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CURRENTS

Amidst backward-walking somnambulists

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Abstract

This *Currents* section provides accounts of Britain's exit (Brexit) or departure from the European Union (EU)—a decision based on a closely won referendum in June 2016, and declared in January 2020 by the Conservative political party. With few exceptions, the views and experiences of those excluded from dominant narratives of “the people” have not been substantially considered in mainstream nor indeed anthropological debates. Contributors to the section offer (auto-)ethnographic perspectives on the legacies and implications of empire, nationalism, racism, cultural diversity, gender, and generational divides made explicit in Brexit phenomena. They range from trolling women of color, the repercussions of race and racism in academia, culturally diverse perspectives on resilience, the experiences of those with EU citizenship who work in England, and views on the English from a former colony and now EU country, the Republic of Ireland.

Keywords

Brexit; empire; nationalism; race; ethnicity; gender

A day after coauthoring a newspaper article on why there was a need to expunge the anachronistic and prejudicial term “empire” from some of the UK's national honors, such as OBE, MBE, and CBE (Hague and Kaur 2020),¹ I received an email sent to my university account from a Lucio Hunter, which I presumed was a hybrid Italian-English pseudonym. Among the usual deluge of emails from students, colleagues, administrators, and spamsters,

1. Order, Member and Commander of the most excellent order of the British Empire, respectively.

this one stood out for its directness: “Go back,” went its subject heading. Without ceremony, the text continued:

to whatever shithole you and or your parents came from—that will end your obvious hypocrisy in living in a country whose past you hate, while simultaneously accepting its benefits.

My immediate thought was, why did the sender have such vitriol for Birmingham, the city near where I was born? Having not directly received such “go back to where you came from” invective since the 1980s, I had almost forgotten its racist intent. My second thought was, why are people so defensive about any criticism of the British empire, intent on holding onto a romanticized airbrushed history like a drowning man does to straw? The email was a stark reminder of attempts by these drowning men to squeeze all sense out from any debate on the country and its imperial pasts and pretensions in conjunction with the resurrection of a deep xenophobia—men being the most appropriate term in what could only be yet another ugly register of a rising toxic white masculinity (Achilleos-Sarll and Martill 2019). We are living through times of historical whitewashing in that there is a concerted erasure of colonial subjugation, brutality, expropriation, and the scientific racism upon which imperial expansion was based (see Gott 2011; Olusoga 2016; Osborne 2016; Parry 2016). This, in more colloquial terms, was going to form part of my reply to Hunter. In the end, I did not respond, thinking it would just puff up the sender’s checkered ego to hit the reply button, and fully cognizant that it is women more than men who are trolled online (Warren 2015).

Vitriolic cry backs to the (in)glorious empire (Tharoor 2017) appear to be a counterbalance to a country caught in dire straits. The period around the June 2016 referendum on whether Britain should exit, or leave, (Brexit) the European Union (EU) saw a swell of such cries and a spurt of hate crimes against racial and ethnic minorities, including those from the European mainland. Attacks on minorities peaked shortly after the referendum

result, recording a fifty-eight percent rise over 2015, using available data (Travis 2016).² This account of Brexit phenomena is based less on “a vague, generic liberalism” as a “critical foil” or “default currency” against the “nonliberal” (Mazzarella 2019: 48) than it is on the compulsion of survivalism—that is, less born out of shock and more out of a familiar feeling: here we go again.

The decision of the Conservative (Tory) Party’s “people’s government” to leave the EU in 2020 was based on a “people’s vote” that ignores 48.11 percent of “the people” (see Laclau 2005), many of whom are women and minorities (Dustin et al. 2019).³ In a period that overlapped with the “European refugee crisis,” when numerous people were escaping bombs and persecution, the Leave campaign led by Conservative and UK Independent Party spokespersons coincided with a desire to expunge not only EU citizens but all migrants from wherever and whenever they came—as Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever put it, the ““internal others” against whom the nation has often defined itself, including, most notably, racialized minorities and migrants (Virdee and McGeever 2018: 1803). Setting up internal and external others greatly propelled the drive through which “Brexit [drew] on deep reservoirs of imperial longing” (Virdee and McGeever 2018: 1805).

Unless one is Rishi Sunak (Chancellor of the Exchequer) or Priti Patel (Secretary of State for the Home Office)—Conservative politicians who have been absorbed into established structure of whiteness—for most migrants and people of color in less elite echelons, Brexit is about a backlash against the foreign along both civic and ethno-racial lines (Valluvan and Kalra 2019). This is the underlying strain of the Brexit phenomenon: a drowning man holding onto a vision of a future that is mired in a nostalgic dream for empire;

2. This extended to hatred and violence against those from the European mainland and those supporting Remain, including the murder of a female politician, Jo Cox, in June 2016.

3. <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/results-and-turnout-eu-referendum>. Accessed April 10, 2020.

a dream that was a nightmare for others; a nightmare that Brexiteers would prefer to brush under an imperial carpet fashioned by a politicized John Bull taking back control of the present (see Virdee and McGeever 2018; Bhambra 2017).

Feedback submitted by readers underneath our above-mentioned article on empire and the UK honors system, virtually all by people with western male names, confirmed and even pumped up this sentiment. One wrote:

The second initial should [be] changed. Leave the other two as is.

MGE, OGE and CGE stand for “member”, “officer” and “commander” of “the Global Empire”. Rather than being out of date, be ahead of history - the Global Empire of the UN.

Another reader added:

While I think “Excellence” would be a good modern choice [as a term to replace empire], the word “Empire” annoys Professors and the professionally offended Virtue Signalling SJWs [Social Justice Warriors]. So that alone makes me want to keep it.

These reactionary responses repeat a populist suspicion of “experts.” Such a suspicion also pairs a backlash against “political correctness” with attempts to demonize any endeavor for equality. This intransigence was neatly summed up in another person’s riposte underneath the latter comment, using a quote by the former US president, Franklin D. Roosevelt: “A reactionary is a somnambulist walking backwards.”

The sleepwalk into the miasmic days of empire is accentuated by the Leave campaigner and now prime minister, Boris Johnson, who styles himself on the World War II premier, Winston Churchill. Like the bulldog leader of yore, Johnson is a larger-than-life Conservative minister and a former journalist with mixed English and American heritage. But there end any further similarities. Johnson’s rhetoric is bombastic without the bombs. Instead, while wielding Cornish pasties, his attack was against an imaginary adversary with wasteful

slush funds that inordinately taxes vacuum cleaners and bans bendy bananas (see Henley 2016). Through repeated iterations, the oppressor as embodied in European ministers developed mythically menacing teeth. Rhetoric hinged on pseudo-emancipatory one-liners based on national sovereignty and independence from Europe regarding control over finances, laws, and borders: “Put Britain First!” and “Take Back Control!” recalibrated for the 2019 national elections as “Protect Our Borders!” and “Get Brexit Done!” These were repeated ad infinitum until they became almost farcical, were they not to have real-life consequences on everyone’s lives.

The early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 witnessed a continuation of this strain of Brexit invincibility and protectionism—with virus denial, refusal to collaborate with the EU on procuring medical supplies, and a belief in an “experimental public health strategy” (Mason 2020) for “herd immunity” that, it was proposed with little evidence, would develop among the British population if it were exposed to the disease. Such a strategy is to a neoliberal tune of the “survival of the fittest” and neglects “unfortunate” collateral damage to the elderly and those with underlying health conditions—that is, those people who are posing a drain on welfare rather than contributing to the economy. Many will “lose loved ones before their time,” said Johnson.⁴ This initial disposition towards COVID-19 has itself been explained as dithering driven by “particularistic empire nostalgia” (Mason 2020) and a conviction of the indomitability of a fit and strong national stock.

Johnson’s own invincibility was stricken by the virus in March 2020, and he was put into self-isolation followed by hospitalization a week later. Shortly before that, the prime minister again dug into this shallow well of imperial-nation inspiration to frame the global epidemiological crisis by talking about the need for “a united national effort” to fight the pandemic while supporting key British workers along with farmers in this “national

4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-51862282/coronavirus-pm-says-more-to-lose-loved-ones-before-their-time>

endeavour.” This fighting talk against an invisible enemy, COVID-19, parodies the fights on the beaches, landing grounds, fields, streets, and hills in Churchill’s classic wartime speech.⁵ To a similar tune, Johnson tried to rally the people to “stay at home, protect our NHS [National Health Service] and save lives,” underlining how “the people of this country will rise to that challenge and we will come through it stronger than ever. We will beat the coronavirus and we will beat it together...”⁶ This go-it-alone fight rehearses Brexit rhetoric in its appeal to circumscribed publics and falls short of addressing a globally connected issue—connected through populations, resources, sustenance, supply chains, finance, and travel.

Commentaries on the EU referendum result often highlight the rise of the downtrodden subaltern. Yet the results belie a simple reaction of the “left behind” rising up to fight, of the working classes who had inordinately suffered in the aftermath of globalization, welfare diminishment, and other austerity measures after the 2008 financial meltdown reacting against their plight. Statistically, fifty-nine percent of those who voted Leave were from elite and middle-class backgrounds (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Virdee and McGreever 2018; Benson 2019).⁷ Brexit is an elitist populism that includes profiteering billionaires and establishmentarians intent on further deregulation under the banner of national sovereignty. However, in anthropology the focus so far has been mainly on the marginalized English working classes (Koch 2016; Evans 2017), with short comments on Brexit’s civic and social implications, comparisons with other European countries, and reflections on its coming into being in an era of post-truth soundbites informed by internet algorithms to harness tribalist sentiments to “profoundly undemocratic ends” (Cowan 2016: 481).⁸ Ruben Andersson, Salih

5. <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches.html>

6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52011928>

7. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i3697>

8. Indeed, the billionaire Robert Mercer is a major investor in data-mining companies Aggregate IQ and Cambridge Analytica, which informed the Vote Leave campaign. Not

Can Açıksöz, Čarna Brković, Douglas Holmes, Cris Shore, and Marilyn Strathern, among others (in Green et al. 2016) touch upon implications for ethnicity/race, migrants, and migration in their immediate reflections on the referendum. Nevertheless, more concerted ethnographic attention to how imperial nostalgia, persistent racisms, and their complex intersections with ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality (Dustin et al. 2019) have shaped Brexit is needed. This is most pertinent with respect to minorities excluded from the dominant framing of “the people,” and how they have and will be affected by issues of equality, citizenship, human rights, and, indeed, social justice.

The articles in this *Currents* section present short contributions on varied but by no means exhaustive ethnographic insights into how Brexit certainties and uncertainties have affected diverse populations inside and outside a profoundly disunited United Kingdom, “everyday Brexits” as human geographers and sociologists Ben Anderson et al. (forthcoming: 2) propose, where political phenomena are incommensurately experienced, enacted and felt. Everyday Brexits constitute dynamic “modes of (un)certainty”—shared practices orientated by distinctive moods such as “negative hope, national optimisms, apprehensive hopefulness and fantasies of action” (Anderson et al. forthcoming: 3; see also Samimian-Darash and Rabinow 2015). While interviews by this group of social scientists were mainly with those describing themselves as white British or English in northeast England, the *Currents* section considers Brexit certainties and uncertainties as they affect minorities in the UK (Dattatreyan, Hashemi, Ringel) as well as the English as a minority outside of the UK (Miller).

Writing during a Brexit impasse that has now slipped into the virtual backrooms of the COVID-19 pandemic, beyond public scrutiny, Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan engages with

incidentally, Mercer was also the largest donor to Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign for president. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/31/aggregateiq-canadian-tech-brexite-data-riddle-cambridge-analytica> ; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercere-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage> Accessed April 22, 2020.

Brexit-inflected conversations on race and racism in British higher education. Arriving from the US in 2016 shortly after the EU referendum, he saw the spike of racist attacks in tandem with the resurrection of white pride, and discourses of nation and empire.⁹ Describing the desire to break from Europe as “steeped in nostalgic British exceptionalism and a desire to return to a glorious past,” he notes how racism against migrants and British and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) populations “amplify class divides and show the limits of British liberalism.” His contribution goes on to consider racial ramifications in the academy with an ethnography of his university situated in the midst of a multiracial zone of south east London: how young people of color there were subjected to racialized violence and exclusion and the strategies they adopted to understand and fight “against racism in the Brexit era.”

Morteza Hashemi provides perspectives on the increasing Islamophobia that also underpinned Brexit debates about economic and security threats from (Muslim) migrants, by way of the lives of Shia Muslims in Scotland. Proposing that “Brexit was a project shaped at the fringes of official politics” that took over the nation, he notes how migrants and those of hyphenated nationality saw their homeland turn into a hostile environment at an alarming scale. Their resilience through turbulent political times is evidenced in their mobilizing civic engagement to legitimate hybrid Scottish Muslim Shia identities and to reconnect with a reinterpretation of Shia history to forge survival strategies in the present.

While Englishness was being politicized in the UK, Daniel Miller takes us across the sea where he has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the use of smartphones in the Republic of Ireland in the aftermath of the EU referendum. He offers perspectives from a place that was a British colony until 1921, and that was burdened with pejorative stereotypes and prejudices that persisted long after. Miller observes how his Irish interlocutors were

⁹ *Post-referendum racism and xenophobia: The role of social media activism in challenging the normalisation of xeno-racist narratives*. 2016. <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/post-referendum-racism-and-the-importance-of-social-activism/> Accessed April 10, 2020.

perplexed by Leavers who accused the EU of colonizing Britain. Their own colonial history included such traumatic episodes as the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921) and the Irish famine (1845-1849), when the British assistant secretary to the Treasury, Sir Charles Trevelyan, declared that starvation was an “effective mechanism for reducing surplus population” (Sheridan 2019). This was an attitude that defined British imperial views on those in many other colonies, bulwarked by a conviction of their own ethno-racial and moral superiority.

In Ireland, views such as “Why would a country simply shoot itself in the foot?” with the Brexit vote were widespread during Miller’s fieldwork, when almost all of the Irish had benefited economically from EU membership. Being European was an additional and positive element to Irish identities, rather than one that detracted from them. Being European also contributed to a fundamental shift in the Irish perception of the English, leading in some ways to an eradication of certain colonial legacies.

As an EU citizen living and working in Britain, Felix Ringel conveys his experiences of Brexit through a theorizing of agency, time, and the future inspired by (auto)ethnography. The author compares his ethnographic material from postindustrial Germany with his experiences in northeast England. The latter region epitomizes the peculiar paradox of Brexit: heavily dependent upon “foreign” or trans- and multinational companies for work, but among the first to reject EU membership in the 2016 referendum. For Ringel, Brexit is not just a somewhat delayed response to economic decline and insecurity, triggered by the 2008 financial crisis. Rather, it indicates that the former industrialized countries in the Global North have not yet redefined their politico-economic organization and “developed an idea of what life after the postindustrial crisis can look like.” The article highlights anthropology’s need to contribute to this kind of future-thinking (see Salazar et al. 2017; Bryant and Knight 2019).

As part of worldwide populist waves, Brexit epitomizes, in William Mazzarella's words,

one of those rare moments that deserve to be called "world historical," not because it brings something substantially new into the world—it does not—but because it marks the moment when aspects of world making that have always been fundamental demand to be recognized as politically decisive. (2019: 54)

Ground-up futurologies on world historical moments enveloped as they are in lingering nostalgia in what has been termed as a "stretched-out present" (Berlant 2011) are key to a well overdue Brexitography. And this in a largely uncharted terrain amidst backward-walking somnambulists with no clear path visible on the horizon.

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