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Problems of Stasis in My Country:

The National Theatre and the Crisis of General Enculturation
in Post-Referendum Britain

Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by targeted completion funds from the Research Office at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Abstract (100 words max):

This essay explores the discursive invocation of ‘civil war’ to describe the polarization of the political terrain in post-Referendum Britain in order to contextualize the National Theatre’s production of Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris’s ‘verbatim’ play My Country and its representation of Brexit. It shows how the political reality of Brexit, understood as a crisis of ‘general enculturation’, undermined the NT’s attempt to transcend the impasse of the political context. It argues that in identifying the NT with the play’s central figure of Britannia, an image of reconciliation, the theatre failed to account for its own implication in the wider crisis of enculturation.

Keywords: Stasis, Civil War, National Theatre, UK Referendum, Oresteia

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Main Text

During an interview for the BBC in December 2016, leading Brexiter and Conservative MP, Michael Gove quipped that the 'Brexit vote was like "the civil war without muskets"' (2016). No doubt overstating things, as usual, and certainly crass, given the murder by a far-right activist a few months earlier of the Labour MP, Jo Cox, in Birstall, West Yorkshire -- the first political assassination incidentally to have occurred in Britain since 1990 -- the motif of civil war in political discourse in Britain, both during and since the EU Referendum in June 2016, now constitutes something of a commonplace. 'Don't mention the civil war', proclaimed The Guardian in January 2018, 'the English are still fighting it' (Kettle 2018). The previous year, Lord Bird had issued the ominous warning: 'this could be a civil war scenario'; prompting The Express to state that 'Brexit tensions could lead to "Blood on the streets" as part of [a] "civil war"' (Heffer 2017). Nigel Farage threatened: 'if people feel voting doesn't change anything, then violence is the next step' (Farage in Simons 2016). In a more recent iteration of the motif, former Liberal-Democrat leader, Vince Cable mused: 'I would go so far as to say Britain is now mired in a protracted, non-violent civil war' (2018); while influential political commentator, Peter Hitchens has expressed his own fear that the UK is moving 'into a pre-civil war condition' (Hitchens in Dugmore 2017). Economist, Will Hutton, has said of Brexit: 'It is barely disguised civil war' (2018). And on this one point, at least, he and Arron Banks -- the businessman and co-founder of the Leave.EU campaign -- agree. Banks boasted, however, that not only was Brexit 'a war' but his side 'won' and those on the losing side -- the metropolitan elite, the 'remoaners', as the belligerent right likes to describe the 48% who voted remain -- should just 'get over it' (Banks in Cadwalladr 2017).

Tempting though it may be to dismiss this talk as just hyperbole, exaggeration, baloney or sensationalist bluster, I think there is more to this rhetorical intensification of civil war discourse than can be dismissed as mere grandstanding by politicians, some fretful cri de coeur by the liberal commentariat or attention-seeking antics by headline-grabbing newspapers. An intriguing analysis by Stefan Collignon, a political economist at the European Institute of the London School of Economics, has revealed an uncanny resemblance between the 'political map of the Brexit vote' (2018) -- the distribution of support for either remain or leave --

and the regional distribution of support, in the 1640s, that divided the country between the Parliamentary cause and those who rallied to the defence of the King and court. The parallels are salutary, rather than specious, and more than justify the claim -- as he puts it -- that Brexit 'has the semblance of a new English civil war' (2018). He explains this semblance by way of an apparent isomorphism between the political maps of 1642 and 2016 as follows: much like today, in 1642, England confronted glaring economic inequality, which divided the country into a prosperous London and south-east -- reliant on international trade under conditions of early modern globalisation, and the deprived rural hinterlands in the North and West of England, which had suffered from years of neglect and impoverishment. In a further echo with contemporary Britain, during the civil war, the King found no support in Scotland, while Ireland -- even if it had wanted to -- could not help, since it was itself mired in internecine conflict. The Parliamentarians drew their support primarily from the cities, as did the Remain vote; while -- Collignon shows -- the same regions and constituencies that supported the Cavaliers in the 1640s swung in 2016 behind the anti-EU Leave campaigns. 'Britain', he observed in conclusion, 'has effectively returned to the politics of the time before it was a United Kingdom' (2018). Far from resolving the divisions in the country, the Referendum cleaved Britain wide open, splitting it -- according to Collignon -- between a closed, nostalgic and inward-facing English nationalism, and those who continue to adhere to the 'liberal idea that opening markets will overcome nationalism and generate a common culture' (2018).

This, no doubt, is an oversimplification on Collignon's part. Many Remain voters would not consider themselves economic liberals, just as not all Leave voters were xenophobes and nationalists. An alternative version would be that the Brexit vote was delivered by a coalition of the non-university-educated, whether working-class (radicalized after years of shouldering the burden of a financial collapse they did not cause) or wealthy and retired or close to it, revealing a hitherto overlooked but crucial non-metropolitan constituency. The peculiarity is that just at a time when British politics appeared to be moving towards European-style coalition forms of government, Brexit has produced a binarized debate, in which otherwise highly unlikely coalitions are formed. What that further complexity indicates is the factional confusion of contemporary British politics -- the blurring of left and right,

and of the political divisions that span the benches of Westminster and beyond -- a confusion, in short, that effectively signals the collapse of the political consensus that has prevailed in the UK since the 1980s in which the political mainstream embraced Europeanisation and globalisation.^{[note]1} What Britain confronts, as a result of this breakdown, is a general crisis of enculturation at the level of political identity formation. It is a crisis of enculturation to the extent that it not only touches every major institution in the UK, from the civil service, to university, to parliament, to NHS trust, etc.; but because it challenges, more fundamentally, the nation in its very identity -- it strikes at the heart of what it means to be 'British'.^{[note]2} As a crisis of general enculturation, Brexit incapacitates that most fundamental of mechanisms of national cohesion -- once described by the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, as the 'interpretative system', essential for cultivating a sense of social integration: a society's ability to arrive at a self-conception before which all differences are dissolved. Brexit tears up the appearance of consensus around what British identity is;^{[note]3} it deconstructs the narrative, painstakingly built over decades, around 'British values' and the reputation of the British polity for an unswerving political and economic 'pragmatism'. What threatens is political and systemic chaos -- this occurs when, Habermas notes, 'the consensual foundations of normative structures are so much impaired that the society becomes anomic. Crisis states assume the form of a disintegration of social institutions' (1976: 3).

There is no doubting that such a general crisis of enculturation has followed the collapse of the so-called centre ground of British politics -- the centre here being code for what used to be known as the 'third way' consensualist political paradigm -- signalling a major challenge to the hegemony of neoliberalism, with its overlay of Blairite 'social democratic' features, not just in the UK, but across Europe as such.^{[note]4} After all, the 'contagion' of populism -- by no means confined to the UK -- has led the French president, Emanuel Macron, to also invoke the spectre of civil war: 'There seems to be', he said, in a speech in April 2018, 'a certain European civil war ... [a] deadly tendency which might lead our continent to the abyss'. What this enculturation crisis signifies, however, is not simply a collapse of the centre, but -- to derive a more specific formulation from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe -- the 'polarization of the political terrain'.^{[note]5} Meeting this challenge now dominates politics in post-Referendum Britain as it

does in many other democracies across the globe. Now, it is into this pyretic and feverish environment that the National Theatre bravely strayed in March 2017, with its theatrical representation of the Referendum campaign of 2016, in Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris's 'verbatim' play My Country: A work in progress. And it is this play, and, more specifically, the position of the National Theatre itself -- the way it sought to position itself via this play, addressing the crisis of the plebiscite in its role as the UK's 'state theatre' -- that I would like to examine here in this essay. I will start with a brief discussion of the play, and then consider its relation to the problematic of civil war -- the discourse of 'civil war', which (in the current situation) is none other than code for the rise of populism as a response to the crisis-inducing effects of austerity on both British politics and wider society.

To begin with, it should be noted that My Country was one of the first plays initiated by Rufus Norris in his new role as the director of the National Theatre, taking over from the previous incumbent, Nicholas Hytner, in 2015 -- important not least because the arrival of Norris signalled a dramatic 'democratic' turn in the leadership of the National, away from the more patrician decade under Hytner. The effect was palpable at the box-office. According to the National Theatre's annual review of 2016--17, in his first year, the National Theatre reached a near capacity audience, 'making it the best attended programme in over a decade'. Over the course of the year, the report noted, 'we commemorated our nation's shared history' with Jeremy Deller's memorial of the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, We're here because we're here, and -- 'we responded to the EU Referendum -- the biggest political event of our generation -- with My Country: a work in progress which recorded the views from people across the UK and put their words centre stage' (2016/17). Not only did My Country tour a number of cities across the UK -- playing at theatre's such as the Warwick Arts Centre, Birmingham Rep and Glasgow Citizen's theatre -- it was also adapted for television, and screened on BBC2 on 14th November 2017 -- justifying, perhaps, Norris's claim that under his leadership the National Theatre had become 'even more national, even more participatory, and even more diverse -- living up to our ambition to be a theatre for everyone'.^[note]⁶ Indeed, that ambition -- to be a truly national theatre -- is refracted through the central conceit of the play, where -- in order to mobilise the voices of the nation -- in order to hear this 'verbatim'

testimony -- the nation had to be summoned to 'listen' to those voices, to listen to itself -- directly and in an apparently unmediated fashion -- yes, in the theatre, but more importantly 'in the words of people across the UK'. The national theatre became a kind of supplementary space in which to reflect upon the state of the state, and an ancillary space to that of the highly fractious public sphere in which the politics of Brexit -- in all their ferocity -- were (just as they continue to be) played out; what the National Theatre sought to produce was a space where one could listen but also where a lesson could be drawn by silencing the angry din of political contestation raging outside -- the word 'listen', a running motif throughout the play, is an anagram of 'silent'. The final lines of the play ended with a plea, directed not just to the audience, but to the country at large and its political class: 'We cannot stand in judgement on each other's lives. But we should search and strive for good leadership. Are you listening? Do I hear you listening?' (Duffy and Norris 2017: 58).

How well, then, did the National Theatre fare? To broach this question, I would like to begin with a consideration of the dramaturgical structure of the play. The first thing to observe is the play's use of identity categories as metaphors via the personification of the regions of Britain by its actors; but it is those same actors who also, shedding their symbolic roles, utter the transcribed words of Norris and Duffy's interviewees. As they speak the words of the verbatim text, each actor holds up a photograph of the actual person who had said them -- transforming each, in effect, into vox pops; second, the verbatim sections are interspersed with scripted dialogue in which, as one reviewer observed, 'regional stereotypes [are used] to get laughs' (Tripney 2017) -- with banter reminiscent of Ealing Comedies, or the films of Bill Forsythe; thirdly, the dramaturgical setting of the play is that of a constitutional convention, convoked by none other than Britannia herself, where Britain's regions have been summoned to gather. Why? Because '[o]nce again', as Britannia declares, 'we find ourselves at a crucial moment in our nation's history' (Duffy and Norris 2017: 6). Note that the rhetorical emphasis placed on the collectivised subject of 'our' nationhood is overshadowed by the portent of history and crisis. Britannia, played by Penny Layden, is dressed in conventional symbolic attire, wearing a plumed helmet and carrying a shield and trident (fig. 1):

[[figure1]]

'Before witnesses', she says, 'we shall listen to those voices we have gathered and see what we can learn. You are the spirits and hearts of your regions and you honour the voices of your people' (2017: 6). Caledonia, the South-West, Cymru, Northern Ireland, the East Midlands and the North East each appear -- though not, it should be observed, remain-voting London and the South-East (or other cities for that matter) -- an omission that did not go unremarked in the national press, with Dominic Cavendish writing in The Telegraph:

With London and the South-East exempt from the party, Remoaners are thin on the ground and members of the metropolitan elite may need to reach for the nearest bottle of Chianti to wash away their distaste at some of what they hear. (2017)

There are other exclusions too, which I shall briefly note: one glaring omission is that of any European voices in the play -- and in particular of those who have made the UK their home; there is also at best a limited acknowledgment of the cultural diversity -- both historical and contemporary -- of Britain, with little recognition of Commonwealth and other diasporas; and we hear nothing from the expat Brits living on the continent of Europe. This is not simply an oversight or moment of neglect, but a poetic choice to present Britain, barring a few tokens, as essentially homogenous, monocultural, and ethnically white.{{note}}7 In this sense, if the National Theatre's aim was to 'speak to the nation for the nation', to produce a kind of national poem, the play already operates within a tacit decision regarding who is to be included in that poetic vision of the nation, and who is to be excluded from it. Recalling the idea of nation and its etymological links to natality, this -- the play proclaims -- is the 'gathering of the family of Britannia' (Duffy and Norris 2017). It is a meeting 'Inter se conveniente Britanniae' -- a meeting 'among ourselves', among the nations of Britain -- where the vision of Britain is one that hearkens back to 1707 and the Act of Union. But, also, there is a wider question that can be raised in relation to this hearkening, regarding the play's forgetfulness of Britain's imperial past: of the racialized and class-inflected inequalities that it instituted, and that still persist, in which the personification of Britain as Britannia

'takes back control' of history by appealing to the myth of a once unified nation state that never was.

Let's consider this interesting figure of Britannia for a moment. It hardly needs saying that she has a long history, dating back to the first century AD and the Roman conquest of Britain. The earliest sculptural relief, found in Aphrodesias in Turkey, shows Britannia being overpowered by the Emperor Claudius, in an image of subjection at the hands of an earlier continental power. After the fall of Rome, Britannia seems to have disappeared as a cultural signifier of any note and only re-emerges as a national muse after the Reformation. In the early nineteenth century she is represented as the defender of virtue, against the programme of radical reformers in the 1830s (as a print by George Cruikshank shows); she also picks up the martial attributes of a seafaring power -- she is henceforth associated with British naval force, invoked in times of national peril as the great protectress, and later with British colonial and military exploits. In an image, published in Judy, in 1879, entitled 'retribution', Britannia can be witnessed violently subduing King Cetewayo, during the Anglo-Zulu war. Not all depictions are quite so explicitly racist, however, and Britannia even makes an appearance on behalf of the abolitionist cause -- as can be seen in her depiction as a Virgin Mary figure, where she is meant to prick the nation's conscience and awaken it to the horrors of slavery; while, in another image, Britannia becomes an emancipatory symbol, who -- in her benevolence -- 'bestows' freedom on Caribbean slaves (fig. 2).

[[figure2]]

Madge Dresser notes, Britannia is a 'syncretistic construct which linked Amazonian fertility goddesses with patriarchal assertions of imperial power' (1989: 41), but like any symbol, she is the bearer of complex historical traces, and thus constitutes a site of political and ideological contestation. And I think this is the point worth examining, in relation to My Country -- she is more than a recognizable trope of British patriotism, a convenient structuring device or a symbolic representation of British nationhood -- she is also, insofar as she is that symbol, a surface of inscription. But what does the play seek to inscribe on its image of Britannia? I think it is nothing other than the values of Norris's National

Theatre itself, and it is by means of this inscription, that it inserted itself, quite literally, to borrow from the NTs mission statement, into the 'wider national conversation' over Brexit. Britannia is both the symbol that speaks for the British family of nations -- insofar as she alone is capable of listening, of bearing witness -- this poetic muse of the poet laureate -- and she also emblemizes the National Theatre and its aspiration to be 'a theatre for the whole nation, a theatre for everyone' (NT, 'Our Mission').

Britannia, my name is Britannia.

I am your memory, your dialects, your cathedrals, your mosques and markets, schools and pubs, your woods, mountains, rivers... your motorways and railway lines, your hospitals, your cenotaphs with paper poppies fading in the rain. I have breathed you in, like air, and breathed you out as prayer, or speech, or song. I am your heartbeat and I take your pulse. Who else but me can praise your ancient, living language as a jewel? Or trace our wars in raised, ugly scars on her flesh?

(Duffy and Norris 2017: 38)

I don't think it is so farfetched to trace the sentiment expressed here back to the National Theatre's origins, in the nineteenth century, in the campaign to build a House for Shakespeare -- but that is an incidental point, other than to say that such arguments were already founded on the aspiration to deploy culture 'ideologically' as a means of symbolically unifying the polity around the construction of a 'national' canon. Today, that aspiration, realized in the form of the National Theatre, has not only become a reality; it is a reality that rests upon the accumulation of immense cultural and symbolic capital, albeit bestowed upon it, in material terms, through actual capital (with high levels of government funding); while its ideological aspect derives from its absorption, in the 1990s, of the liberal doctrines promoted by New Labour of 'cosmopolitanism', 'pluralism' and increasing 'diversity'. These values inflect the play in contradictory ways, and the tacit identification of Britannia and the National Theatre is to be understood, as a consequence, in relation to those contradictions -- just as are the two central planks constituting the theatre's self-defining mission: 'to better understand ourselves and the world around us' and to '[show] us who we are, who we have

been, who we could be'. In other words, it is the entire ensemble of cultural values, upon which the National Theatre's normative structures rest, that My Country inadvertently exposed as contestable.

This is how Britannia expresses her role, her function in the play:

So.

Listen to me and let me hear your words:
not to agree, but -- as the song of birds
reveals the light,
the darkness lessening --
to hear this human music; silence loosening
within the Sacrament of Listening...
... I move to the Opening Voices. Verbatim
(Duffy and Norris 2017: 10--11)

Just as the song of birds reveals the light, and lessens the darkness -- so the theatre, a space of light and of listening, has the power to illuminate that which is otherwise clouded in opacity. What is this sacrament of listening? The word sacrament signifies baptism or confirmation; but also, it indicates a ceremonial and performative act imparting spiritual grace -- again it is worth recalling that Britannia is often depicted as a secularised Virgin Mary figure. What is it to impart spiritual 'grace'? It is to offer deliverance from enemies, from adversity and affliction. Britannia becomes the spiritual guide who offers those who are prepared to listen both forgiveness and salvation -- she opens the space in which our sins, our offenses, our trespasses can be forgiven. She listens to us in silence, without judgement: she is an impartial observer, standing above the fray, apparently without interest or faction. She is offered as an unsullied point of identification: a national symbol of reconciliation and healing. She is there to remind us of who we once were, who we are, and who we yet might be -- if, that is, we are able to see beyond the differences that divide us. So, it is in light of this symbolic and sacramental effect that we can understand, I think, how the National Theatre -- enunciating principles of clemency, decency, benevolence and mercifulness -- sought to position itself following the 2016 Referendum as the great unifier of a

divided nation. In doing so, however, the theatre inevitably ran into an insuperable difficulty: the political reality of Brexit. Let me briefly indicate this difficulty through some of the critical responses to the play. Michael Billington proclaimed that while never dull, My Country 'tends to confirm what we already knew: that the referendum has revealed just how fractious and divided we are as a nation' (2017). Worse still, 'the overriding impression is of a country filled with a simmering resentment' (Billington 2017). Natasha Tripney, writing in The Stage, remarked that it 'feels like a belated attempt to put a sticking plaster on a gushing wound' (2017). And the Times's Christopher Hart opined: 'This National show is a brave stab at the Brexit debate, but we're left with a nation at war' (2017). Here, once again, we have that motif of a nation at war with itself -- the discourse of civil war with which I began, and to which I would now like to return for a more detailed analysis.

Consider the problem of the political reality of Brexit. What the National Theatre did can be thought in terms of two positional operations: first, it deployed the symbolism of Britannia in order to insert itself in the 'national conversation' around Brexit; but, in doing so, it also sought to extract itself from the political fray -- to place itself above it. The viability of performing these two apparently contradictory operations, is -- I think -- certainly open to question. To indicate the nature of the deeper problem here I'd like to make reference to an earlier play about civil war, to draw a parallel between them (if I can be forgiven this indulgence) by reading My Country in relation to the Oresteia -- and its fundamental problem. In the Oresteia, the fundamental problem is not, in fact, how to put an end to the series of killings -- the affliction of the House of Atreus -- which reaches its conclusion in the trial of Orestes; it is how to prevent those killings from spilling over into a general conflagration into which the entire polis will be drawn. It is, in short, how to prevent what the ancient Greeks called stasis, and which we translate variously by the terms civil or internal war, and, more generically, civil strife; but stasis is also, essentially, demotic in form -- it indicates the threat posed by populism to the unity of the polity. I will note two parallels that are instructive here, then: first, that in the Oresteia we find the central figure and symbolism of Athena occupying the centre of the play -- another goddess who embodies the ideal of the polis -- which mirrors the role played, in My Country, by Britannia; second, we have the identification of

the real ground of the problem of stasis, which is not the war in the family as such, but the way that war threatens to develop beyond the family, through the factional divisions that erupt within a vengeful populace, represented in the Oresteia by the chorus and in My Country through verbatim vox pops. The people appear, they speak, in choric form -- and what they say is disturbing -- expressing profound grievances, resentments and general disaffection. In My Country this choric function appears in the verbatim elements of the play, arranged thematically into sections on 'Patriotism', 'Europe', 'Hardship', 'Immigration' and the 'vote'. And just as Athena appeals to the chorus to set aside their grievances, to show mercy and forgiveness, so Britannia makes the demand on the country, on a country riven by division, to overcome those divisions through the injunction 'to listen'. But this is to misunderstand two things, I think, about the current situation.

First, it misunderstands the nature of political antagonism and the formation of popular demands -- that in a context of stasis, of the bifurcation of the political terrain, society has -- if I may borrow terms offered by Ernesto Laclau -- structured itself around 'two incompatible equivalential chains' (2007: 83--86) -- those of 'Brexit' and 'Remain'. The chasm that separates them is radical and cannot be reasoned away, since it involves profound 'libidinal' attachments, but also real underlying grievances. Stasis, above all, signifies a phenomenon that we might call 'affective democracy' -- consisting not of a reasoning public, but impassioned popular political identities. Within the hegemonic struggle of Brexit, the word 'Brexiter', with all its connotations of buccaneering, anti-establishment defiance, crystallizes the point upon which a plurality of popular demands that have little to do with one another in themselves converge in a single identity. This brings me to the second problem: along with the construction of the popular identity, there is also the identification of what Laclau calls the 'global enemy' (2007: 91). Remainder, metropolitan elite, enemy of the people -- are obvious examples that the Brexit supporting press has popularized. But here I want to simply note that what this dynamic affords is a way of understanding what are currently termed 'culture wars', but which in fact indicate the general crisis of enculturation that underpins the current crisis of legitimacy confronting political and cultural institutions. That is why, institutional responses -- for instance those of the judiciary -- fail to grasp how popular identification with Brexit responds to an

entirely different logic to that of law and legality; it is a political logic that involves the withdrawal of consent from institutional structures that are identified with the status quo. And it is in relation to this last point that the National Theatre's position -- of inserting itself into the national conversation, but extracting itself from the political fray -- runs up against political reality: when there is stasis, there is no position impervious to the effects of the political.

In other words -- under conditions of stasis -- a profound schism emerges between what Habermas termed, on the one hand, the 'validity claims constitutive for the cultural reproduction of life' (1976: 5) -- expressed as whatever claims to truth or rightness as are required to undergird the legitimacy of political and cultural institutions -- and the 'life world' context, on the other, that rewards those institutions with mass loyalty by acquiescing to those claims. When those truth claims 'forfeit [their] sense of discursive redeemability' (1976: 6), i.e., when they are no longer considered to represent the 'truth', it is because they are perceived to be indistinguishable, Habermas notes, from other 'control media' such as power, money, social influence and so on. I would suggest one can view the dilemma confronting the National Theatre in corresponding terms: viewed politically, the National Theatre cannot 'speak the truth' of Brexit, since that truth is impossible to announce from the position of neutrality that confers institutional legitimacy on the National. On the contrary, the truth spoken by the National must always be, at some level, suspected of recidivism; while the truth of Brexit, in all its radicality, cannot but contradict the very space of legitimacy from which the National derives its authority to 'speak' to and for the 'nation'. The truth of politics is of a completely different order to the discursive truth upon which the cultural capital and prestige of the National Theatre rests: it speaks of fundamental antagonisms that cannot, in the febrile context of a crisis of general enculturation, occupy the same symbolic space. In fact, that symbolic space of orderly and 'civil' discourse is rendered 'undecidable'. Thus, while it is no doubt laudable to 'seek and search and strive for good leadership' (Duffy and Norris 2017: 58), stasis betrays the search as always already futile. In his writing on the concept of stasis, Giorgio Agamben observes that civil strife, 'functions as a reactant' which reveals both the 'threshold of politicisation' and the undecidability of the distinctions that normally demarcate 'brother and enemy, inside and outside, household and city'

(2015: 13). It is for that reason that in entering the profound confusion of the national 'debate' on Brexit, the National, like a ship buffeted by powerful countervailing winds, could not escape being positioned by one side or the other of a deeply polarized nation. With respect to the problem of institutionality -- and its critique -- within the context of a general crisis of enculturation, the lesson for the National could not be starker: attempting to confer legitimacy on itself only confirmed the political illegitimacy of its claim to 'represent' the nation.

Notes

1 The sense of confusion witnessed in the contemporary formation of political identities can no doubt also be correlated with the collapse of trust in the traditional fourth estate. New modes of news distribution across digital platforms have led to the emergence of propaganda by algorithm, the rise of the 24 hour news cycles (transforming news into a permanent spectacle of mediated catastrophism), alongside the steady capture and consolidation of conservative power, over a number of years, in information 'echo chambers' promoted by media empires such as Fox News (as well as the political appropriation of social media sites).

2 The process by which 'nation' is constructed through 'narration' is, of course, a complex one, as Homi K. Bhabha astutely observed, when distinguishing the tension between 'pedagogical' and 'performative' aspects of the 'narrative address of the nation'. 'It is,' he wrote, 'precisely in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how the "people" come to be constituted within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the processes of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double time; the people are the historical "objects" of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on a pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the "subjects" of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified

as a repeating and reproductive process ... In the production of the nation as narrative there is a split between the continuist accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative' (1990: 297).

3 Brexit has tended to engage specifically English nationalism -- making it more isolationist -- while antagonising Scottish nationalism in particular -- making it more cosmopolitan. These kinds of paradoxes can only be understood historically, but have been produced by the lack of an awareness of history governing the Brexit debate. I thank Tom Cornford for this astute observation -- and for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

4 Brexit, of course, has exposed a major, perhaps irreconcilable, split in the Tory party -- between metropolitan socially-liberal neoliberals and 'traditional Conservatives' in the Churchill mold who see themselves as economic liberals and social conservatives.

5 See Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, where Laclau and Mouffe distinguish between the diversity of political positions characteristic of democratic politics, in contrast to the bifurcated division of the political sphere during the populist moment: 'We shall use the term popular subject position to refer to the position that is constituted on the basis of dividing the political space into two antagonistic camps; and democratic subject position to refer to the locus of a clearly delimited antagonism which does not divide society in that way' (2001: 131).

6 See Welcome, Rufus Norris in Annual Review 2016-17, <https://review.nationaltheatre.org.uk/#2017/overview/4>.

7 In an interview with the Guardian's Amelia Gentleman, Norris frames the decision behind which 'voices' were to be included in the play (and by implication, which were to be excluded) in relation to both the desire to avoid the perception of 'metropolitan' 'liberal' bias -- 'We push[ed] it further the other way because you understand that the majority of people who will come to see it are likely to be on the remain side, because theatres are seen as a liberal echo chamber'; and -- as Gentleman reports it -- to capture the voices of those (presumably non 'metropolitan') 'citizens trying to

come to terms with a rapidly changing nation'. Norris explains: 'We have been incredibly diligent, making sure that what will inevitably be perceived as our pro-remain bias is properly balanced' (Norris in Gentleman 2017).

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Photo courtesy: Sarah Lee

Figure 2. Britannia as a protectress, 1837. Source: Alamy.