

Our Nation's Future

Youth visions of a post-Brexit Britain

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Introduction

On 23 June 2016, the British electorate voted in favour of leaving the European Union in what has come to be known as the Brexit referendum. The counting returned 51.89% of the votes in favour of 'Leave' and 48.11% in favour of 'Remain'. Scholars and commentators have scrutinised this referendum through a variety of geographical and socio-demographic lenses. Geographically, the vote pointed to a clear fragmentation of the United Kingdom: England (53.38%) and Wales (52.53%) displayed higher support for 'Leave', whereas Scotland (62.00%) and Northern Ireland (55.78%) backed 'Remain'. While densely populated urban centres were more likely to support 'Remain', suburban communities, post-industrial towns, and coastal areas were more likely to vote 'Leave' (Jennings and Stoker, 2017). In terms of socio-demographics, a higher percentage (64%) of working-class voters supported 'Leave' than did upper- and middle-class voters (46%) (Khalili, 2016) and, across these classes, people with conservative values and a desire for order were most likely to vote 'Leave', irrespective of education, income and political affiliation (Kaufmann, 2016). Immigration, measured in terms of its rate at the local level and demands for its control, has also been highlighted as a key predictor of the 'Leave' vote (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). This point brings forward the ethno-racial connotation of the Brexit vote. While 53% of people describing themselves as white voted 'Leave', 67% of those describing themselves as Asian and 73% of those identifying as black voted 'Remain' (Lord Ashcroft, 2016). This explains why Brexit can also be read as a nostalgic call for a white, colonial Britain (Bhambra, 2017), imbued with feelings of discontent and anxiety over a present populated by racialized others perceived as undermining traditional understandings of Englishness/Britishness (Virdee and McGeever, 2017).

These studies help understand who voted for Brexit and why, but in this chapter, we are interested in a different question: what next? What are the perceptions, concerns and aspirations of the British people in relation to a post-Brexit Britain? We shall answer this question by focusing on young people, most of whom, due to their age, did not have the right to vote in 2016. In particular, we are interested

in how young people close to adulthood perceive the future of the nation at this juncture. To this end, we will analyse visual and textual materials produced by various groups of young people living in Loughborough – an English market town located in the East Midlands. Their works formed the basis of *Our Nation's Future: Loughborough Youth Creative Visions*, a week-long exhibition held at Loughborough University as part of the 2017 ESRC Festival of Social Sciences. Before delving into the analysis of these materials, we shall first offer some background information about the relationship between youth, politics and nation and then explain how data were collected and analysed. The discussion section will highlight the major themes that we thought emerged from the artworks produced by the young people and, to conclude, we shall reflect on the ways in which these young people call the nation into existence when facing an uncertain future.

Brexit, politics and youth

Young people are often characterised as being disconnected from formal politics (Bastedo, 2015). They are said to be less likely to vote (Henn, Oldfield and Hart, 2017) or engage in party politics (O'Toole, 2015). These attitudes have been explained in relation to the so-called post-materialist turn which, since the 1970s, has characterised affluent Western societies (Inglehart, 1977). In these societies, younger cohorts and the better-off social strata tend to be driven by values of self-expression which are not always in tune with traditional forms of political representation. Political apathy towards formal politics was also found among British young people (Fox, 2015). This is seemingly motivated by the feeling that they have little say in governmental affairs (Sloam, 2011).

However, the Brexit referendum stands as an exception to this trend. Though still below the national turnout (72%), a good percentage (64%) of those aged 18–24 took part (Ipsos-Mori, 2016). Among them, 75% voted 'Remain', signalling a generational divide which may be attributed to differences in values and cultural attitudes. Young British people are less hostile to the EU than older age groups (Fox, 2016) and have grown up 'in the slipstream of the anti-racist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s' (Virdee and McGeever, 2017). Consequently, multi-cultural education in schools, equality provisions at work and an anti-racist civic culture are an ordinary backdrop to their daily lives.

Young people also feel less strongly about national identity than the older generations. In his study on youth feelings towards being English or British, Fenton (2007) found a generalised sense of indifference (for a similar argument among Australian youth, see also Howard and Gill, 2001; Langer and Farrar, 2003). Instead of national identity, it is local communities, friends and families which emerge as more significant in defining the attachment, belonging and identification of young people (Scourfield et al., 2006, pp. 78–79; Fenton, 2007, p. 336).

Yet, one should be cautious about fully dismissing the relevance of the nation to young people. Indifference towards one's sense of national identity might actually confirm its 'banality' (Billig, 1995), i.e. its unreflexive working in the background

of people's everyday lives. This is particularly true for ethnic majorities, whose national belonging goes uncontested. In their study on Irish Roman Catholic adolescents, Stevenson and Muldoon (2010) showed that, while those living in Northern Ireland proactively claimed their Irishness, those living in the Republic of Ireland were much less active in flagging their national identity, as this was, for them, a secure and uncontested 'banal' identity (see also Scourfield et al., 2006, p. 79, for the case of Wales). Similarly, children of migrants are more likely to show a reflexive attachment to the nation, as their national belonging does not carry the same certainty (Antonsich, 2016). In this sense, whether the nation matters or not has to be judged taking into consideration the national context and the ethno-racial background of those involved.

Many studies dismissing the nation's relevance for young people focus on inner-city areas where conviviality among a super-diverse population is the norm (Back, 1996). However, beyond these areas, racialized manifestations of the nation are still widely felt. For example, Nayak (2017) shows how racialized narratives of the nation remain central to white young people's assertions of identity in the deprived suburbs of the North East of England.

In addition, it is problematic to juxtapose the national to the local. As Cohen (1982) has rightly pointed out, the nation has an abstract quality that can only be apprehended locally and personally (Scourfield et al., 2006, p. 11). Local experience mediates national identity and, simultaneously, may also inform it (Jones and Desforges, 2003; Antonsich, 2018). For young people, the nation may be more often lived and practiced, forming part of the familiar background of their daily lives, than narrated or mobilised as an identity (Hopkins, 2013).

In this chapter, we aim to map the ways in which the nation is constructed in young people's visions for a post-Brexit Britain. When producing artworks which explicitly portrayed the future of Britain, many young people appeared to consider the nation closely. Yet, the question is, *how?* Here, we analyse which repertoires they used to give substance to their national visions. Before delving into the data, though, we describe the event (*Our Nation's Future*) which constituted the occasion for which the artworks were produced.

Our Nation's Future – a visual participatory project

As part of the annual ESRC Festival of Social Science in November 2017, the authors organised a week-long event titled *Our Nation's Future: Loughborough Youth Creative Visions*. Delivering on the festival's aim to bridge the gap between social scientists and the public, the authors sought to bring together academics from the Loughborough University Nationalism Network (*LUNN*), local policy makers, young people from youth groups and schools in and around Loughborough, and community members to engage with the topic of post-Brexit Britain.

The project's main objective was to give young people in Loughborough – a small university town located in the East Midlands of England, where around 54% of the eligible residents voted 'Leave' – the chance to creatively express

their visions for the future of Britain. The resulting artworks formed the basis for a public exhibition and panel discussion with LUNN academics and the local MP.

We focused on a heterogeneous cohort of young people with mixed social status and ethnicity, aged between 14 and 19 and living in or around Loughborough. As most of this group was not eligible to vote during the referendum, our initiative worked as a platform which enabled them to voice their opinions, while also allowing us to map the ways they were managing the prospects of change and imagining the future of their nation as a direct result of the referendum.

Potential participants were approached through their instructors at secondary schools and youth groups during the summer of 2017. Participants were encouraged to use visual or performative art to express their views on post-Brexit Britain. This decision was made on the basis that, in the case of young people, visual and performative methods of participatory research offer more inclusive and richer registers of feelings compared to more traditional research methods (Kraftl, 2013).

Overall, 17 artworks were produced by groups and individuals: a theatrical performance, two short essays, 12 drawings, a photographic collage made on a wooden door and an animated video clip.¹ For some artworks, we received a title and a short description.

We analysed data using a thematic approach adapted for multimedia data (Gleeson, 2011). Artworks and accompanying texts were coded in relation to the research aim. This process was initially conducted by the authors individually before the themes were discussed and rearticulated collectively.

Portraying a post-Brexit Britain

As a result of the open format of participants' contributions, the data collected revealed diverse forms and levels of reflection on the subject of post-Brexit Britain. Our initial categorisation distinguished between artworks which clearly revealed the personal feelings of the participants and those which offered a more dispassionate appraisal of Brexit. In the first case, feelings of distrust, despair, fear and abandonment dominated the artworks. In the second case, participants appeared to take the exercise in more didactic terms and prioritise factual information. Cutting across these broad categories were two themes: the personalisation and the localisation of Brexit. To make it meaningful and to be able to relate to it, young people rewrote this national event by mobilising aspects of their localised everyday life. This is an important point which challenges the scholarship on nation and young people discussed earlier in the chapter. Given their more limited mobility and social networks, young people's lives are more localised than those of adults. Their local environments are centred around home, school and neighbourhoods (Scourfield et al., 2006, p. 15; Harris, 2009, p. 192). However, we argue that these registers should not be read in opposition to the nation (Fenton, 2007), as evidence in this study reveals that local and personal repertoires mediate the ways young people make the nation present. In this section, we explore the participants' visions of the nation by grouping their artworks under different

themes. We acknowledge that this is not the only possible categorisation, but our aim is to highlight the diversity of responses we received.

A traumatic present

Despite being asked to visualise the future of a post-Brexit Britain, the great majority of participants returned artworks which focused on the 'here and now': Brexit as a momentous present rather than an event which elicits visions for the future. This response resonates with what Leccardi (2006) calls the 'extended present'. The socio-economic transformation associated with contemporary risk societies (Beck, 1992) generates uncertainty and indeterminacy which, in turn, produces the loss of the idea of future among young generations. As control over their life plans is untenable, the new time of action becomes the 'extended present', 'that time span short enough not to escape the social and human domain but long enough to allow for some sort of projection further in time' (Leccardi, 2006, p. 41). With Brexit bringing additional uncertainty, it is not surprising that participants were more focused on the event itself rather than the future associated with it.

Among the most commonly recurring feelings was a sense of traumatic shock (Seidler, 2018). Figure 12.1 depicts Brexit as a painted European Union flag with a bleeding hole punched through the canvas, replacing one of the stars symbolising the Union. Interestingly, it is not a British flag that is bleeding. This suggests that



Figure 12.1 Bloodshot

the participant wished to convey the impact of the traumatic event for the ‘other side’, too. The same distressing emotion emerges from another artwork – a collage depicting the European flag being licked by flames from a raging fire – which portrays the negative impact of Brexit on both sides. In the middle of the flag stands a broken United Kingdom; one cleavage separates England from both Scotland and part of Wales, while another separates Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. Here, Brexit marks the departure of the United Kingdom from the EU and, simultaneously, marks the end of the United Kingdom itself: a drama unfolding in the present and anticipating a gloomy future. Brexit as a far-reaching, traumatic event is also apparent in the drawing of a globe with a missing piece. A chunk of Earth representing the United Kingdom lies on the floor, leaving behind a deep, dark hole. The violent extraction depicted in the image conveys a sense of Brexit as an event of epic traumatic proportions, which also returns in another drawing centred on a pair of scissors cutting the threads connecting the United Kingdom and Europe. In a seemingly ironic artwork titled ‘Hang on in There’, which portrays a bear-like figure hanging on barbed wire, the importance of a dramatic present is also palpable. Crafted in a graffiti style resonating with youth urban culture, this painting focuses on the difficulty of the ‘here and now’. Endurance appears as a skill essential to survival in a condition of dangerous precariousness and, as the participant explains, is a sentiment that informs the British character: ‘Britain has had one problem after another from the World Wars, the Great Depression and the recent economic downturn. But somehow we’re still hanging on cause that’s what we will carry on doing through thick and thin’. In this sense, Brexit exalts the enduring and resilient character of the nation, but it is not a nation cast against something (e.g. globalisation) or someone (e.g. immigrant) as voiced during the Brexit campaign.

An uncertain future

In artworks where the future emerges more clearly, a pervasive sense of uncertainty seems to dominate. Figure 12.2 portrays the same traumatic division as observed earlier, but it also tentatively depicts a new future. The painting shows a broken road that separates London from Paris. Feelings of desperation seem to characterise two men in suits – possibly businessmen – as they observe banknotes floating over the Channel amid sinking boats and sharks. Ripped national flags of European countries lie disorderly on the road as a way of symbolising the impact Brexit may have across the Channel. Yet, a sun surrounded by the European stars hangs over Europe and appears to signal a new future for nations proceeding in partnership. This ambivalence over the future of Europe surrounds the depiction of the United Kingdom, which is left in disarray.

Uncertainty also seems to dominate the artwork shown in Figure 12.3. Entitled ‘Bus Stop’, the drawing presents a faceless person dressed in the British flag getting off the ‘Europe Express’ bus. The present journey is over and the next one is unknown. The future destination is somewhere on the globe depicted on the bus shelter. However, a blurred timetable signifies that the destination and timescale of the next journey remain uncertain. The future is open as there is no answer to



Figure 12.2 As we leave the EU

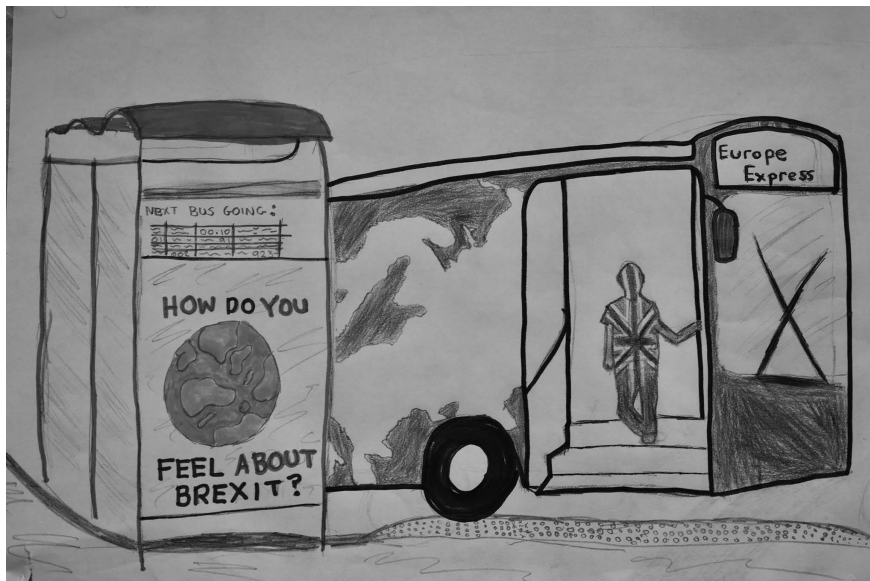


Figure 12.3 Bus stop

the question: ‘How do you feel about Brexit?’ True, it is a less gloomy future than those portrayed in other artworks, as the author also confirms:

My thoughts on Brexit aren’t major and I don’t have an opinion on whether we are doing the right or wrong thing. I feel like even though the UK is leaving the EU, it doesn’t mean we are going to ignore them or desert them. They’re still as close to us as before.

Besides uncertainty, a sense of disorientation characterises another artwork which represents the future with a question mark that splits the EU and UK flags. There is no sense of direction and no anticipation of a positive or negative future. Disorientation and confusion are foregrounded, and these are symbolised by the serial repetition of ballot papers endlessly asking the question: ‘Leave’ or ‘Stay’? The same confusion and concerns for the unknown are depicted in the theatrical play written and performed by 12 young children and adolescents from Frenzy Youth Theatre. Amid a cacophony of voices, the characters struggle to grasp what Brexit really means. After presenting a series of contrasting positions which, at times, escalate in tense exchanges, the play ends with an unanswered question: ‘What happens now?’

‘Lots of hot air’

Two other artworks convey, more clearly, the idea of Brexit as something which young people not only struggle to comprehend, but also perceive as happening above and beyond them. In a drawing titled ‘Lots of Hot Air’, empty talks heard during the referendum campaign are represented in the form of a hot air balloon suggesting feelings of distance towards a highly polarised political debate represented by a fracture across the balloon. Feelings of disenfranchisement and distrust are also apparent in another drawing which depicts Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, as a meek figure standing atop a large globe as she announces that she will throw the European flag into ‘the bin’. Her promise ‘to make Britain great again’ is undermined by the postscript ‘sike!!’, a colloquial expression indicating irony which signals, once again, the distance young people put between themselves and formal politics (Mejias and Banaj, 2017).

Clear visions

Two artworks only conveyed a clear position about Brexit. Figure 12.4 represents a full-sized door split into two panels. The open panel showcases in bright colours the stories of non-British Europeans contributing to the Loughborough community, while the closed panel features a black-and-white collage of anti-immigration news headlines, images and slogans from the ‘Leave’ campaign. This open/closed, colour-coded visualisation highlights two contrasting ideas of nation: one centred on a lived and localised cosmopolitan conviviality, the other illustrated as a distant reality constructed by political and media discourse. ‘Please Hold the Door’ denotes a small act which could be interpreted as symbolic of the convivial weak



Figure 12.4 Please hold the door

ties between strangers in public spaces (Laurier and Philo, 2006). In their accompanying text, the participants recall how they were left ‘in despair . . . hang[ing] our heads in shame’ while watching the anti-immigration slogans from the Leave campaign on TV. Furthermore, inspired by Martin Niemöller’s poem, ‘First they came . . .’, the participants wanted ‘to speak out’ in favour of ‘a post-Brexit Britain

that has a place for everyone irrespective of [their] background . . . Britain should hold the door open and welcome people into our country for their benefit as well as ours’.

A similarly unambiguous position emerges from Figure 12.5. The drawing symbolises the same traumatic experience and ‘here and now’ approach to Brexit



Figure 12.5 May's force is against you

as already seen in other artworks. Inspired by the movie *Star Wars* and humorously entitled 'May's Force Is Against You', the drawing depicts an apocalyptic scenario. A huge grey caricature of Theresa May looms over a solitary outline of a Britain spewing poisonous fumes. Scotland is already consumed and separated from England by a grey shadow, and neither Europe nor the world is represented. The focus is solely on the United Kingdom and its gloomy present with a small, hopeful caveat: 'Based hopefully not on a true story (please)'. In the accompanying words, May appears as a supreme leader who steers the country at her will in the absence of any voice from the people:

She wants to control the whole of the UK in the way she sees it in her image and no one else's and that means that the poor people, the people with different races and ethnic background, they will get left out and the rich get more, as always . . . we'll never going to have our own voices about where Brexit is going.

In contrast to the previous artwork, no hope is expressed for a cosmopolitan, post-Brexit Britain. Instead, the focus is on a grievance cast in populist tones which opposes the people to the governing elite.

Localising the national

While the artworks analysed thus far exhibit the emotions of their participants, other young people adopted a more detached approach to a post-Brexit Britain; presenting the results of their research as strict negatives and positives of Brexit. Among them were two long essays, one drawing and one video. The factual information collected varies in terms of quality and accuracy, but in all cases the interventions show no or little emotional investment. Here, Brexit is something to be researched. Interestingly, two of these interventions adopt a local lens to read the future of a post-Brexit Britain. One essay focuses on the impact of Brexit on universities and on Loughborough University specifically. It anticipates a loss of students, higher fees and fewer student exchanges. The video is a stop-motion animation featuring two participants drawing on a white board and illustrating what they believe the consequences of Brexit will be for Loughborough. The national is reduced to the local to make it meaningful, understandable and tangible in its impact. Two worried faces appear on the board at the beginning of the video, but this is the only instance when emotions are displayed. The remainder of the video comprises a list of negative consequences – loss of foreign population, rise of taxes, pressure on the NHS, and rise in house prices and university fees. Again, this presents a gloomy future framed in local terms.

The localisation of Brexit returns in one of the artworks previously discussed. 'Holding the Door' is centred on Loughborough as a site of cosmopolitan conviviality. This image is used to show the possibility of a different Britain; conflating the local and the national in a way that challenges the argument that young people move away from the nation and confine themselves in the local spaces of their

everyday life. The local is certainly an important register for young people, but it is also used to make a statement about the kind of nation they want (Antonsich, 2018).

Personalising the nation

If the localisation of the nation is one modality through which young people depict the nation, then personalisation is another. In Figure 12.6, a human figure in a British flag stands alone and looks dejectedly to the ground. The figure is separated from a group of former friends, each one bearing the flag of a different European nation. A lonely chair is placed in a corner and the participant notes in the accompanying text that his intention was to convey a personal, relatable story: ‘I was inspired to do this because I know that kids being left out of the conversation is a reality. I wanted to show something real, a picture that can be understood by myself and others who see it’. In the accompanying text of another artwork, another participant writes:

I am going to make a painting showing people wearing flags of their nation . . . and we will have a sad face . . . I feel that this will show how we will be left out of the group of friends, and I am concerned how that will feel. I am worried we may become isolated. It is like being left out of a group of friends you have had for a while.



Figure 12.6 Conversation expectation

In both cases, the nation is rewritten in personal terms so that Brexit can be understood in terms of lived experiences of social relationships. The reference to friendship serves to emotionally apprehend something which would otherwise remain distant. In other words, the register 'friends' is not alternative to the register 'nation' (Fenton, 2007), but it is mobilised to project a different image of nation from the one supported by the 'Leave' campaign. Here, as in other artworks, the nation is not narrated as a cocoon from which to protect 'us' against external 'threats' (immigration, Europe, global capital). The nation is portrayed as existing in relation to other nations like a person within a group of friends. This image calls for a 'relational nation' which clashes with the kind of Britain heralded in the 'Leave' campaign. It also provides an alternative meaning to being 'left out' in the context of Brexit. This term has been used to characterise those who voted 'Leave', feeling that globalisation does not work for them (Delanty, 2017). Yet, as much as Brexit has been the product of these 'left out' people, this artwork shows how the Brexit referendum has, in turn, produced a new kind of 'left out' – young people who cherish an interconnected world.

Conclusion

When the visions of a post-Brexit Britain offered by the young people in this study are analysed, four points of interest emerge. First, as also observed by Leccardi (2006), young people appear to be more focused on the 'here and now' than on projecting themselves in the future. Brexit is portrayed and experienced as a traumatic event absorbed in the present rather than projected into the future. In this sense, the participants in this study do not show clear evidence of how young people might act in 'a pioneering way' by anticipating the future for the wider society (Colombo and Rebughini, Introduction). They appear to be too overwhelmed by the present to anticipate 'our' future.

The participants did not rally around the nation in the same way as older strata of the population did. A great deal of this population voted for Brexit in nationalist terms; by heralding the nation as the supreme value to be defended and protected (Fenton, 2007, p. 322). The young people in this study instead presented an alternative image of nation – one which only exists in relation to other nations, like a friend within a group of friends. This idea of a 'relational nation' clearly goes against the present surge of nationalism, imbued with ideas of protectionism, sovereignty and xenophobia. Not surprisingly, immigration was barely present in the artworks and always treated either as a positive presence or as mere fact.

The reference to friendship used to construct the image of a 'relational nation' anticipates the third point. Contrary to some literature which suggests that young people are indifferent to the nation and their affective registers are oriented towards their local communities, friends and family (Fenton, 2007), our study highlights the intersections among these dimensions. In order to make sense of Brexit, participants mobilised their personal and local references, vesting the nation with human-like traits and narrating stories of broken relationships. The

local place was the setting some participants used to materialise their idea of a post-Brexit Britain. In these instances, the nation coexists with alternative registers, and there are no clear signs to suggest that it does not matter for young people. There is no active flagging as in more nationalist visions aired during the Brexit campaign, but this seems to point more to the banality of the nation as a silent backdrop in participants' daily lives (Billig, 1995) than to their indifference to the national idea.

Finally, some of the artworks appear to confirm the distance some young people feel towards the formal political debate. Whether political apathy or indifference, this seems to prevent the emergence of clear political positions as most participants did not clearly express where they stood in relation to Brexit. They end up somewhere in the middle of the two distinct orientations to the nation that Fenton (2012) has identified for the ethnic majority in England: 'the resentful nationalist' and 'the liberal cosmopolitan'. Participants neither shared the resentment and anxiety towards change that translate into the mobilisation of the nation as a protective and exclusive shield (against someone or something) nor embraced, except in one case, the idea of a liberal, cosmopolitan nation. Context here matters: Loughborough is neither a metropolitan inner-city centre, where forms of multicultural conviviality are present, nor a suburb where an enraged white nationalism may thrive (Nayak, 2017). However, what many of the artworks convey is that participants felt a distinct lack of agency in relation to Brexit – an event imposed upon them by the older, voting population and political leaders.

If one is looking for new generational skills which can navigate the present world of uncertainties, this study does not seem to offer a clear answer. However, if one is to evaluate the role the nation plays in this present uncertain condition, it seems legitimate to anticipate a less nationalistic future. This does not imply the coming of age of a 'non-national generation' as Fenton (2007) maintains, but rather that of a generation which believes in what we might call a 'relational nation'. One that coexists peacefully with other nations and does not need to be actively flagged against someone or something, be this Europe, immigration or globalisation.

Note

1 Due to author's limited budget, only some selected artworks are published here. All artworks are available, in colour, at www.lboro.ac.uk/research/lunn/news-events/youth-brexit-futures/gallery/.

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