Union, the Scottish nationalist government has been reluctant towards the idea of a forced Brexit (Maxwell, 2020). The Scottish SNP also sees an opportunity to succeed this time to mobilize the overwhelming Scottish discontent over Brexit and turn it into a second chance for independence.

3. Brexit and the Fractured European Project: Identity, Economics, and the Rise of Populism

In a 2016 EU assembly, Nigel Farage, then the leader of UKIP, sneered at his peers about the triumphant Brexit campaign, “When I came here 17 years ago and I said that I wanted to lead a campaign to get Britain to leave the European Union, you all laughed at me, well, I have to say you are not laughing now, are you?” (BBC News, 2016). As a matter of fact, Farage, as many other nationalist populists, had undoubtedly played an effective role in mobilizing anti-EU sentiments in Britain during a prolonged period of time. But while anti-EU voices might have been a necessary condition in the development of Brexit, they were not a sufficient condition. It was the EU itself, however, which contributed greatly to the breakup.

Economically, joining the EU had unquestionably boosted Britain’s economic potentials, especially in the 1970s and 1990s through incentivizing the country’s firms and companies to compete with the bloc’s huge economic market, estimated at 10 per cent rise in the British economy (Giles, 2017). On the other hand, liberal national policies initiated by Margaret Thatcher, and later consolidated by Tony Blair, were also tuned to meet the requirements for Britain to effectively trade with other members of the bloc as well as other states. In October 2015 the Center for Economic and Business Research released a report suggesting that 3.1 million jobs in Britain were linked to the UK’s exports to the EU and forecasts greater gains had the UK remained in the EU (CEBR, 2020). So, if the Britain’s relation with the EU seems to be mutually beneficial, since Britain had been the third largest contributor to the EU’s annual budget, then the most obvious question that comes to mind is why did Britain chose to end a partnership that seems to be delivering?

A plausible answer to this this question suggests that economics, as relevant as it is, may not be the appropriate explanation to anti-European attitudes in Britain. The

European Union may have opened free spaces for Britain to trade freely with Europe, but it had also created a new cultural market, in which British culture and identity had to compete with other European cultures and identifies.

Fossum argues that the charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, put forward by the EU in 2001, makes a trend towards a European post-national identity (Fossum, 2001). This initiative also comes in line with a recent political theory attempting to shift from previous cultural and nationalist attachments towards a more universal notion of constitutional patriotism. This new tendency in political practice holds that allegiance to be primarily civic rather than national or cultural.

Until the early 21st century, the European integrationist project seemed to function accordingly, but since then, everything in the union seemed to go in the opposite direction. As a member of the EU, Britain was obliged to open its borders who seek to reside or work in the UK. This part of the UK-EU agreement became a divisive issue in Britain, especially after the accession of post-communist countries, such as Romania and Poland, into the EU in 2004. In the same year, Britain witnessed the emergence of populist Eurosceptic parties, such as the UK Independence Party and the British National Party. Since then, immigration and migration became central in the political debate on the status of the UK as a member of the EU.

In 2004, the number of EU-born migrants in the UK were at an estimate of 1.5 million; however, that number had steadily risen to 3.7 million in 2019, most of whom are of Polish and Romanian origin (Migration Observatory, 2021). Social attitudes towards immigration among British citizens have remained divided and dependent on various factors. In its recent 31st edition, a British Social Attitudes survey shows that half of the British public held positive attitude towards immigration, while the other half held negative views on immigration with regard to their impact on culture and economy (Park, Bryson, & Curtis, 2014). According to the survey, those who have positive views on immigration tend to be skilled or professional workers and graduates. Those who do not share this view tend to be mostly unskilled, manual workers who do not have high educational qualifications. The report also holds that the generational factor is significant. Those with positive attitudes to immigration tend to be the young, 18-29 age groups. The oldest generation, however, tend to hold the most intensely negative views.

On the question of the relation between Britain and Europe, the report indicates that 35% of the public in the UK favor a withdrawal from Europe, the highest since 1985. The data exhibits that while the number of those who identify themselves as “European” has remained mostly consistent since 1999, those who regard themselves primarily “British” had risen significantly. Among those who do not identify themselves as primarily “European,” 40% supported leaving the European Union. More significantly, even among those who identify as “European,” and who are most expected to be enthusiastic supporters of the EU, 43% of them feel that the EU’s powers should be reduced.

The aforementioned data definitely raises a red flag of a growing malfunction in the European project. The expected joyride towards an ever-closer Europe now seems to be not so joyful during recent years. Since the early 21st century, the EU has gone through some rough turbulence, starting from the electoral breakthrough of far-right populist parties to the global financial crisis in 2008 and its subsequent offspring: the European Debt Crisis in 2010. These events have exposed serious structural flaws within the Union. The economic asymmetry that became apparent after the E.D.C. showed there is still an imbalance between northern Europe and southern Europe. Whereas countries like France and Germany had relatively been capable of cushioning the impact of the

crisis on their populations, countries like Spain, Italy, and Greece were struggling to keep their economies from defaulting.

The way dominant EU members, such as Germany, handled the crisis has had the opposite effect (Stiglitz, 2016, pp. 9-10). According to Stiglitz (2016), the lack of political solidarity among EU members had deepened the crisis in the afflicted south. In return for bailouts, Spain, Italy, and Greece, for instance, were forced to give up much of their economic sovereignty. This meant that finance ministers of countries like France and Germany became responsible for the dictation of austerity reform measures on other members as a condition for a bailout. In addition, the powers of the Eurozone believed that the lavish fiscal policies of the afflicted countries, such as Greece, were the main reason behind their economic depression. The blame-the-victim attitude, according to Stiglitz, had intentionally or unintentionally diverted attention from the real problem, which is a flawed structure leading to flawed policies. The lack of political will to complement the existing economic union with a political one will render the EU vulnerable to episodic shocks. As Stiglitz states, “the current halfway house, a single currency without the minimal institutions required of a common currency area, has not worked and is not likely to do so. There either has to be more Europe or less” (p. 11).

Other academics have made similar remarks about the cyclic challenges that face the EU. The European project has failed to provide protective mechanisms, which would be intended to soften the impact of fierce global market competition on vulnerable populations in the EU. The lack of effective, compassionate social measures is due to the absence of structural institutions that would enforce these policies. The current status quo of the Union may benefit corporations and multinationals. However, its benefits may not extend, for instance, to unskilled, less educated workers, who are now facing a cheap workforce coming from abroad. This category does not see the Union as a source of prosperity as much as a threat to their livelihoods. The populist radical right in France, Britain, Germany, and Denmark have capitalized on working-class hostility towards the EU. For instance, in the 2014 European Parliament elections, Eurosceptic parties thrived in response to the Eurozone crisis.

Of course, one might argue that episodic economic downturns are to be well-expected in a supranational project with the magnitude of the EU. This is certainly an acceptable assumption had the EU been able to withstand these malfunctions without being a catalyst for the disintegration of the Union. Incidents like the E.D.C. have shown that although the Union has provided peaceful channels for cooperation between its members through intergovernmental and supranational institutions, the state of the Union is still fragile, and economic crises could still awaken distrust between member-states.

Like Stiglitz, Isiksel (2018) calls for the consolidation of a more compassionate or “social” Europe as a remedy for the current situation of the Union. She argues that although initiatives in this direction already exist, the lack of political will and the necessary institutions to implement them are among the main reasons why the EU would continue to experience damaging shocks. One way “social Europe” could be attained, according to her, is through the alignment of left governments across Europe⁴⁹; however, given the current success of the far-right across the continent, this is increasingly becoming a far-fetched strategy. As she states, “The pendulum that used to swing between the left and the right sides of the political spectrum now oscillates precariously between moderate and extreme right” (p. 5).

Another promise the EU has been unable to live up to is the idea of creating a European identity that would eventually tame nationalist impulses among its member-states. The logic behind this idea was that a supranational European identity was

necessary to further secure a lasting union with an identifying European citizenry. From its earliest stages, the EU has been preoccupied with the aim of creating a substitute for the traditional sense of “the people” by introducing the notion of a European citizenry. This was regarded by European elites as a viable solution to rid the continent of traditional nationalist impulses that had for centuries brought nothing but conflict and destruction upon not only Europe but the world at large.

Conclusion

Signed in 1992, the Maastricht Treaty sought to complement the Economic Community by establishing a political zone that transcended traditional conceptions of the polity. The underlying rationale was that once European citizens experienced the benefits of a border-free economic zone, they would naturally gravitate towards political unification. However, this anticipated outcome did not materialise. The era of permissive consensus, long upheld by the Brussels elite, came to a decisive end with the Brexit referendum.

The United Kingdom, previously considered resistant to the allure of populist far-right movements, opted to sever its ties with Europe, a partnership that had endured for nearly half a century. While economic considerations undeniably played a role in the Brexit debate, identity politics, in many respects, propelled the nation's political trajectory towards this historic decision.

Whether Brexit is to be regarded as a remedy to British divided attitudes over Britishness is a matter of debate. While one might argue that Britain is finally free to draw its own independent course outside the restraints of the EU, others argue that Brexit created more problems than it solved. The country has become more divided, and nationalist movements across the Isles are gaining steam, with Scotland aiming for a second referendum to achieve independence. Politically, Brexit has also shown that third parties, such as UKIP and BNP, were capable of causing irreversible damage even without holding office. The crucial role these parties played in the Leave Campaign has proved essential for stirring popular anguish towards Europe.

Nationalism, although subdued mainly throughout the post-war era, was persistently stoked by the far right. These groups capitalised on the growing disillusionment with domestic politics and the perceived remoteness of Brussels' bureaucracy to undermine the European project. Central to their narrative were claims that the European Union was eroding the United Kingdom's sovereignty and that open-border policies were inundating the country with immigrants. In the final days leading up to the Brexit vote, the Leave Campaign emphasized these issues, many of which were factually questionable. However, one argument remains particularly worthy of reflection: By underestimating the potent force of nationalism, Europe's elites committed an error comparable in scale to that of the Weimar Republic: They put the cart before the horse.

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