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Brexism or: How to Emerge from Political Psychosis

For almost two years we have been watching on a daily basis a political farce with increasingly tragic undertones. The play is called *As You Cannot Like It Or: All Pretends to be Well that Began Badly*. The problem is that in this play we are not only spectators; embarrassingly, we have volunteered, or been compelled, to become stagehands in this on-going production riddled with inconceivable blunders and collapsing props.

What – in this situation – could be more difficult than developing thoughts on changing the script and assessing how to move on from this most absurd of political theatre on these shores in living memory, namely Britain’s pending exit from the European Union, with all its, by now, apparent traumatic consequences? As ever so often in media-driven discourses on subject matters even of existential dimensions, this delicate, if not precarious, complexity of Brexit has been subject to trivialization – whether by intention or default, depending on one’s position on this deeply troubling political matter. The most trivial formulaic reduction of this complexity was contained in the meaningless prime ministerial phrase ‘Brexit means Brexit’. It was the Formula zero for running into intellectual and political bankruptcy. In the British Prime Minister’s recent Mansion House speech on Brexit this formula found itself transformed into an equally disarming phrase: “Life is going to be different.” Some people suggested that this was an expression of new realism in governmental policy towards the Brexit. Have we really grown to be satisfied with so little these days?

This said, ‘Brexit’ still does mean ‘Brexit’ and this formula, if even by default, has turned out to be the most accurate expression of utter helplessness in coping with this self-afflicted condition. One could not help noting though that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ may have resonated Shakespeare’s “Henry V” and the scene – it is the eighth in Act IV – when Williams asks Fluellen whether he knows this particular glove. The latter’s response comes strikingly close to the British position on Brexit and the emptiest political formula of all times: “Know the glove! I know the glove is a glove.”

To be sure, there is a fine line between trivialization and popularization. The latter was meant when Alexander von Humboldt called upon fellow scientists of all denominations to make the results of their research accessible and, most importantly from his and his brother's point of view, to find an appropriate linguistic register to facilitate this ambitious aspect of communication, even though I am still not tempted to call the Humboldts therefore champions of Open Access policy. But both brothers saw the flourishing communication of scholarly pursuits across borders as a contribution to *Bildung*, which, in turn, Goethe famously termed the very sphere of "genuinely acquired freedom" (*wirklich gewonnene Freiheit*).

With Brexit the opposite has happened. Its trivialization resulted in ill-defined consequences camouflaging Britain being increasingly weakened by her own folly. There will be little that is 'splendid' about this utterly unnecessary act of self-isolation. For how are we supposed to feel when we taste this unwholesome cocktail of post-imperial illusions, outmoded conceptions of national sovereignty, dogmatic self-righteousness coupled with open disregard for established political and cultural partnerships, and even contempt for those who think differently about Brexit in what is by now a deeply divided country? Against this seriously warped backdrop the question of questions really is: Where to go from here in this intrinsically difficult situation? Can we as an academic community really claim to become agents of future synergies potent enough to at least contribute to counteracting, if not overcoming, the inevitable damage Brexitism has caused already?

In his essay *On Difficulty* (1978), George Steiner spoke of an "interference-effect between underlying clarity and obstructed formulation" when he attempted to define 'difficulty'. Brexit and, in particular, dogmatic Brexitism clearly illustrate this definition of difficulty, even though the 'underlying clarity' in Steiner's terms is deceiving in this case. For the more we progress in assessing the likely impact of Brexit the less clear matters look – be it in respect of the predicted economic consequences, its political fallout, or its cultural implications. In this connection, 'difficulty' is heightened by an ever-growing sense of incalculability. This is also true in the very area that concerns all of us here most: scholarship, science – meaning the interconnected world of universities as well as the community of other learned organisations, including this august Foundation. Therefore, the following truism conditions our lives more than ever: The future with, and after, Brexit remains an inevitably fickle commodity.

“The future is always too near”, Virginia Woolf famously stated. For in attempting to shape the future we realize that it cannot be but an extrapolation of the present but, in this particular case, this commonplace has a worrying implication: Are we in fact trapped by what we want to move on from, namely this precarious state of Brexit affairs that has all the hallmarks of a pathological condition, or rather obsessive preoccupation, enforced upon us all? Are there any pointers towards a somewhat saner future?

In Ibsen’s play *Hedda Gabler*, the protagonist’s husband, Jørgen Tesman, a scholar reminiscent of George Eliot’s Casaubon, insists that we cannot know anything of the future whereas his rival and Hedda’s former lover, Ejlert Løvborg, claims that this may be so “but there is a thing or two to be said about the future all the same.” Interestingly, when we look at the first examples of the novelization of this part of our contemporary history, Ali Smith’s prose *Autumn*, a similar conclusion occurs. Its central character, Elisabeth, responds to the political, social and cultural turbulence of 2016 by reading Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in an attempt to make sense of the dystopia she feels confronted with.

But before we can even begin to say ‘a thing or two’ about the ‘moving on’ from where we find ourselves now, namely in an unprecedented political conundrum, we need to reassess what it is exactly that we should emerge from as the immediate past is catching up with us on a daily basis. Ultimately, it is all a question of perception. In Germany, observers of the British scene tend to underplay the game-changing momentum Brexitism has triggered in Britain. They often resist their nostalgic and deeply cherished Anglophilia being tested even more. In Britain there is a tendency to expect from everyone else outside the UK that they will support the country in this calamitous situation and to show understanding for Britain’s precarious position, even though at least some commentators realize that Britain has already overstretched the patience of her partners in the EU. On both sides of the Channel one consensus, or rather consolation prize or pious hope, for both camps, seems to gain shape: When Britain leaves the European Union she will not leave Europe as such.

However, in the context of the present Brexit scenario we can observe the simplistic reduction of the European spirit to a mere matter of trade and commerce and the question of whether Britain should enter a customs union with the EU or not. What is in danger of being forgotten is the essential fact that ‘Europe’ has long acquired the status of a moral project in want of a sustainable and ever flexible political structure for accomplishing common pursuits. ‘Europe’ therefore is a matter of political realism *and* creative

imagination. And the very same applies to Europe's academic communities. In this present scenario they need bespoke agreements on research collaboration, the sustaining of students and staff exchange and, by now crucially, a properly negotiated association of British academia with the European Research Council. It speaks volumes, though, that Britain has not even asked for this to be on the agenda for the Brexit negotiations. But it is the academic sector that is arguably most reliant on closest cohesion with the EU. The following may illustrate this:

Currently, there are 200,000 students from the EU at British universities amounting to 9% of the students' population and 16% of the academic staff from the EU work at British Universities, a staggering 43,000 academics. At Scottish Universities German students even form the majority of the EU students' contingent. One in four of UK publications is produced in collaboration with a European partner. Currently UK academic partners coordinate 20% of projects funded by Horizon 2020.

In terms of future research collaboration between the UK and the EU the partnership between the UK and Germany is absolutely crucial. Germany is the UK's main collaborative partner through Horizon 2020 after Spain, Italy, France and the Netherlands. By the same token, the UK is Germany's main collaborative link with currently over ten thousand such links within the present European Framework Programmes. And despite of all this, the status and position of Higher Education Institutions figure in none of the Brexit statements of any political party in this country.

Well, we all remember that last year (2017) was the bi-centenary of Jane Austen's death when, in the case of Brexit, 'pride and prejudice' seemed to have won over 'sense and sensibility' for good. Looking at the present state of Brexit negotiations in Brussels and the still embarrassingly unclear position Britain presents her partners with (the scandalously unresolved border issues in Ireland stand for many others), once again the Formula zero for the intellectually underprivileged, 'Brexit means Brexit', just about sums matters up. What we have been witnessing is, in effect, Whitehall's affidavit of political means in respect of European politics, only matched by its decolonization blunders after 1945 and the Suez crisis of 1956. This is not made better by the fact that it has taken the main opposition party almost two years to suggest that Britain should be in *a* customs union of sorts whilst

otherwise entertaining what Labour has termed a “constructive ambiguity” towards the entire Brexit question.

In his “Notes on Nationalism” aptly published in the then popular *Magazine of Philosophy, Psychology & Aesthetics* in October 1945, George Orwell spoke of what he saw as a given, namely that a “transferred nationalism, like the use of scapegoats, is a way of attaining salvation without altering one’s conduct.” And he added: “All nationalists have the power of not seeing resemblances between similar sets of facts.” In today’s speak: Nationalists are in denial of what ought to be perceived as political realities. It is now beyond doubt that Brexitism has become a drug-like version of nationalism in Britain, not least reinforced by the fact that the present government clings to its power on the basis of an over-expensive deal with the most dubious of political partner’s in the UK, the DUP of Northern Ireland. Incidentally, Orwell concluded his essay by saying that together with ruthless stereotyping ‘transferred nationalism’ created nothing but dangerous illusions.

One such illusion that conditioned Britain’s stance on Europe since the days of Margaret Thatcher was the assumption that the UK could be in the EU by opting out of most of its decisions, from the Social Charter to agreements on migration policy. The British public got so used to the phrase ‘the EU agreed but Britain opted out’ that this must also have influenced somehow the outcome of the EU-referendum. In fact, we have now reached a situation in which Brexit can be regarded as the sum of Britain’s previous ‘optings out’, leading to what Germany had once practiced and led to its downfall, namely following a ‘Sonderweg’, a concept that has found its way into the OED – for good measure as it now appears.

In one of the central chapters in Ralf Dahrendorf’s BBC series *On Britain* (1982) we find the following remark: “The story of Britain’s relationship to the construction of Europe after 1945 is singularly unhappy. It is so unhappy that I almost called this chapter not ‘The European Dilemma’, but ‘The European Calamity’. The story of Britain and Europe is calamitous.” After some forty years of membership in the EU the net result could not be more sobering as this ‘story’ is as ‘calamitous’ as ever. At the beginning of Britain’s membership, the eminent economist Andrew Shonfield referred to her European venture as a “journey to an unknown destination”; such was the title of his Reith Lectures in 1972. Today, the destination of Britain’s journey out of Europe is equally opaque.

As observers of contemporary developments, we are all “tainted by proximity” to use Mary Fulbrook’s apt phrase. But as she pointed out in her essay on “Subjectivity and History” we also share a “communicative craft” and engage in a “three-way communication process between the subjectivities of people in the past, audiences in a later present, and historians” of all disciplines. Brexit itself has already become an object of scholarly investigation with one of Britain’s research councils having temporarily flagged it as one of its main themes. Against this backdrop it was even more extraordinary that a responsibility-bearing politician and chief-whip of the Tory Party felt that he had to issue a letter to some Vice Chancellors, in which he asked for the names of academic colleagues engaged in research on Brexit. The aim was obviously to assess where the academic land lies in this country and where the dissenters were to be found. The fact that this kind of thing should have happened at all speaks volumes. So much has changed in Britain’s political culture as a result of Brexit leaving us with a state beyond recognition. Or, perhaps, we should apply the German phrase: *bis zur Kenntlichkeit entstellt* – disfigured to the point of proper recognition if we want to assess the background of, and reasons for, Brexit. Is it really the case that Brexit has brought out the worst in this once cherished haven of democracy where a government repeatedly withheld from Parliament vital information about the impact of Brexit? Is it conceivably possible that one referendum, which was conducted on the basis of false information, should be regarded as the final word on an entire country’s destiny?

Brexit needs to be seen in the context of an attempted whitewash of Britain’s colonial past, a renewed glorification of the Empire and a mobilization of sentiments that makes people stand up and applaud in the cinema when, in the latest Churchill film, the protagonist declares with the characteristic timbre of his voice: “We shall fight them on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds [...] We shall never surrender.” To be sure, to those who applauded these lines, ‘them’ were for once not the Wehrmacht but the EU negotiators.

It is the ‘them’ and ‘us’ syndrome that bedevils again literally all public and private discourses on Brexit. It is the myth of Britain standing alone against the rest of the world, the most bizarre antithesis in the age of globalization and the price called collective psychosis islanders pay when they prefer to define themselves solely through their insularity. And yet, Whitehall speaks of a ‘global Britain’ and never misses an opportunity to write ‘great’ with a capital letter. Elsewhere, I have termed this condition ‘Illusionspolitik’ and find it confirmed when Martin Kettle, one of the most astute political commentators in this country, speaks of

the gaping “gulf between rhetoric and reality” in British politics (and) Britain’s self-representation abroad. And I quote from Kettle’s analysis of current British affairs: “The claims of British greatness and engagement are too often self-deceiving, and they were so long before Brexit.” Amongst Britain’s real assets, however, he singles out her soft powers, the language, the laws, the universities, the arts [...].”

On the subject of universities, however, we should not entertain illusions either, in a country whose politicians deprive its young people from the learning of languages in state schools and where the degree programme ‘European Studies’ has virtually vanished. To be sure, teaching units on the European Union never entered the school curricula. In the name of economizing and streamlining smaller subjects, including Modern Languages, are being marginalized even further if not abandoned altogether. How are we to create mutual understanding between our respective cultures through educated communication if the very essence of mutuality and intercultural competence, the teaching of languages in the context of cultivating the arts & humanities, have been systematically eroded on the British Isles?

Instead of speculating about ways to emerge from the current political psychosis of Brexitism and how to move on from there I would like to remind ourselves of what was arguably one of the finest texts ever written on the meaning of European culture on these shores, T. S. Eliot’s essay *The Unity of European Culture*, first broadcast via RIAS Berlin in 1946. One of the points in his essay of striking relevance today is the centrality that Eliot attributed to universities in our endeavour to advance European culture. It is right for us to consider again this centrality of academia against the backdrop of global networking as long as we do not confuse functional globalization with a genuinely education-based cosmopolitan ethos. The very foundation of academia is what Eliot termed “a variety of loyalties”. With reference to the universities he explained it as follows – and I quote this crucial passage in Eliot’s essay *in extenso*:

No university ought to be merely a national institution, even if it is supported by the nation. The universities of Europe should have their common ideals, they should have their obligations towards each other. [...] They should not be institutions for the training of an efficient bureaucracy, or for equipping scientists to get the better of foreign scientists; they

should stand for the preservation of learning, for the pursuit of truth, and in so far as men are capable of it, the attainment of wisdom.

There are reminiscences in this passage of Cardinal Newman's treatise on *The Idea of the University* and echoes of Matthew Arnold's conception of culture as a process of learning. But Eliot refers to their models by implication or rather in a way, in which a contemporary composer would look at contrapuntal structures asking himself what it is he could produce with them today. Likewise, we need to ask what we derive from Eliot's vision. In soberly institutional terms and today's terminology perhaps the following: In the European Research Area the position of the European University Association should be politically and strategically strengthened in conjunction with the European Research Council.

But Eliot took Newman's and Arnold's arguments one step further. In his essay on *The Unity of European Culture* these attributions to the university as a condensation of universality, such as ethical responsibility, obligation towards learning for the sake of identifying truth, exploring and testing knowledge for the sake of obtaining orientation, form the culmination of Eliot's argument. They clearly amount to more than mere academic exchange. The transnational community of universities should become the place where, according to Eliot, we learn to "recognise our mutual dependence upon each other", as put it. And this should happen through the sharing of knowledge, that is, the interacting of learned communities. In this connection Eliot speaks of the necessity for us to recognise the "interrelated history of thought and feeling and behaviour, an interchange of arts and of ideas." Furthermore, "different cultures should recognise their relationship to each other, so that each should be susceptible of influence from the others."

Note how insistently Eliot uses the verb 'to recognise' when he attempts to establish the principle of 'variety of loyalties' or indeed of mutuality in the make-up of culture. The suggestion here is that recognition should imply the realization of perspectivism in any form of collective endeavours. 'Culture' therefore means joining up different perspectives on a given subject – be it historical, artistic, or indeed political.

Contrary to this ideal of considered mutuality the ill-conceived spirit of Brexitism suggests that Britain could shape the world on her own based on her financial and service industry, propagating Business English abroad, selling tea in China, offering Shakespeare productions as cultural tokens, and taking refuge in an allegedly nothing but heroic past. The vision of a

global Britain as currently entertained by leading Brexiteers looks like badly written fiction in the face of what the *New York Times* stated after the World Economic Summit in Davos in January this year: “Britain’s stature on the world stage has diminished. The former colonial empire has been reduced to a lesser actor.” In view of this development noises gain prominence in recent weeks that the academic sector might spearhead a new vision for Britain’s new global stance.

But let us, for once, not pretend that all is well in the UK’s academic sector. In fact, it is deeply troubled, too, with disturbing uncertainties regarding student finance, the position of the Arts & Humanities, the unashamed industrialization of academic life and the promotion of blatant utilitarianism when it comes to the justification of particular study and research programmes. Academic freedom in this country is persistently challenged, if not gradually undermined, by a one-dimensional impact rhetoric, now translated into a menacingly real factor of future research income. In this country, universities are already confronted with a situation in which certain research is done for the sake of impact with all its ominous criteria and would therefore be better called attempts in academic window-dressing for impressing the non-academic public. Talking about research collaboration therefore requires a clear understanding of the circumstances that condition academic work in our respective cultures and the values attached to it.

There is a perceived conflict of thought and strategies in terms of Britain trying to map out future academic relations with Europe. Some view a network of bi-lateral arrangements as a possible way to replace the present EU context for research collaboration, predominantly between Britain and Germany. But this poses the obvious problem of proliferation of activities a lack of proper coordination. The question has arisen whether there would be some sense in establishing an Anglo-German Academic Research Innovation Agency or whether such forms of institutionalization would only complicate matters further and make such bureaucratically cumbersome. Alternatively, would there be a place for UK universities in the conception of a European University as recently suggested by Chancellor Merkel and President Macron? But we also need to consider the differences in research organization at institutional levels in say, Britain and Germany. For instance, there is no British equivalent to the Federal Research Institutes including the Käte Hamburger Kollegs for the Humanities. Let us also remember the following: In 2009 the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which was then also responsible for the universities in England, discovered –

somewhat late - the German Fraunhofer Institutes, to be precise exactly sixty years after their inception. The result was the launch of so-called catapult centres in Britain. The very name of these centres indicated a fundamental misunderstanding on Britain's part: the Fraunhofer Institutes operate on a long-term basis whilst 'catapult centres' favour short-termism. Interestingly, the consultancy firm Ernst & Young was tasked with reviewing their effectiveness and the result published as a comprehensive report in November 2017 read as follows: Only the High Value Manufacturing Catapult had achieved its funding targets, with the others heavily reliant on public funding. The report criticized the strategies, governance and performance management of most of the centres, and made 38 urgent recommendations. Three centres – Digital, Future Cities and Transport Systems – were identified as in need of remedial plans, with the possibility of halting their further funding.

I refer to this simply because the "moving forward" through networking promotes but also continues to require a high degree of intercultural competence in grasping essentials when it comes to the most profound of rationales behind such collaboration: the learning from each other with an open mind and sensitivity for the intrinsic features of our academic cultures.

And with that, finally back to the Brexit-related agenda. On a purely pragmatic note we need to realize that Britain is about to lose her influence on co-shaping common research policy in what is to follow Horizon 2020. It should not be forgotten that the UK benefitted from the European Research Framework disproportionately high in financial terms, consistently getting more out of the scheme than it had paid towards it. It is far too early to tell whether a network of initially bilateral arrangements between universities here and the European Union, say, along the lines of a closer cooperation between Oxford University and the three main universities in Berlin represented by a Berlin House here in Oxford and an Oxford House in Berlin, will be able to compensate for the certain loss of research income from the European Framework arrangements after 2020.

To be sure, at present on average some 16% of any UK university's budget is made up of grants and funding from the EU. After Brexit a gaping hole will therefore be left in the UK's higher education institutions. Furthermore, students from the EU, currently some 130,000 or 6 % of the overall student population are likely to lose 'home status' meaning that their fees will triple. In addition, their legal status will probably change quite radically and affect their right to stay on in the UK. The 2010 Equality Act will then fully apply to students from the EU as they would be regarded as having no legal affiliation with Britain and her context. As long

as Britain was a full member of the EU this context was given. The same will apply to researchers from the EU on short-term contracts. This will not only endanger joint research ventures but impact on our respective research cultures, including our ability to network effectively.

Whether we should call this situation in academia astonishing or consequential is a matter of political taste. That it will compromise our integrity as institutions of learning and scholarship is, however, beyond doubt. What we see undermined is the most vital aspect of academic life even before the concept of globalization became part of our common currency, namely unrestricted interaction between individuals and communities. And this cornerstone of our civil liberties is in danger of being turned into a ruin before our eyes. It is a development, which was foreshadowed by an increasingly irrational policy on visa restrictions. Initiatives like the noble but oddly termed campaign of Universities UK (“Go international: Stand out”), intended to double the number of UK students going abroad, looks all too isolated an effort to counteract the trend towards further insularity of the UK’s academic life.

In conclusion, let us spell out once more what is at stake here for academic collaboration during and after the Brexit. For Britain it is the endangered continuing outward mobility for students and staff; access to talent from EU countries; and access to major research funding sources in a multilateral cooperation framework. What matters to the EU academic communities in this context is the following: Access for EU students to same fees & loans as UK students; access to research capacity; compensating the UK contribution to the EU research budget.

To what extent are developments of this magnitude reversible, or could at least be corrected? A sea change in attitude is required, “a sea change / Into something rich and strange”, as Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* had it. And, perhaps, the ‘richest and strangest’ insight here in Britain and elsewhere is the awareness that we are nothing without the others. Modesty is required. We are not credible in this country if our motivation to stop Brexit would merely be to “make Britain great again” as even a former leader of the Liberal Democrats proclaimed on the title page of his extended pamphlet on the subject. Perhaps there is hope in the fact that he put this ominous phrase into brackets.

To be sure, the only genuine motivation for this country to counteract the Brexit should be to regain its credibility and sense of collective responsibility in, and for, Europe. For good

measure the European project was termed an 'ever closer union' but in order to be in the position to open up towards the world outside that very union through all of its member states.

However, the chances are that this painful process, call it Brexiting, will drag on, even far beyond the date of Britain's secession from the European Union. And to many of us where ever we shall be by then, one of Hamlet's last words will have a very eerie ring to our ear: "I cannot live to hear the news from England". For Brexit is likely to remain a precarious, if not poisonous inspiration for nationalists of all colours, and therefore Britain's most precarious legacy for us all. It could be that, in future, we might indeed not be able to bear hearing the news from England, even if – different from Hamlet – we will live to hear them. But this is a matter for political psychology and therefore an undoubtedly veritable subject for lasting academic collaboration across the Channel or through its tunnel.