



Contemporary Britain. Times of change

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Abstract: This article builds a contemporary image of Britain, including important issues that imprint on its national identity. Current events like Brexit are of notable relevance and need to be brought into discussion. Most of us share a rather vague definition of national identity. Two notions that get intertwined are national identity and citizenship. A good example are the Scottish, the English, the Welsh and the Irish, whose national identities lie within their territories, but whose passports show that they are all British citizens. But a nationalist spirit awakes in people when comparing themselves to others. “This may be to assert similarity but they often express their national identity by contrasting it to that of others, by delineating who (or what) they are not.”¹

Keywords: contemporary Britain; national identity; Brexit; identity crisis; ethnicity; racism; globalisation.

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¹ Frank Bechhofer, David McCrone (eds.), *National Identity, Nationalism and Constitutional Change*, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, op. cit., p 3.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Britain is a great deal more different than what we learned from history. This is a nation that altered the character of its political system out of philosophical and popular pressures, and which adapted to a post-imperial economy, which is now outdone by the United States, Japan and bigger European countries. British society has changed in the last two generations and continues to suffer changes.

A growing diversity in terms of race, religion, nationality and culture characterizes British society, along with “a redefinition of the class system, which has been diluted by improved education, the rise of the middle class, the growth of the consumer society, and by new levels of affluence and social mobility.”² We see shifts from the welfare state that took care of its citizens collectively to a stakeholder society whose members share both rights and duties, and the benefits of the individuals are in direct relation to their implication and fairness. A sensitive aspect that eventually brought about the divorce between the United Kingdom and the European Union through Brexit is “in the altered balance of power among government institutions as the executive becomes more powerful and Europe becomes more influential.”³ In other words, a redefinition of *Britishness* has come into discussion due to devolution, which has fractured the relations between the Scots, the Welsh, the Irish, and the English, and has revived their nationalism. This has modified the voters’ attitudes towards the government, and they now have more means to express their views on politics through a range of social media channels, rendering them more vocal. There is a dramatic development in communication technology, changing the character of television and revolutionizing the way people communicate through the internet (John McCormick, 2012).

2. Brexit. A turning point

Let us not forget that Britain is part of the European continent. Moreover, it also used to be an important member of the European Union. What changed?

To begin, the British are undeniably Europeans. They share the same cultural elements, despite the assumption that perhaps they are more like the Americans, since they speak the same language. Once put in interaction with the American continent, the contrasts start popping out, which causes Britons to acknowledge their European identity: ‘I never realised how European I was until I came over here.’⁴ This is correct from a cultural point of view. What about politics? It appears that for

² *Ibidem*, p. 1.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁴ John Lichfield, ‘Do we need Europe? Do the British have more in common with Americans or Italians? And would anything actually change if we opted out of the EU?’, *The Independent*, 20 May 1996, in John Oakland, *Contemporary Britain: A Survey with Texts*, London, Routledge, 2001, op. cit., p. 170.

the British this is the least desirable part of being a European: sharing the same political views or worse, submitting to European political rules.

The European Union is an organization formerly known as the European Commission, originally named the European Economic Community. It is characterized by political ambitions, and the instauration of free trade between a community of nations that are prosperous and influential in a world dominated by the United States and Russia. It started with its own finances, central institutions and laws, sometimes taking over those of its member states. This sounds a lot like a little something called federalism, which is why Britain initially refused to join in 1958. The aim of the European Union has always been “to make trade between two member states the same as trade between two cities in one country. This meant going after the whole hidden armoury of trade barriers, such as obscure national regulations, varying safety standards and government subsidies. It also meant trying to help the poorer regions, and poorer sections of society, who might suffer in this newly competitive world. It also meant making special arrangements for farmers (with famously disastrous consequences, now much reformed). This is why the EU had laws and a budget. The intention, from the beginning, was to make Europe not just one market, but one economy.”⁵ This is all pretty cute, but it ceased to feel that way for the British, and especially for the English, who voted in their majority to leave the EU at the referendum on Thursday 23, 2016. There are several significant arguments in favour of leaving, as it follows from the article published by Timothy B. Lee on vox.com:

1. The EU threatens British sovereignty.⁶ Or at least this is what most of the intellectuals supporting the Conservative Party believe. In time, Brussels has been granted authority, enabling European Union laws to sometimes override the national laws of its member states.

2. The EU is strangling the UK in burdensome regulations.⁷ Britain argues it spends too much money on nonsense. Regulations that the British find impractical seem to cost them too much and to generate frustration, since in order to change something everybody in the EU must agree. One cannot simply put in practice their ideas without asking for permission from the other member countries.

3. The EU entrenches corporate interests and prevents radical reforms.⁸ The countries which have the euro as currency have been greatly affected by the recession that began in 2008. See the example of Greece, which struggled with a massive debt crisis and unemployment. In order for the EU to help its members in

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

⁶ Timothy B. Lee, *Brexit: the 7 most important arguments for Britain to leave the EU*, available at <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/22/11992106/brexit-arguments>, accessed on the 15th of June 2021.

⁷ *Idem*.

⁸ *Idem*.

need, it should have a common welfare and deeper fiscal integration, which Britain is not willing to accede to. Hence its vote to leave the party and let Europe slowly but surely become a unified state.

4. The EU allows too many immigrants.⁹ This is the number one reason that stuck in our minds as foreigners. One of the perks of being in the EU is that everyone gets to travel, live and get a job within the Union. Since it is common for the people in poorer countries to migrate to the richer ones, Britain got itself many immigrants in search for better prospects in life. British natives did not love how this led to depressed wages for them.

5. The UK could have a more rational immigration system outside the EU.¹⁰ If it is going to accept immigrants, let them at least be the *crème de la crème*. It is a yes for those educated, young and well-prepared. Not discriminatory at all, just acting in its best interest, right?

6. The UK could keep the money it currently sends to the EU.¹¹ No surprise it all comes down to money. Although much of the budget is spent in the UK, why not keep it all to itself and be done with the world?

Of course, these are the arguments of those in favour of leaving, but not all the voters who opted for Brexit were fully aware of the importance and meaning of their vote, admitting complete ignorance on the matter. Some got curious enough to google the European Union only post-Brexit, when everything seemed to turn into chaos. It seems even the political leaders were taken by surprise when the ship started to sink, so in the lack of an actual Brexit plan, they jumped out of the boat. "All of this gives a picture of a failed attempt for a genuine democratic exercise and makes the Brexit referendum look like mere political chutzpah. It also shows the reality of contemporary politics where mediocre political elites are not only acting primarily in their own personal interest but also fail to see the big picture."¹²

3. Post-Brexit identity crisis

Brexit has generated a period of uncertainty, characterized by a political and economic crisis. The people are divided, the country is heading towards disintegration, and poor civic education mixed with irresponsible populism turn out to be a toxic couple.

The fracture in the relationship of the member-states of the Union is given by their different positions in respect to leaving the European Union. Discussions on

⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰ *Idem.*

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² *Brexit Referendum: Beginning of the End or Just a Turning Point?*, European Papers, Vol. 1, 2016, No 2, pp. 377-381, ISSN 2499-8249 - doi: 10.15166/2499-8249/59, available at <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/e-journal/brexit-referendum-beginning-end-or-just-turning-point>, accessed on June 11, 2021.

independence have amplified due to lack of consensus, since Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to stay in the EU. Moreover, there has been disagreement within the territory of England, for Londoners, in their majority, voted to stay as well. “In the weeks following the referendum something unthinkable before 23 June happened: thousands of people wrapped in EU flags took to the streets of London to protest against Brexit. This was not an episode of blind love.”¹³ The protesters argue they are aware of the EU’s flaws and its need to reform for the sake of its citizens. However, they did not agree with such a drastic measure as the divorce. These aspects shed new lights on the state of affairs, bringing about ideas of unification between Scotland and Ireland, or independence for London, which has the potential of being self-sufficient considering its size and its fine Gross Domestic Product.

In light of these events, there has been an increase in nationalism and xenophobia, which so far have been simmering slowly in the background. In the weeks following the referendum, an alarming level of hate crime was reached. In the past years Britain had to deal with difficult negotiations with the EU in order to establish their new roles and their new relations. The rest of the world has also been affected by Brexit and had to recalculate its position in relation with the United Kingdom. For instance, the news channels in Romania reported how students give up on applying to colleges in the UK, as the costs have drastically increased. Furthermore, a wave of immigrants has returned home. Students, investors, professionals, find themselves compelled to reorient.

The political class has broadly disappointed, looking unprepared, vain and completely in denial regarding the UK's serious predicament. Brexit leaves Britain wondering about its future trading policies and about its future as a country. The English Prime Minister Boris Johnson “wants to believe that Britain’s future can be simultaneously more open to the world and more in control of its political destiny. But his policies already look incoherent.”¹⁴ Brexit supporters were two united groups: older social supporters of the Conservative Party and lower-skilled working classes. Keeping them together and explaining the failures of Britain’s economic model is going to be a hard task for the current Government. “As the author and economist Martin Sandbu argued: “A hard Brexit ... stands to exacerbate the polarising characteristics of the UK’s existing economic model and harden the social tensions to which it has given rise.”¹⁵ In the context of globalization, which Britain is trying to put a stop to via Brexit, trade is made between countries through webs of

¹³ *Brexit Referendum: Beginning of the End or Just a Turning Point?*, European Papers, Vol. 1, 2016, No 2, pp. 377-381, ISSN 2499-8249 - doi: 10.15166/2499-8249/59, available at <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/e-journal/brexit-referendum-beginning-end-or-just-turning-point>, accessed on June 11, 2021.

¹⁴ James Crabtree, *Britain's Post-Brexit Identity Crisis*, April 3, 2020, 1:05 AM, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/03/britain-post-brexit-identity-crisis/>, accessed on June 8, 2021.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

production called value chains, speeding up the delivery process. The first step towards perfecting this aspect was Europeanization. “A hard Brexit will undo much of this, adding costs to companies via trade barriers and delays through new custom checks.”¹⁶ Britain’s economy is already showing signs of weakness, being around 3 per cent smaller than it used to be before Brexit.

A long-term economic decline is announced. Instead of liberation and transformation, Britain risks feeling even more out of control wandering in uncertainty.

4. Ethnicity and racism

As already mentioned in some previous notes, racism has always been lurking around. But post Brexit it became upsettingly vocal. This subchapter aims to present actual examples of experienced racism as testified by the victims.

About 13 percent of the UK's population and 37 per cent of London residents are foreigners. Almost 2 million European citizens reside in Britain, and 1.2 million of the British live and work in the EU. While some of these people have acknowledged the advantages of being European, mostly translated in freedom of movement, others feel that multiculturalism is affecting British identity and national sovereignty. While pro-Brexiteers generally argue that not immigration was the real issue, but the fact that global free markets favoured immigrants, for they represent cheap labour, thus affecting domestic labour, some of the people who voted for Brexit did it out of racism, as an act against immigration.

It is common knowledge that employment, along with housing and the justice system, are based on ethnic inequalities, as black and Muslim minorities live in overcrowded housing and face an unemployment rate twice as big as the British. These categories are even more likely to be investigated by the police. Dr. Halima Begum, chief executive of the Runnymede Trust and a race equality advocate, was interviewed on the topic and asked to give her opinion about the statement according to which Britain is not institutionally racist: “Tell that to the black young mother who is four times more likely to die in childbirth than her young white neighbour, tell that to the 60% of NHS doctors and nurses who died from Covid and were black and ethnic minority workers. You can't tell them that, because they are dead.”¹⁷

Impressive findings were discovered through the European Social Survey, which addressed a relevant question to the British public: are there innate differences between racial or ethnic groups? In 2019, “19% agreed that some groups were born

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ Race report: 'UK not deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities', 31 March, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-56585538>, accessed on June 9, 2021.

less intelligent, and 38% agreed that some groups were born less hard working.”¹⁸ The respondents who agreed to this are probably the same ones who are against immigration.

The hate got to be expressed out loud and even affected people who were born and raised in Britain, but belonged to different ethnic groups. According to the minorities in Britain, the post-Brexit period has brought upon them a wave of discomfort. A woman born in London, whose parents were from Bangladesh states that she has lately been the victim of racist comments that she had never experienced in all the years growing up there: “I think people are feeling a bit scared. [...] Obviously, there’s loads of backlashes and everything.”¹⁹

Another woman, Fatima, of Tunisian origin, but born in French, is seriously concerned by the Brexit consequences upon her and her family, as Europeans: “My children are French. I’m French. [...] But my kids were born here. And now I’m thinking, what happens after [Brexit]? Do I stay here, or go back to France? If we go back to France, we start from zero again. I don’t want to start from zero. It’s very hard. I don’t want my children — who don’t speak French — to have to feel like me when I came to England.”²⁰

These are mere examples of people who have experienced racism from those among Brexit supporters who after the referendum started telling those who looked foreign that they should “go home to their own countries”.²¹ This is all very contrasting with the next topic to be analysed, globalization, which represents quite the opposite of this kind of previously-mentioned form of admonishment.

5. Globalization - impact on the young

In the last few decades the world has known a speedy development in computing, communication and transport technology, hence an intensive globalization. This is characterized by Governments ceding power to national organizations such as the European Union or the United Nations, and also by other visible transformations like the outspread of commercial chains such as McDonald’s, etc. A common fear is that this type of exposure to other cultures will alter individual national identities and ways of life. The facilitation of travelling translates into an increase in the number of immigrants, compromising national solidarity, and the enormous range of standardized products is leading towards a global

¹⁸ *How racist is Britain today? What the evidence tells us*, July 1, 2020 1.37pm BST, available at <https://theconversation.com/how-racist-is-britain-today-what-the-evidence-tells-us-141657>, accessed on June 9, 2021.

¹⁹ Mary Kay Magistad, *Britain’s undergoing an identity crisis*, October 06, 2016, 5:15 PM EDT, available at <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-10-06/britains-undergoing-identity-crisis>, accessed on June 9, 2021.

²⁰ *Idem*.

²¹ *Idem*.

monoculture which will lack such things as boundaries, due to multinational corporations and transnational political bodies (Jackie Hogan, 2009).

However, it is arguable that the changes brought by globalization are in fact superficial and do not have the power to deeply transform national identities, unless these are fragile to begin with. The truth is “national identities are inherently changeable and almost infinitely adaptable. [...] In fact, globalizing social changes may even prompt a defensive strengthening of discourses of national belonging and national distinctiveness”²²

Considering the increasingly global character of British society, it is imperative for the young to recognize the relation between globalization and local experiences in order to create themselves an identity. According to Giddens (1991), globalisation is “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”²³ These social changes generate feelings of confusion and an ambiguous sense of place in the world. Everyone’s lives are consequently shaped, but mostly young people’s lifestyle, influencing their employment patterns, social networking, or groups of friends. In order for British society to keep up with its multiculturalism, there should probably be a curriculum adaptation in schools.

Let us look at the report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, *Our Shared Future*, from June, 2007. These are their findings on the influence of global affairs on local communities: super diversity (migrants are coming from all over the world to the UK); multiple identities (drawn from across race, class, gender and generation); trans-nationalism (a particular form of multiple identities resulted from globalisation and easy communications. It means that the UK is far more plugged in to events around the world and that cohesion in local areas can be affected by events in another country).²⁴ Thus, we are talking about a process of mixing identities that encapsulates foreign cultural influences in local identities, mostly seen in the UK through consumer culture, which represents a social link between children and young people, who, in overwhelming majority, possess mobile phones with access to the internet. The young cannot steer this ship, but do have a say in the effects its uncontrollable course has on their lives. Consequently, they make use of social media to express themselves. The paradox of globalization for

²² Jackie Hogan, *Gender, Race and National Identity. Nations of Flesh and Blood*, New York, Routledge, 2009, op. cit., p. 10.

²³ Giddens, A., *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, in Douglas Bourn, *Young people, identity and living in a global society*, Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review, Vol. 7, Autumn, 2008, op. cit., pp. 48-61.

²⁴ Alessandra Buonfino (with Louisa Thomson), *Belonging in Contemporary Britain*, London: Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

them is that they “are in one sense citizens of a global culture but at the same time struggle for a sense of acceptance in the local societies in which they live.”²⁵

Within the UK, which is highly characterized by multiculturalism, a person can identify simultaneously “as ‘daughter’, ‘mother’, ‘Geordie’, ‘northerner’, ‘English’, ‘British’, ‘European’, ‘global’”.²⁶ Defining who they are resembles a postcode: “I’m black, I live in London – that’s my home. My parents are from the Caribbean but I’m really African. I’m a Christian, but I’m E7 – that’s where I hang, they’re my people. That’s who I am.”²⁷ Therefore, “understand their identities and feel a sense of belonging – as important for an indigenous white pupil as a newly arrived immigrant... Exploring and understanding their own and others’ identities is fundamental to education for diversity, essential as pupils construct their own interpretations of the world around them and their place within that world”.²⁸ Social acceptability is very important in this context, and it is often gained among youngsters through wearing branded clothes. They create their own image and style by reflecting the complexity of their position in the world, which includes various cultural and geographical influences.

Place and identity have a very complex relation with one another. In order for someone to define their identity, they need to be rooted somewhere. Here is the reaction of a British pupil to a class discussion on how everybody around the world came from somewhere: “I’m from nowhere like that, I’m just plain British. I just want to be from a different ‘race’, or a quarter something”.²⁹ It is clear that identity is influenced by a great deal of factors and young people make constant adaptations in the context of rapid changes. They do relate to groups and communities, but always make a statement about who they are as individuals among their peers. British society is more than multicultural; it is diverse, complex, and open to global influences that are most visible on its youngest. They perceive themselves as cosmopolitans or as citizens of the world that do not merely observe, but actively criticize via the internet, using technology as tools for enquiry (Douglas Bourn, 2008). They cherish diversity and the sense of uniqueness that can be drawn from such a large palette of identity features: “Being same and being different are both really good, I enjoy being the same and different and so should you. It’s really amazing that everyone’s different or the same. If you’re different and unique or

²⁵ Douglas Bourn, *Young people, identity and living in a global society*, Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review, Vol. 7, Autumn, 2008, op. cit., pp. 48-61.

²⁶ Keith Ajegb, Dina Kiwan, Seema Sharma, *Diversity and Curriculum Review*, London: DfES., 2007, op. cit., p. 29.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 25-29.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

diverse...shout out loud, so everyone can hear...Being different is NOT a curse: I love being different!”³⁰

To sum up, identity needs to be discussed in the context of globalization in the endeavour to accurately define it. The relationship between multiculturalism and territory, or nationalism and globalism is most certainly relevant to the way young people construct their identity, reflecting today’s challenging realities.

6. Conclusions

Great Britain remains one of the most powerful nations that have greatly influenced the world, bringing a huge contribution to the contemporary state of affairs worldwide, by generating developments with global impact. It is common knowledge that the British have revolutionized the industrial system with their inventions, leading to economic changes. They were once the global economic leaders. Politically speaking they have proved everlasting, their political system being one of the oldest functional systems in the world. In this context we must refer back to their ideas about capitalism or to the origins of the British democratic model (McCormick, 2012). But the most obvious contribution seems to be the English language that has become “the international language of business, communications, diplomacy and – increasingly – everyday conversation.”³¹

However, changes like the ones mentioned above in the present article have great effects on contemporary Britain, which has moved from being an imperial power to a European one, redefining its place in the world by climbing down the ladder.

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³⁰ Douglas Bourn, *Young people, identity and living in a global society*, Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review, Vol. 7, Autumn, 2008, op. cit., pp. 48-61.

³¹ John McCormick, *Contemporary Britain*, Third edition, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, op. cit., p. 1.

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