Britain and Brexit: Imagining an essentialist sense of 'Britishness' and navigating among 'the British'

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Abstract

In his analysis of the 1956 Hungarian uprising against Soviet control, Georges Devereux argued that social movements exist not because members exhibit attitudinal uniformity but because in the 'same' collective act individuals serendipitously find a socially acceptable expression for their world-views. Any number of individual meanings and motivations come to be 'accidentally' actualized alike. Devereux's insights are pertinent regarding the elective decision in Britain to leave the EU, and more broadly for a social-anthropological approach to stereotypes of 'Britishness'. There will be certain customary discourses by which social life in Britain is 'ego-syntonically' conducted, whose competency represents both a sign of belonging and means to navigate everyday interactions. Six discourses of Britishness of this kind might be identified: Class; Ethnicity; Nationality; Islandness; Privacy; and Football. But one is careful to distinguish between such discourses of Britishness—how it is stereotypically, formulaically, to be 'British'; how it is publicly, customarily, to express and partake in 'Britishness'—and the diversity of individual identities that inhabit and animate those discourses. Equally, one is careful to distinguish between the kinds of violence or violation that the expression of individual world-views by way of stereotypic collective discourses might embody: 'democratic violence' as against 'nihilistic violence'.

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'Britishness': A thought-experiment

Social anthropology lies somewhere between a social science and a humanity in that it treats people on an individual basis: its data comprise the details of meeting particular people at particular times and places; hearing them saying particular things while doing particular things. Or so I would like to claim (Rapport 2002). To adopt a phrase from Virginia Woolf (1985), the truth in social anthropology entails doing justice to what we experience as the 'moments of being' of other individual human beings. Or to borrow from another British author, William Blake (1998:91), the truth of social anthropology is to labour in 'Minute Particulars': 'Art and Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars', and not in 'generalizing Demonstrations'. Only by attending to 'Definite and Determinate Identities', Blake urged, could one do one's duty not only as a scholar but as a citizen: 'He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars'; 'To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit—General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess', while claiming the existence of a 'General Good' was 'the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer'.

But then the French seem to have no problem with generality and generalization. Certainly, French social anthropology appears quite happy to extrapolate immediately from particular case to general class or law. While British social anthropology may pride itself on moving empirically and painstakingly *from* moment *to* model or system, the French do

precisely the opposite: only by virtue of an *a priori* model or paradigm, it is insisted, can particular moments and phenomena, particular people, be made sense of.

But then perhaps I do an injustice to the French and French anthropology here. Is it not an erroneous generalization to say that the French pay insufficient attention to the individualities of life—and that this is why British anthropology is superior: different and better? I should recognize, too, how my description of 'British social anthropology' is less than secure. Is there such a thing at all? Social anthropology as it is, and has been, practised at Cambridge is not the same as in Manchester, let alone St Andrews. Am I really happy to go on as I have begun, then, with notions of 'Britain' versus 'France', 'Britishness' versus 'Frenchness', 'empiricism' versus 'rationalism'? There may be *some* truth here, but surely these are stereotypes that collapse on closer inspection?

Stereotypes get a bad press; and for good reason. They reduce, collectivise and homogenise identities, and they may subject the individual to stigmatic ascriptions, with fatal consequences. But stereotypes are also known to serve a cognitive function. They can orientate us, providing initial and immediate points of reference in complex social environments, offering shorthands for further elaboration when navigating among strangers in contemporary mass societies. They also serve a social function: by virtue of stereotypes human beings organise themselves into groups and territories—such as 'Britain' and 'the British'. Competency in stereotyping is a form of social and cultural belonging, a unifying practice (Rapport 1995). Let me conduct a thought experiment. How might I continue in the above vein and flesh out an essentialist sense of Britishness? I have laid claim to a particular version of British social anthropology (as against French). How might I go further and instruct someone, say, in an essential account of who the British are: how to 'navigate' socially among them, how to anticipate encountering 'Britishness'? If (my) 'British' social anthropology is individualist in orientation, then how far may it take me in comprehending

Britishness as a general, collective phenomenon? I would navigate the apparent paradox of portraying an essential Britain and a stereotypical Britishness (including the contemporary political setting of seceding from the European Union ('Brexit')) from the perspective of a social anthropology that does justice to individual identity and personal experience.

Navigating Britishness

According to the stereotype, one may expect the British—vis-à-vis the French, say, or the Germans—to be practical and mercantile. A seafaring and island race. Steadfast in a crisis, phlegmatic embodiments of a Dunkirk spirit. They drink tea. They wait in queues. They show a public restraint and politeness, and only truly reveal themselves in the 'castles' of their homes. They are conservative, preferring evolution to revolution, and they value empiricism over ideology. They enjoy the pageantry and pomp of monarchy. They cherish their freedom. They tolerate eccentricity. They dread social embarrassment and losing face. They mistrust expertise. They are sentimental towards animals. They support the underdog and are fair-minded, as evidenced by all the sports they are responsible for ratifying—if not by the imperial *pax Britannica* and rule of law that they imposed on the quarter of the globe over which they assumed sovereignty. They perfect institutions for global export: from Parliament to the University to banking and insurance. They have fashioned a language that the world now speaks—with the largest vocabulary and capacity for literary excellence. And they bemoan the weather on the island that has been their fortress since 1066—and where they discriminate among themselves to the nth degree: English against Welsh against Scottish; Cockney against Geordie against Scouse; north against south; city against country; local against outsider; native against immigrant; Catholic against Protestant; the Gunners against the Toffees against the Bluebirds (football); and of course upper class against middle class against working class, 'posh' against 'common'.

Strangely impervious to empirical refutation, stereotypes persist as kinds of interactional formulae by which membership of a society is both signalled and effected. Here, stereotypes join other symbolic forms, linguistic and behavioural, whose intrinsic capaciousness—and ambiguity—is such that they can have a synthesizing function. By means of stereotypes and other forms of habitual or ritualized discourse individual members of groups, communities and societies can come together in conventional and routine and legitimate ways in order to exchange with one another and to conduct the business of the moment.

There are certain customary codes by which social life in Britain, specifically, is conducted. Knowledge of these codes, and competency in their usage—how to speak, how to act—is both a sign of belonging and a means to navigate everyday interactions. The customary codes of British social life, then, would encompass queuing, knowing pop music, appreciating village greens, partaking in sporting rivalries, drinking tea, eating fish-and-chips, chicken tikka masala and cheddar cheese. Also, enjoying an ironic humour, maintaining a sense of personal space, boasting a mercantile ethos, and undertaking voluntary work. Certain key institutions are 'proudly' British, including Parliament, the pub, the High Street, B&Bs, the National Health Service, the Monarchy, the BBC and the house that is a 'castle' of privacy. The durability of these interactional formulae is due to their convenient ambiguity: simplistic verbal and behavioural forms are able to bring people together while signifying a possible diversity of meaning and being differently intended. Virginia Woolf's phrasing is again perceptive:

'One begins letters "Dear Sir," ends them "Yours faithfully"; one
cannot despise these phrases laid like Roman roads across the tumult
of our lives, since they compel us to walk in step like civilized people

with the slow and measured tread of policemen though one may be humming any nonsense under one's breath at the same time—"Hark, hark, the dogs do bark," "Come away, come away, death," "Let me not to the marriage of true minds," and so on' (1969:223).

The seemingly fixed and customary procedures, discourses and rituals of Britishness are animated by the variable meanings and projects of their individual users. Behind the conventional is the personal.

But let me continue the thought-experiment in essentialist and reductionist vein and proffer six key codes that, I suggest, predominate in British social life, and by which Britishness is to be discursively navigated.

Codes of Britishness

1.   Class

Class is an all-inclusive discourse that hierachicalizes British society into sub-groups and assigns individuals to those groups. Ostensibly it concerns wealth, but wealth includes symbolic capital as well as economic. In other words, one's class refers to one's breeding, family and social networks, as well as one's financial resources. It manifests itself in accent, education (private or state schooling), domicile and culture (tastes in food, recreation, holidays, decoration—of one's body as well as one's housing), as well as bank balance. The British read off an individual's status and assign them to a class, a rank. To be British is also to be upwardly or downwardly mobile, as an individual or a family on the class hierarchy. Then again, to be British is to embrace one's current class standing (and its miniscule gradations), even if this is to deny the hierarchicalization: being happily working class,

proudly lower-middle class, insouciantly upper class. And yet again, to be British is to deny the class hierarchy entirely and find it immoral, irrelevant or anachronistic.

2.   *Ethnicity*

One thing that makes class possibly irrelevant as a discourse is ethnicity. Britain now claims itself to be 'multicultural'. This means that instead of assignation to a class one can now see oneself belonging to a 'cultural community'. And in the same way that one might boast one's class membership and guard its boundaries, so 'cultural misappropriation' becomes a way in which one makes out of ethnicity an essence of a Briton's identity. Black, Irish, Muslim, Asian, White, Jewish, these now become forms of ethnic identity, minoritarian and majoritarian, of which Britain is composed—now envisaged as a confederation of ethnic communities. And through this multiculturalism, Britain joins with the world. Openness to global otherness and global equality is reflected in the supposed respectful meeting of cultural difference within its shores.

A reason for the rise of ethnicity as a British discourse is the demise of Empire—*Pax Britannica* and 'Rule, Britannia!'—especially since the end of the Second World War. Attitudes to the Empire and its passing vary widely—from regret to shame, nostalgia to expiation—but a consequence has been the 'Empire' coming home, or 'striking back'. Britain is now home to discrete ethnic communities, each proudly maintaining, guarding, inventing a cultural tradition respect for which becomes a legal right and a personal duty.

3.   *Nationality*

The rise of new ethnic and cultural 'traditions' in Britain is also a reminder that while Empire might have been a unifying national project for a number of centuries, the British Isles have actually been home to indigenous diversity for longer centuries. Celts, Picts, Anglo-Saxons,

Vikings, Normans fought over Ancient Britain; the English conquered the Welsh, the Irish, the Scots. Jews, Huguenots and Gypsies have long sought asylum. And while a Union of Crowns (English and Scottish) might historically have formed 'Great Britain' in 1707, and a further Act of Union joined Ireland to this 'United Kingdom' in 1801, indigenous diversity has never been finally removed or obviated. The Irish Free State, formed itself in 1922 after a bloody revolt; Welshness expressed itself continually through language (*y Gymraeg*) and non-conformist religion; Scottishness maintained itself through independent institutions of education, medicine, law and religion. To these historical 'nations' within the United Kingdom may now be added regionalist identity movements: Cornish, Northumbrian, Yorkshire; and metropolitan ones: London, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle. Independent movements in Scotland and Wales mean that they now have their own legislative assemblies; Northern Ireland too. With 'independence referendums' being episodically mooted, there may be further break-up of the 'United Kingdom' into constitutive regions.

4.   Islandness

A further response to the demise of Empire is an insistence on British specialness: an island race. As Shakespeare immortalised the sentiment:

> 'This sceptered isle,
>
> (…)
>
> This other Eden, demi-paradise,
>
> This fortress built by Nature for herself
>
> (…)
>
> This happy breed of men, this little world,
>
> This precious stone set in the silver sea,

(…)

Against the envy of less happier lands,

—This blessed plot, this earth, this realm' (1965:388).

The qualities that led a small island to achieving such global presence have surely not disappeared. The qualities that made Shakespeare the world's greatest author, and the English language the world's most extensive, capacious and complete, still afford Britain a special relationship to the world: by nature, a fount of civilized values and civilizing institutions. Freedom, tolerance, fairness. Parliament, the University, the NHS.

5. *Privacy*

If Britain has essentially an island identity, then its inhabitants are equally islands in themselves. Privacy, the personal preserve not only of a house and home but also one's conscience, consciousness, mind and imagination, is a natural fact and a civilized right. The British citizen is ultimately alone with herself or himself and, by rights, preserves a personal space—physical, emotional, intellectual—by which the outside world is kept at a distance. John Stuart Mill is not only the greatest political philosopher of modernity, then, but also the voice of a British liberalism that enshrines freedom as a natural law:

'The worth of the state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it' (1963:240);

'Whatever crushes individuality is despotism, no matter what name it is called' (1963:188);

'The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our

own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive

others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper

guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual'

(1963:138).

If William Blake and Virginia Woolf esteemed the particular and the momentary, then there

is in this appreciation of atomism a British celebration of individualism, and a wariness of

both generality and centrism. A British laissez-faire does not only leave the individual alone

in his or her freedom but also deprecates general and centrist projects of ideology and

expertise, of management and development.

6. *Football*

But such liberalism is also middle class: the preserve of the well-to-do or else the

idiosyncratic and eccentric. At the same time as there is a British lauding of individuality and

individualism, then, community and solidarity exist as values and means of togetherness and

cooperation. The trade union movement and ideas of collective bargaining originated with the

industrialisation of labour in 18th century Britain. Likewise, Britain was also responsible for

ratifying the most popular modern sports, with rules of 'fair play' and where players might

practise and learn *esprit de corps*: Football 1863; Cricket 1787; Rugby 1871; Hockey 1860;

Rounders 1884; Badminton 1887; Lawn Tennis 1859; Table Tennis 1880; Snooker 1875;

Darts 1900; Golf 1502. This translates into contemporary team rivalries, most apparent in the

contest between supporters of rival football teams, but also in the league tables of schools,

universities and hospitals and the competition between political parties for votes, or between

religious denominations for adherents, between commercial enterprises for market-share and

revenue, and between families, classes and colleges for reputation. All these speak to a collective solidarity, even tribalism, in which the individual is expected to locate himself or herself—and if necessary, sacrifice themselves for the greater good.

Departing from the thought-experiment

I have been outlining certain discourses or codes that, I have suggested, characterise the British and Britishness in essentialist ways and enable navigation across a landscape of social situations and cultural traditions in contemporary Britain. To know these as interactional cues is to be able to demonstrate a stereotypical knowledge of Britishness and practise a competency in its public exchange (Rapport 2015). These reduced, formulaic discourses provide habitual and routine points of reference when living among strangers in the large-scale society that is Britain.

But in what way might an anthropologist claim that these codes and cues and their claims for institutions, customs and traits are *intrinsically* or *essentially* British? Even as stereotypes, 'British' and 'Britishness' are not self-evident terms: further 'reductions' are possible. There are, then, within Britain the practical and phlegmatic English as against the dour and thrifty Scots as against the secretive and lyrical Welsh. An English attitude to the French is not a Scottish one, where an Auld Alliance to curb English incursions is celebrated. But then a Scottish Presbyterian attitude to this alliance must be different to a Scottish Catholic or Jacobite one that still regrets the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie. And then the attitude of Kenneth Munro, of Presbyterian stock, who was Head of Representation of the European Union in Scotland, sitting in a well-appointed office in Edinburgh—and who also happened to be my father-in-law—differs from the attitude towards the European Union of the equally Presbyterian Alastair Munro, a porter at a hospital in Dundee whom I met during a period of anthropological fieldwork (Rapport 2008a). 'Anything is better for the white

working class than the current status quo', Alastair Munro might have assured me as we undertook our menial portering tasks: 'And like in the Blitz, Nigel, a new togetherness might emerge from the ashes of Brexit'.

In an insightful study, George Devereux analysed the 1956 Hungarian uprising against Soviet control: How had that social movement come about? Devereux argued that any social movement, from the organised to the spontaneous, the conventional to the revolutionary, existed not because its individual members exhibited attitudinal uniformity—'threaded like beads on a string of common motives'—but because in the 'same' symbolic form and collective act individuals were able to find a viable, socially acceptable, expression for possibly very different world-views (1978:125-7). The collective act represented the public gratification (in different ways and to different extents) of any number of individual meanings and motivations, in the process funnelling a differentiated population into a fictive singularity: the Hungarian People.

Devereux's insights are pertinent on a number of levels. To take part in the Brexit referendum of 2016, for instance, and vote to leave the European Union, should not be taken as a homogeneous or even consistent or coherent expression of uniform 'British' attitudes. The meanings and motivations will be diverse, individual; in voting to leave the European Union, some 17 million British citizens were able to express and to gratify possibly very different world-views and life-projects. Voting 'Leave' has been claimed, then, as an expression of disenfranchisement from the 'political establishment' and its 'expertise', meaning both the faceless unelected bureaucrats in Brussels and a self-serving elite in London. Voting 'Leave', again, is a desire to escape an EU 'neoliberal' agenda; or else an EU 'social-democratic' agenda. Voting 'Leave' was about 'taking back control' of national interests. Now one might guard national borders and regulate the foreigners and foreignness that threatened to dilute and swamp British cultural distinctiveness; or else to usurp British

social services (the European 'welfare scrounger' and 'health tourist') and steal British jobs; or else to bring an atavistic violence to peaceable British streets (the Islamist jihadist). Voting 'Leave', again, was a cry of pain from those suffering from government policies of austerity in the post-industrial north as against the entrepreneurial south. Voting 'Leave' was a demand for investment in health and social services, for local and regional control over the infrastructure of social life devolved from 'Whitehall', a centralized civil service and government. And so on, and so on (cf. Forum 2016; Dawson 2017, 2018). There will be a great deal of serendipity involved in any collective social act, Devereux explained, calling for a subtle anthropological analysis of the 'ego-syntonism' whereby any number of very different individual motivations come 'accidentally' to be actualized alike. Ego-syntonism is a process whereby a number of discrete consciousnesses come 'harmonically' to interact one with another:

> 'Both organised and spontaneous social movements and processes are possible not because all individuals participating in them are identically (and sociologistically) motivated, but because a variety of authentically subjective motives may seek and find an ego-syntonic outlet in the same type of collective activity' (Devereux 1978:126).

Joint social events need not be singular to be maintained; nor need they eventuate in singularity. Individuals need not be in agreement when they begin to interact; and the process of interaction, however repeated or habitual or even routine, need bring them no closer to a joint or standardised consciousness, or an overcoming of their idiosyncrasies.

The key to ego-syntonism is the ambiguity of symbolic forms. For the latter to serve as synthesising instruments by which the threads of different individuals' lives come to be

interwoven, they must possess a basic indeterminacy—and reductionism. A language of reduced, common forms is the means by which individuals both come together and remain apart. As long ago as 1836, Wilhelm von Humboldt recognised the social truth that:

> 'Language assumes its final distinctiveness in the individual. Upon
> hearing a word, no one thinks precisely what the other does, and even
> the smallest difference trembles, like a circle in the water, on through
> the whole language. All understanding is therefore simultaneously a
> non-understanding, all mutual agreement a moving apart in thought
> and feeling. The way in which language is modified in every
> individual shows man's power over it. (…) The influence exercised
> on him (on man) reflects the rule-relatedness of language (…), and his
> response reveals a principle of freedom' (Humboldt 1995:59).

The 'friendly ambiguities' of symbolic forms, as Edward Sapir more recently concluded, conspire to reinterpret for each 'member' of a social interaction the behaviour they observe in terms of 'those meanings which are relevant to his own life' (1956:153). The codes and discourses of everyday social life will always mediate between the actions of one individual and the interpretations of another. Their ambiguity also affords them inertia—and their persistence as stereotypes. The reduced codes, the essentialist discourses, can be inherited intact by different generations and adapted to a variety of settings due to their very superficiality. Here are ready-made formulae vague enough to be capable of being substantiated and revived by ever new motivations and moods (Propp 1968:116). It will remain the case, Devereux concluded, citing the old Latin adage, that: '*Si bis faciunt idem, non est idem*' ('If two people do the same thing, it is not the same thing'). Diverse and

possibly private individual motivations will express themselves and find gratification in the habitual formulae, customs and conventions of public social engagement (Rapport 2001).

Personal Britishness

An understanding of the ego-syntonism undergirding the stereotypical usage of reductionist discourses also provides a way to approach the question of the 'essential' Britishness of the codes described above, and how one might anthropologically approach 'the British'. Social anthropology should be intent on revealing the distance between the general and the particular, I have urged, elucidating the individual intentionalities that *animate* the forms and themes of customary social exchange (Rapport 2008b). One is careful to distinguish between, on the one hand, the discourses and codes of Britishness—how it is, habitually, conventionally, formulaically, politely to *be* 'British', how it is publicly to express and partake in 'Britishness'—and on the other, the diversity of individual identities that privately inhabit those discourses. One does not presume that the deployment of generalized conventions, the stereotypes and codes of exchange, reveals the Briton as he or she is beneath the public politenesses in the private preserve of individual identity; social anthropology exposes the tension between public and private lives. Illuminating this tension and distance, I would, in this final section, focus on the diversity that might make each 'British' citizen his or her own unique and *personal* kind of Briton (Cohen 1996).

I think of myself as British, and proudly so. Even though my surname is 'Rapport', I would hate to have it misconstrued as French, and pronounced 'Rrrapp*ort*'. Perhaps at one time the name was 'Rappoport': a common enough Ashkenazi-Jewish surname from Poland and Lithuania. But the Rapports have been based in Britain, London and South Wales, since the late 1800s. I was educated in an English 'public' (private) school in Bristol that still saw its mission as training a class of young men who might make imperial contributions, even if

the Empire was not quite the arena for British global expression that it was when the school was founded. But then again, my boarding at Clifton College was at Polack's House where Jewish boys alone were lodged (segregated). I do not forget the history of persecution that led many Rappoports to flee Eastern Europe, a history that also incorporates the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. That history continues to distinguish Rapport family attitudes from some of their British and South-Walian neighbours'. But equally, my attitudes have not been those of my Rapport cousins who have made *aliyah* to Israel and now live in Jerusalem. Indeed, when my first anthropological field project (as a PhD student) took me to the Yorkshire Dales my intent, in part at least, was to be able to establish firmer ties to British soil (Rapport 1993, 1994).

That fieldwork saw me working as a farm-labourer for Doris and Fred Harvey, partaking in their small family business of high-fell sheep and Friesian milk-beasts. Around Wanet village I was 'Nigel of Cedar High Farm'. But then Doris noticed my surname on a letter mailed to me by my parents: '"Rapport": isn't that a Jewey name?', she quizzed me. I muttered something about French ancestry; how I wished I could escape the pejorative classification, and the disparaging tone of Doris's derogation.

But such classifying was fundamental, I came to recognize, to Doris's emotional and intellectual life. She spent a great deal of energy establishing and fulfilling world-views that depended on her distinguishing 'a' from 'b'—and ranking 'a' and 'b'. 'I am a *farmer* not a scrounger or sponger', Doris assured me. 'I am a *married woman* not a flirt'. 'I am a *local* not a "trailing Hebrew"', or an "offcomer"'. 'I aspire for better not like the lazy working-class'. 'I am born and bred in the dale of Wanet, not nearby Leyton. But then Wanet and Leyton are both far superior to Manchester or Liverpool: urban environments plagued by poor genes, miscegenation, laziness, indiscipline and stupidity. But then Wanet *and* Leyton *and* Manchester and Liverpool are all British, and so (supposedly) home to a distinctive people

that needs to guard its borders against the envious and fickle approaches of foreigners who want to despoil what is not theirs'.

Doris taught me how key classification was to practising 'Britishness': distinguishing and eschewing what is Other, different, and very often inferior. The theme of the distinctions may vary—from autochthony to socioeconomic class to religion to nationality—and the content of the distinctions may vary—what 'Europe' and 'the European Union' signify, for instance—but all Britons may meet in the language-game of distinguishing and eschewing. (As I prepared to leave Wanet, at the end of my fieldwork, my mother assured me that now I would finally leave those 'country bumpkins' behind—and what they thought would not matter ever again.) There is a 'very British' love of distinction. This is blatant in terms of economic status, but it also shades into issues of breeding, of being 'common' or 'posh' (as my mother would put it), of snobbishness and inverted snobbery. And this in turn shades into questions of English accent: a sign of refinement and education as well as regionalism. And this shades, finally, into issues of nationality: of being English, Scottish, Welsh—and certainly not being foreign. Class, ethnicity, nationality, islandness, privacy, football—the discourse surrounding Brexit—all involve classifying as a form of discrimination.

But Doris also taught me how embracing distinction was a personal frame of mind. To reach the anthropological conclusion that in Britain one thinks and acts in terms of classes is to appreciate how the public discourse is personalized in use. It is to do justice to the 'minutely organized particulars' that is an individual's 'moments of being'. Hence, in Doris's case:

> 'Trouble is all the interbreeding we've got here now. Invasions from
> all over. Chinese, and lots of Arabs about. And Hebrews. And the
> curry eaters that smell. I've nowt against these tribes mind, but it

can't be natural for them here, can it? And they breed too fast, too. *Like rats.* And living twelve to a room: it's disgusting! Why do they let them? They should all go home and breed with their own kind. I mean *no* animal likes breeding with another kind does it? And they aren't really born to cities are they? Nor clothes. I mean they're more used to running round jungles naked.'

'I love living and breathing things. Animals and nature. Nowt beats nature. Being out on the farm is the *best* life. And I get very involved in animals too. Happen too involved, but I can't help it... And they say farming is more intelligent than other jobs too. 'Cos when you learn them it's in, but on the farm there's a *hundred and one* things that can go wrong, like on a cow, and you gotta look after them all.'

'My conscience would prick me too much if I started asking for things now. I know Fred can't afford diamond bracelets and gold rings and that, yet. But he's got so much manly strength inside him still. He can carry on *all day* and keep it up. And he can get into such tempers—but he's *hellishly* handsome then. He can really fly at folk, you know. And he used to terrify people at darts in The Eagle. He used to *shatter* his opponents by the end.'

'I *always* vote Tory—and I'd not vote *at all* before I voted Labour. It's been brayed into me. 'Cos only the Tories can give the country the harsh medicine it needs; it's too easy under Labour. I just hope

they let the Tories have a real try. It's 'cos so many people are

uneducated, and uninformed and naive to vote. Happen they

shouldn't be allowed to. Fred and me have sort of *halfway* tastes at

the moment, anyway (but I saw a nice posh bank manager at Lloyds

last week about a loan).'

Stereotypes offer both opposition and hyperbole. From the former, from comparison

and contrast, notions of being are to be gained; by continuously 'playing the vis-a-vis'

distinctions between self and other are realised (Boon 1981:231; cf. Kurzwelly 2019). From

the latter, from exaggeration, clarity and definiteness may be derived (Douglas 1966:4).

Differences between ego and other remain clear-cut, furnishing the individual with

comforting shibboleths of self. Doris's world-views—and my own—anticipate and direct an

exploration of the unknown and potentially chaotic in terms of the personally orderly and

known.

Democratic and nihilistic violence

The reductions and essentialization at play in the language-games of British discursive

interaction are not on a par with the murderous violence wrought by the public sway of

Nazism, Stalinism or contemporary Islamism, say, but they violate all the same. Stereotypes

of British and English superiority, Doris's pejorative account of curry-eaters and Jews and

inner-city miscegenation, my own depreciation of country bumpkins, my mother's of those

who are 'common', these cognitive constructions have consequences, doing potential

violence to the senses of self of those they would categorize and label as alike. In this closing

section I would make two points. The first is that there is something intrinsically violating in

the nature of society as such. Georg Simmel framed this succinctly in his famous early essay,

'How is Society Possible?' from 1908. A society, Simmel explained (1971:19), is something that exists by virtue of 'a number of individuals enter[ing] into interaction'. The unity of society then depends on symbolic forms—systems of shared languages and social structures—that synthesise individual differences. Nevertheless, a society remains 'a web of qualitatively differentiated phenomena': individuals unequal in their drives, purposes, life-contents and destinies (1971:19-23). The irony is that the common symbolic-institutional-structural forms that individuals create and share and maintain for their social interactions obscure their own authentic identities: the systems of symbols that bring members of a society together at the same time keep them apart. This occurs for two reasons. First, symbols, by their very nature, are ambiguous (as we have heard): forms that may contain a diversity of meanings. The common symbolic forms of society 'synthesize', bring individuals together, but in the process they ambiguate identity: 'we see the other person[s] generalized, in some measure' (Simmel 1971:9). Second, the consciousness of another human being will always remain obscure, and 'we cannot fully represent to ourselves an individuality which deviates from our own' (Simmel 1971:329). We recognise others as fellow 'members' of our society and this very recognition obfuscates the fact of our inexorable difference. Society operates by way of *a priori* categories—veils of enumeration and generalization—that both detract from individuality and supplement it with something alien. We stereotype individual character; we see the individual other through the veil of group membership, we reduce the individual to a class. In the very process of social life, subjectivity loses out to objectification. Society exists by virtue of 'distortions' of identity (cf. Rapport 2017).

This is not however the end of the matter, of course, Simmel observes, for individuality persists. Human individuality is a pure, unrepeatable essence, and while symbolic forms may engender objectification and abstraction, generalization and stereotype, nevertheless 'the social environment does not surround all of the individual', 'life is not

entirely social' (Simmel 2005:13-14). Society will always represent 'a structure which consists of beings who stand inside and outside of it at the same time' (2005:14-15). Human beings have an extra-social nature, each with his or her own interests, worth, temperament and fate. The individual human being may be a member of symbolic collectivities but he or she remains, inevitably an autonomous organic whole, characterized by a discrete consciousness and embodiment. Individuality exists *and persists* beyond social norms, beyond the distortion of symbolic objectification and abstraction. This, Simmel concludes (1971:9), is the 'tragedy of culture': to belong to a society is to have its symbolic structures, categories and classes violate the essential uniqueness and individuality of one's selfhood.

But this violation may be of different kinds and extents. The extent to which the sociocultural environment *acknowledges* the 'tragedy' of category-thinking and the distortion thus facilitated is indeed a historical variable (Rapport 2019:86-96). The specific point I would make here is that there is a radical difference between a society where 'democratic' violence occurs and one where a 'nihilistic' violence is instituted (Rapport 2000).

Social structure, I have argued, is a set of discursive idioms, systems of symbols in terms of which individuals meet, for the purpose of undertaking collective projects. Meeting in terms of behavioural forms held in common (verbal and non-verbal), individuals are able to express, fulfil and extend their personal world-views and life-projects. Here is an 'organization of diversity' (Wallace 1970:22). What enables individuals to interact routinely in mutually rewarding ways—to organise themselves into orderly, expanding, changing societies in spite of their having radically different interests, habits, values and customs— Anthony Wallace has outlined, is *mutual predictability*. Individual 'members' of a society share the ability to predict how their fellows will behave in specific situations and thus can be confidently interrelated with actions of their own. Individual 'A' knows that when she perpetrates action 'a1' then individual 'B', in all probability, will perpetrate action 'b1',

which will lead 'A' to doing 'a2', et cetera. Meanwhile, individual 'B' knows that when he perpetrates action 'b1', individual 'A' responds with 'a1', which he follows with 'b2'. In this way, individuals 'A' and 'B' need not concur on when precisely the interaction begins and whose action is perpetrated first—on who acts and who reacts—never mind concurring on the content of their interaction. Rather, the nature of the orderly relationships which constitute stable societies entails what Wallace describes as 'equivalence structures' or sets of equivalent behavioural expectancies (1970:23-31). Individuals can organise themselves, integrate their behaviours into reliable and joint systems: 'social contracts', the mutual facilitation of individual strivings and into structured wholes. Wallace's contractual equivalencies are the sociological correlate of Devereux's psychological imaging of ego-syntonism.

What is crucial, to repeat, is expectability. However different and diverse the world-views and life-projects of the individuals who partake of social exchange, so long as each can predict, each can expect, certain behaviours from the other, then the relationship can continue—as can the underlying diversity. Expectability means that each 'member' of the interaction is able to continue to find the behaviour of the other(s) understandable, meaningful—in his or her own terms. Interaction does not entail communication: just that each member can continue to interpret the behaviour of the other(s) as routine and expectable. Even to the extent that *had* members understood the meanings and intentions of their fellows, their world-views and life-projects, then they might have felt violated. As Charles Baudelaire (2014 [1887]) summarized: 'If, by some mischance, people understood each other, they would never be able to reach agreement'.

A 'democratic violence' I would like to define as a situation of routine social interaction where the violation remains covert, beneath the surface. The interaction continues without hindrance, each member able to go on interpreting and meaning as they choose, even

as those meanings would be likely to violate others' sense of self were they ever able to become known. 'Democratic violence' affords individuality—the individual creation and inhabitation of distinct and discrete worlds of meaning and activity—the capability to maintain itself and persist beneath a surface of social-structural calm and within a form of (ambiguous) behavioural norms which individuals continue to share. If the social contract entails individuals' possession of mutual expectations which allow them to orient their behaviour to one another in routine ways, then the stability of such expectations is not threatened by a 'violent' diversity of individual meaning and activity which does not breach the civil surface of the exchange. The violence is 'democratic': part and parcel of a mutual, interactional norm.

'Democratic violence' recognizes the norm of individual difference—of an individual construction of a diversity of possibly incompatible and mutually contradictory life-projects and world-views—living beneath an ambiguous surface of social-structural calm, within behavioural contracts that individuals share. 'Democratic violence' adverts to the 'ordinary violence' of everyday life and social exchange: 'a sort of constant' around which society is organized (Aijmer 2000:9). It is 'beliefs and blindnesses', in the novelist's words (Compton-Burnett 1969:30), which are the substance of mundane interpersonal relations.

A 'nihilistic violence', on the other hand, I would define as behaviour which denies expectability: which disorientates others such that they can neither anticipate nor interpret the behaviour of their interlocutors. The 'nihilistic' behaviour is random. It may be physically threatening; or it may be cognitively disconcerting. But orientation towards the behaviour by others—their development of ongoing expectations with regard to it—is rendered unattainable: they cannot adapt, their acts of prediction and interpretation are made impossible and irrelevant. Nihilistic violence refuses the social contract of individual behaviours which are habitual and structurally equivalent, making ego-syntonism, a

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harmonizing of intentionalities, impossible. The violation here is such as to breach the civil surface of interaction: violating any practicable norms of exchange.

The violation may take a variety of forms and degrees. Random expressions, silences and actions will negate viable interactions of a routine and ongoing kind, denying others the possibility of making sense, making meaningful interpretations. But then maiming or killing will negate viable interaction and meaningful interpretation henceforward and in general. Hence, a sliding-scale of nihilistic violence may be conceptualized, the severity adjudged in terms of the intended and/or received injury to others' ability to further their world-views and life-projects at that time and henceforward. As Primo Levi concluded in his depiction of the Nazi death-camp—surely the nihilistic extreme—here was 'violence beyond logic' (1996:83).

The very term 'violence' is commonly associated with the breakdown of civil order and exchange and a breach of civility (cf. Stanage 1974:232). By distinguishing between violation that is covert—ambiguous at least—and that which is overt, negating ongoing social interaction, a more subtle, spectral appreciation is perhaps reached. There is a violence involved in the way that individuality *ubiquitously* subsists and expresses itself in social life and exchange (Rapport 1987; cf. Marx 1976:110). Beyond this, however, one is in a position to discriminate between, say, the stereotypical and formulaic discourse that I have identified in navigating among the British at a time of Brexit, and the essentialism at play for instance in Nazi Germany. One is more 'democratic' and one more 'nihilistic'. That is, the essentialism of contemporary Britishness does not negate the surface calm of social interaction. One partakes in its formulae and is able to 'hum any nonsense under one's breath at the same time', as Virginia Woolf put it. The codes of stereotypical Britishness do not threaten an individuality that exists beneath the symbolic surface. This is not to condone what I have described above from Doris's world-views—any more than from my own—but to say

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that the consequences of this were not debilitating for our mutual interaction: our ability to go on anticipating the behaviour of the other and making sense of the world from our individual points of view. The potentially nihilistic consequences of the Brexit movement to leave the European Union are matters for the future. It may be that the language-games of Britishness will—as with Nazism—negate the very possibility of some individuals sharing in a civil relationship and violate practicable norms of exchange.

Differentiating between democratic violence and nihilistic violence is a way to assess degrees of violation that accompany the purportedly inevitable 'tragedy' of social life, as well as to recognise the diversity of individual consciousness that may continue to inhabit the ambiguities of common symbolic forms of exchange—however reductive, stereotypical and essentialist the latter may also be.

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