

Brexit and EU Identity I: A Personal Perspective

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So that's it. Four per cent of my fellow nationals have stripped me of part of my identity. I am, at last, an Island Monkey. Once Article 50 is triggered, I'll have at most two years left as an EU citizen. It's been heart-breaking and too raw to address.

In this blog, I'm not going to explore the reasons for the popular vote to leave the EU on 23 June; much has been written about this already. Neither am I going to explore the farces that have been witnessed since the result was announced, with *Game of Thrones* style political savagery and major plot twists. All of this is the stuff of journalism, and of bitter Schadenfreude: there has been many a belly laugh caused by the revelations that so many Brexit campaigners had no idea what they would do if they won, or what it would really mean to be outside the EU, or how the EU actually works. David Davis, for instance, is the new Minister for Brexit, charged with the responsibility to lead the negotiations with our EU partners; his big strategy, which he stated in public by means of a blog post, was to pursue bilateral trade deals with those EU states we wanted still to trade with. Exclusive competence for external trade deals, anyone?

Instead, what I'm going to do is explore what Brexit means for EU identity. I intend to develop this into a mini-suite of posts, starting with a personal reflection, and then moving on to two further issues. The first of these will be on the implications of Brexit for the successful construction of an EU identity: what can be learned about how, and how not, to make sure citizens both understand the EU and see their connections with partner EU states as important? The second will be on the more immediate political and social impact of Brexit for and in the EU-27: has the impending departure of the UK made citizens of other Member States feel more, or less, European? Do they prize their EU membership more, or less?

Brexit and breakdown

When I saw the referendum result, tears coursed down my cheeks. It felt like part of me had been stripped away. Almost a month later, it still does. The first time I became a citizen, as opposed to a subject of Her Britannic Majesty, was when the Maastricht Treaty was ratified. For me, it's been a proud badge of belonging, a symbol with substance of my participation in the great experiment in transnational governance that is the EU.

For all its faults and limitations, EU citizenship is – was? – something I valued very dearly. I made use of the rights it gave me to live and work in three Member States other than the UK. I felt, and feel, European as well as British. There are parts of France I know better than my home country; much of my favourite music and other art comes from 'the continent', and being an EU citizen made me feel part of the places where they originated in a much deeper way. I can still listen to ABBA or Mylène Farmer, of course; I can still read Mankell, or Balzac, or Cavafy. But now these people no longer seem my compatriots; EU identity and European identity have never been the same thing, of course, but nonetheless I feel a direct link to European culture that I once had has been severed. This isn't entirely true, of course, but emotions notoriously resist the yoke of logic; my future consists of being on the outside and looking in. Some of my dearest friends are EU nationals; the idea that I will likely need a visa to see them in future fills me with sorrow.

I realise that my own life experience colours my perspective in a quixotic way that reflects the time I grew up as well as my own character. When I was a teenager, the Single European Act was agreed. ‘Europe’ was going to be the future. I learned French and German at high school, and then carried on studying the former for my degree. As a young gay man, European culture suffused my consciousness; I wasn’t a public schoolboy, so I’m not thinking of Goethe and High Romanticism, although I came to love them later. I’m thinking of Eurobeat, a version of hi-energy dance music that became popular in the mid-1980s and influenced the mainstream, and that was particularly popular on the gay scene in the UK. If you ask Brits today if they have heard of Sandra or Modern Talking, I wager more than 90% of those who say yes are gayers *d’un certain âge*. They’re a part of my mental map in a way that they aren’t for most British people (a matter to which I’ll return in my next blog).

Additionally, I spent 25 years of my life studying and analysing European integration, particularly the EU. It’s a part of my lifeworld in a way that is deeply rooted as both cultural experience and politico-economic reality, again in a way that isn’t true for most British people: I have often had to point out to fellow academics, as well as government officials, how the EU works and where its competence has an impact on what they are trying to do, or study. I’ll return to this in my next blog too.

Of course I’m not alone in this: one of my friends and I have been a support group of two in the last few weeks, and I know many others have found their equivalents. There’s an infant UK-wide newspaper, the *New European*, which is attempting to articulate the voices of the 48% who voted to Remain. There have been large demonstrations in support of the UK’s EU membership, and discussions about what will happen to nationals of other EU states who live in the UK, and vice versa, are widespread. The Irish government has had to impose a temporary stop on applications by Brits for an Irish passport because they’ve been snowed under by the huge demand. Others in England and Wales are mulling over a move to Scotland, in the hope that if that country becomes independent, or finds another way to remain part of the EU, they can be included on the basis of residency. Northern Ireland may have a similar experience, if current moves to hold a referendum on Irish reunification acquire more support. But what links us ‘48ers’ in our various schemes and responses is a grim realisation: Brexit will happen, and at the very least England and Wales will be outside the EU. We don’t like it, we don’t want it, but there it is. Along with many other Brits, I’m slowly acclimatising to the new reality.