

The Metaphysics of Brexitism

Abstract

In this essay, I consider Brexit as the expression of a more general ideology - Brexitism – which I explore through commentary upon a series of quotations drawn from speeches, newspapers, propaganda materials and social media. This method is appropriate because Brexitism is itself a kind of quotation – a repetition of half-remembered actual and fictional past political gestures – which allude to something deeper. Exploring fragments which illustrate three different elements of Brexitist ideology – Heroism, Time and Distinction – I suggest that these can be read as expressions of an underlying, dynamic and ‘productive’ conceptual field, similar to what Max Weber described as a ‘stand toward the world’. This is the ‘metaphysics of Brexit’ apart from which it cannot be fully understood.

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Keywords: Brexit; Brexitism; political ideologies; political ideas; political rhetoric; Weber; UKIP; Farage; Conservatism; alt-right.

The Metaphysics of Brexit

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Introduction

Brexit is not a single – let alone simple – political event. It is a complex element of continuing processes of different duration, intensity and direction. These are not confined to the UK. Their effects can be seen across Europe and the United States where they manifest in the rejection of political internationalisation, economic globalisation and multiculturalism. What happened in the UK on 23rd June 2016 was, however, a significant event. At a confluence of those processes and tendencies something crystallised into a specific political expression which, because it took a solid form, has since affected the direction and altered the speed of the eddies and whorls of British political culture.

In understanding that crystallisation we could turn to journalistic analyses of the parties and movements which helped bring Brexit about – who was involved, who paid for it, what were their motivations.¹ Alternatively we could turn to Political Science which can tell us in valuable detail, about the social constituencies that supported or opposed Brexit - defined by, for example, levels of qualification, geographic location, income, property ownership, occupation type, authoritarian tendencies.²

¹ For example, Tim Shipman, *All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class*, William Collins, 2016; Peter Geoghegan and Adam Ramsey, 'The "Dark Money" that paid for Brexit', *Open Democracy*, 15th Dec. 2017

² Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath 'The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result', *Political Quarterly*, 87 (3), 2016, 323-332; Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, 'Britain After Brexit: A Nation Divided', *Journal of Democracy*, 28 (1) 2017, 17-30; Eric Kaufmann, 'It's NOT the economy, stupid: Brexit as a story of personal values', *British Politics and Policy at LSE*, 07 July, 2016, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/71585/>

These literatures are helpful. But Brexit is also formed from ideas of the sort that the sociologist Max Weber identified as one of the determinants of human action. What Weber had in mind were not ‘everyday’ ideas but fundamental ideas of how the world works and of the proper place for things within it. These ‘world images’, as he called them, are conceptions of the cosmos which give people an existential orientation, a ‘stand toward the world’, and crucially, a belief in redemption (their ideal rather than material interests). We all and always long for redemption from the physical and psychological difficulties the world imposes upon us, Weber argued. Religions systematise this kind of thinking; they rationalise a world image and in so doing give redemption a special significance, while also specifying from what, and for what, one can be redeemed, as well as what that redemption might look like.³

The religious outlook on the world is one which modern politics affects to find irrational. Yet, sometimes, to understand political movements and ideologies we need to understand the ‘religious’ aspects of their ideas. We need to know how they orient adherents towards the world so that they may find themselves within it, be able to live in it and believe in the possibility of ‘redemption’. Brexitism is not a religion. But what connects its otherwise disparate parts (opposition to immigration, anger at the effects of neoliberalism on established working communities, hostility to supranational economic and political regulation, cultural conservatism, distrust or hatred of elites) and what it shares with other contemporary political phenomena (the election of Donald Trump, the resurgence of white power politics across the US and Europe, reactionary populisms in Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe) is an underlying ‘metaphysics’ – an image of the world, linked with a belief in redemption.

³ Max Weber, ‘The Psychology of the World Religions’, in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1946, 267-301.

In this essay, and with a view to capturing some of the facets of the metaphysics of ‘Brexitism’, I bring together for discussion various quotations from varied Brexitist sources with a particular focus on how it conceives of *heroism*, *time* and *distinction*. This will help reveal something of the ‘stand’ Brexitism takes and the redemption it promises.

Heroism

At the end of this campaign I think you'll agree there is a very clear choice between those on their side who speak of nothing but fear of the consequences of leaving the EU, and we on our side who offer hope...Between those who have been endlessly rubbishing our country and running it down, and those of us who believe in Britain...they are woefully underestimating this country and what it can do...if we stand up for democracy we will be speaking up for hundreds of millions of people around Europe who agree with us but who currently have no voice. If we vote Leave and take back control I believe that this Thursday can be our country's Independence Day.
(Boris Johnson, MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, June 21st, 2016).⁴

On June 21st, 2016, the Tuesday before the Thursday of the vote, the BBC staged what it called a ‘great debate’ at Wembley football stadium, billed as the biggest ever live debate in British politics, and – inevitably – as a ‘clash’ in which ‘big beasts’ ‘traded blows’. During Boris Johnson’s closing summation for the Leave side significant sections of the audience cheered at the redemptive promise of the phrases ‘offer hope’, ‘underestimating this country’, and ‘have no voice’. The closing sentence about independence was met with rapturous applause.

⁴ The speech can be viewed online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uems1e1PscA>

That Johnson, born in New York City and a UK-US dual national, should end his speech with so American a reference is perhaps not so odd; that a British crowd, thinking about Crown sovereignty, should be so enthused perhaps is. But the paradox is easily dissolved. Johnson was not invoking the 1776 Declaration of Independence but the 1996 action film *Independence Day*. At the start of the final act of that movie the character of the US President delivers a speech rousing the people to armed resistance against an occupying force of inscrutable, ruthless and bureaucratic aliens. The connection with Brexit is not logical, but affectively and figuratively a fitting conclusion to Johnson's argument that our problems come from those who let others rule our land while insisting that there is no alternative.

Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, speaking at a press conference shortly after it had become clear that Leave had won, expressed the same sentiment as Johnson but in a more directly English spirit.

It's a victory for ordinary people, decent people, it's a victory against the big merchant banks, against the big businesses and against big politics, and I'm proud of everybody that had the courage, in the face of all the threats, everything they were told, they had the guts to stand up and do the right thing. (Nigel Farage, June 24th 2016)

In an influential essay on the harms of too much rationalism in politics, the English conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott described creed as a mood rather than a dogma: 'To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to

utopian bliss.’⁵ Farage's Brexitism imitates such sentiments. He opposes the small, ordinary, decent, local and familiar to the big, distant and untrustworthy. But he adds something with his celebration (in a very English usage) of ‘guts’ and courage. The phrases invoke boyhood stories of wartime bravery against the odds and of standing up to boarding-school bullies. Here, as also with Johnson’s rhetoric, Conservatism of Oakeshott’s sort is pressured into mutating. Preference for the familiar leans into denunciation of its enemies – those who prefer something else – and celebration of opposition to them. It then slowly but decisively turns into an embrace of the unknown and untried, a dream of perfection and utopia, in the name of the traditional and quotidian. Accordingly, a vote for Leave could be experienced as ‘doing one’s bit’ to defend the national culture and, through the combination of English myth with American cinema, imagined as rendering one heroic.⁶

Time

This is the single most important political decision any of us will make in our lifetime. (Nigel Farage)⁷

⁵ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, London, Methuen, 1967, 169.

⁶ The American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander argues that in contemporary societies, the ‘public sphere’ in which we play out our complex conflicts is not akin to a debating forum but to a stage upon which public figures ‘perform’ their reasons. There, politics is a grand drama, the protagonists of which ‘are forcefully aligned with the sacred themes and figures of cultural myth’, icons performing their opposition to that which they declare profane, a pollution of the culture. ‘If’, Alexander writes, ‘a protagonist successfully performs the binaries, audiences will pronounce the performer to be an “honest man,” the movement to be “truly democratic”’. Jeffrey C. Alexander, ‘Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy’ in J. C. Alexander, B. Giesen, and J. Mast (eds.) *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, 61.

⁷ These quotations are from *Brexit: The Movie* an 81minute film made to support Leave and released online in May of 2016. By the date of the referendum You Tube showed it as having one and a half million views. Leave won by one-million two-hundred and sixty-nine thousand five-hundred and one votes.

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I think this is the last chance that we'll be able to vote on EU membership when we still have a recognisable identity as Britons' (James Delingpole)⁸

'This is THE most important vote you will ever cast in your lifetimes' (Paul Joseph Watson)⁹

Aristotle distinguished political talk from legal on the grounds that the latter is concerned with what happened in the past and with who is responsible for it, while the former is concerned with the probable effects in the future of collective actions we might take now. But political action is also about what the Ancient Greeks called *kairos*, the moment of opportunity. Political success requires the ability to see what is possible in the present situation and, when it comes, to identify and seize the moment to act. The catalogues of political failure are full of those who jumped too soon, showing their hand when it would have been better to match rather than raise the stakes, and those who hesitated, seeing the moment pass through their hands and be picked up by their rivals.

This is a paradox of politics. It asks us to think about the future, to plan for it, weighing up the possibilities, and to coordinate actions to make it secure, liveable, perhaps even better than the present. But to succeed we have to take decisions right now. We can't defer until all options are presented, tested and weighed in the balance: the enemy is already at the gates; the global temperature is on the rise; people are suffering right now. Politics, with an eye on the future is always caught within the exigencies of now. It must condense complexity into a clear choice and motivate people to decide and to act. Constitutions and conventions try to contain this

⁸ From *Brexit: The Movie*, *op. cit.*

⁹Paul Joseph Watson, *The Truth about #Brexit* You Tube, 5th June, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNJ05NfM-4Y>. Watson is a prominent You Tube political personality, with over 1.25m subscribers. He also produces content for the US-based conspiracy website and radio show Infowars.

paradox, holding the space between rash action and paralysis. Some rules force decisions – cloture for example – while others, such as the filibuster, enable delay. Bills have to be read, reviewed, amended and re-read but not endlessly; second chambers, select committees and supreme courts can block, check and amend but not forever.

The political philosophy of Brexit sees all of this as a ruse. Time, pause for thought and revision, is the enemy up to the usual tricks. There is only the now, the urgent moment, like no other before or since. Yet Brexitism doesn't pull on the future, tugging it closer. On the contrary a key characteristic of its advocates is their refusal to present plans, declare policies for a post-Brexit Britain and discuss their implementation. For Brexitism the present moment must be defended and prolonged because it is the moment of redemption through heroic resistance. It must find more enemies, more aliens to resist (Judges with their reviews, Lords with their amendments, MPs with their demand for a vote on any new agreement with the EU) prolonging the redemptive struggle of the present.

'Brexit represents nothing less than a stunning populist revolt and a complete rejection of the political establishment...but don't expect the elite to take this lying down...these people are snakes, don't think the battle is won, because it's only just beginning' (Paul Joseph Watson, June 24th, 2016)¹⁰.

For Liberalism the past is something to be transcended. It may be how we got here but we are going somewhere else, somewhere beyond, into a future which we will create and which will be better than the past which must by necessity be discarded lest it slow us down. Conservative

¹⁰ Paul Joseph Watson, Brexit: Dawn of a Populist Uprising, You Tube, 24th June, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XKJ2mcdVmQ>

and reactionary politics were born from rejection of that outlook and defined by their emphasis on the value or necessity of the past, the risks of progress and the hubris of people who think that they can create a future when such is really in the hand of divinity alone. But in recent decades Liberalism has subverted its metaphysics of history more effectively than any reactionary thinker or activist. Neoliberal ideology converted the concept of the future from an ideal of temporal progress into a rich territory up ahead, filled with risks and opportunities in need of charting, and ripe for conquest by those smart enough to collect and analyse the data, make the psychologically informed predictions and do the risk calculation.

Meanwhile, as a mode of government, neoliberalism redefined the future as imminent and unstoppable change to which people simply must adapt. 'So, what is the challenge?' Tony Blair asked his Party Conference in 2005. The answer was: 'Modernise or die'.¹¹ Government would do its best to train us morally and practically to be both resilient and enthused by the exciting opportunities ahead for upward mobility and personal development. Brexitism is a reaction against this. Its insistence on a permanent present is also resistance of futurity itself, for it sees there nothing other than further implementation of the plans and policies of 'normal' or 'elite' politics (the things 'they' do to 'us'). It is the future of and for 'them' - of cosmopolitanism, jobs replaced by technology, craft turned into transferable skills. From behind this world image the essence of democracy seems to reside not in the collective invention of a new future but, rather, in the expression of the will of the people as a refusal of that future (accompanied by pleasure at the rejection and punishment of the class trying to shape it).

Where neoliberalism predicted the future to us so that we might 'willingly' consent to being made fit for it, Brexitism construes it as a void, a zone of complete opacity and unknowability.

¹¹ Tony Blair, Speech to the Trades Union Congress Conference, Sept. 9th 1997

There are no facts about the future. (@PolAnalyst, April 13th, 2018)

... nobody knows the future. Since it will be different experience and history has limited use and cannot be a basis for accuracy. Therefore predictions of impending Brexit disaster cannot be fact yet many claim such. (@dancludlow Twitter, 1.33am, 4th March 2018)

Nobody knows the future. That's the beauty of Brexit, taking back control gives the U.K. the flexibility to thrive. Democracy at it finest. (@Shackavan1, 12.11am, 5th July 2018)

I could list hundreds perhaps thousands of examples such as these. The rejection of all and any claim to know anything about the future (and of the experts who make such claims) is central to Brexitism for which the truth of human affairs does not, as Liberalism proposes, lie in the realisation of a projected future. Nevertheless, it does have its utopian dimension.

We have huge scope, huge scope for creating vast numbers of new jobs. (David Davis)¹²

Outside Europe we could have prosperity on a level that we can't even imagine now. (Matt Ridley)¹³

Such general promises of future manna may seem to indicate belief in a real historical redemption. But yearning for it is caught on the reactionary hook. Brexitism cannot move from hope to plan because it takes the form of what Ernst Bloch characterised as 'wishful images in the mirror'. As in the fairy-tales Brexitism offers not a window onto a new world but a reflection, an inverted image of what is behind us and of how we remember the world to have

¹² From *Brexit: The Movie*, *op. cit.*

¹³ From *Brexit: The Movie*, *op. cit.*

been in our youth. Bloch calls it a 'beautifying mirror which often only reflects how the ruling class wishes the wishes of the weak to be'.¹⁴

Distinction

What Brexitism sees in the mirror is the past returning: the fishing industry, smaller farms, towns and cities, established gender roles, a place for everyone and everyone in their place. The philosophy behind this is familiar: there is an eternal order, hidden but indicated by the correct use of words (like gender pronouns) and by the stability of the natural order to which it gives rise; chaos is the outcome of ignoring such distinctions. It's a version of the standard (and thoroughly modern) critique of a Liberalism which began with the rejection of feudal class distinctions and which is thought to persist in the promise that we can be whatever we want, that all categories to which we might be assigned (be they biological, historical or cultural) are to be condemned as oppressive and escaped from, so that we may 'self-declare' who and what we are. Reactionary public intellectuals such as Jordan Peterson¹⁵ articulate this critique as part of a proof of Liberalism's irrational hostility to nature and history, and of its imposition of a cult of self that places an intolerable and unjust psychic burden on those who cannot be what they naturally are – healthy, virile, self-possessed young men.

That critique has no trouble turning into a critique of Democracy which Plato once mocked as a 'charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike'. He characterised it (quite rightly in my view) as a society which disregards necessary distinctions and in which the 'metic' (who today we would call a legal

¹⁴ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Vol. 1*, MIT Press, 1996, 13

¹⁵ Jordan Peterson is a Canadian clinical psychologist and professor of psychology who became a celebrity with the publication of *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, Penguin Random house, 2018

migrant) is treated as equal with the citizen, and the stranger (the illegal migrant) ‘is quite as good as either’; worst of all is ‘the liberty and equality of the two sexes in relation to each other’.

The democratic demand and its counterpart in the form of insistence on order through hierarchical distinction are recurrent elements of European political culture. By personifying the forces of equality as an occupying alien force of bureaucrats, public officials and experts who all profit from it, contemporary reactionary politics is able to turn Plato’s aristocratic critique into the claim that its heroic resistance is the true democracy, its call for a return of distinctions in which the displaced class of people who work with their hands, have their place once more, the true egalitarianism. The Brexit campaign secured that claim by connecting the desire for stable distinctions to the issue of the EU. And it did that through the mythical figure of ‘The Turk’.

‘Behind me is the Bosphorus the ancient waterway that historically separated East from West. 97% of Turkey is actually in Asia, only 3% is in Europe but what if the whole country were to become a member state of the European Union? Well, that would extend the borders of what would then be known as Europe all the way to Iraq, Iran and Syria’ (UKIP Party Political Broadcast, 3rd Feb, 2016)¹⁶

‘With the terrorism threat that we face only growing, it is hard to see how it could possibly be in our security interests to open visa-free travel to 77 million Turkish

¹⁶ ‘Cameron Wants Turkey to Join the EU’, UKIP Party Political Broadcast, 3rd Feb. 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnrFddSJWsk>

citizens and to create a border-free zone from Iraq, Iran and Syria to the English Channel' (Michael Gove, June 8th, 2016).¹⁷

When Brexitists speak of sovereignty they mean the power to make metaphysical distinctions manifest in the form of borders that separate us from them, giving to each their proper identity and definition. The essential problem with the EU for the Brexitist is that it erodes borders with its famous four freedoms of goods, capital, services and persons. Only through its abolition can nations recover political and cultural distinction, perhaps spiritual also, and Europe be saved from blurring into Asia. In his extensive *Revolt Against the Modern World* the Italian fascist metaphysician Julius Evola – cited by Steve Bannon and celebrated by the alt-right - recalled the legend that Alexander the Great 'contained the onslaught of the peoples of Gog and Magog by building an Iron Wall'. The mythical truth of the legend is explained thus: the outsiders represent 'the "demonic" element that in the traditional hierarchies was successfully subjugated; one day these people will flood the earth in pursuit of conquest but they will ultimately be challenged by figures who, according to mediaeval sagas will embody the archetype of the leaders of the Holy Roman Empire'¹⁸.

¹⁷ Michael Gove, Speech at Vote Leave Headquarters, quoted in 'Turkey EU accession poses security risk - Michael Gove', BBC News online, June 8th <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36479259>. Examples abound. See for instance: 'STUFFED BY TURKEY: More than 700,000 Turks "will flock to live and work in Britain after country joins EU"' (headline in *The Sun*, 12th June, 2016)¹⁷ 'A vote for Remain is a vote for mass immigration from Turkey' (headline in *The Daily Telegraph* 17th May 2016)¹⁷ Owen Bennett, 'There Will Be More Cologne-style Sex Attacks If Turkey Joins the EU, Claims Nigel Farage', *Huffington Post*, 29 April 2016.

¹⁸ Julius Evola, (1995[1934] *Revolt Against the Modern World*, Rochester, Vermont, Inner Traditions International, 26.

Conclusion

Cultural and spiritual redemption, through the restoration of the natural distinctions between peoples, achieved by heroic resistance to the future imposed by alien and expert elites: that is Brexitism. Not everyone who voted Leave did so because they consciously held this philosophy. That is not how such political ideas work. They are something we come to as a result of politics, not the other way around.

‘Men make their own history’ Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* ‘but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past... just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before...they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language’. He continues that description with a striking analogy. Acquiring the ‘borrowed language’ is like learning a foreign tongue. We begin by translating it back into our first language but over time we assimilate the spirit of the new, speaking it freely when we move about in it, not recalling the old and eventually forgetting our native tongue.