

THE BREXIT, FAILURE OR SUCCESS?

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ABSTRACT

The Brexit is now a reality, increasingly de-dramatized, six years after the triggering of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty by the British government following the result of the June 2016 referendum. Until the Covid-19 health crisis, the Brexit was at the center of media spaces within all member states. This unprecedented process was initially often seen as revealing misunderstandings or even questioning of European construction. But could European integration for the United Kingdom really be envisaged beyond the economic?

Keywords: Brexit, referendum, otherness

The media in Europe is currently less interested in the Brexit. It has become a reality, increasingly de-dramatized. This situation is the result of a rather lengthy process that formally began six years ago, with the triggering of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty by the British government on March 29, 2017, after the results of the June 26, 2016 referendum (Antoine, 2020; Drevet, 2021). The citizens of England and Wales then tipped the scales of British opinion towards a departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. Then, until the Covid 19 health crisis, the Brexit was at the center of media spaces within all member states. This unprecedented process has very often been seen as revealing a deep malaise in the construction of Europe or even as a sign of the disintegration of this original confederation, whereas it is possible to see it as a perspective specific to the United Kingdom, which could be anticipated as soon as European integration went beyond the economic framework, that is, in the end, right from the start: a very good example of incommunication with regard to the project itself.

Europe is not the same for all Europeans...

During a certain period, within the framework of the complicated negotiations preparing the divorce, other inclinations of rupture were evoked, a possible Polexit (for Poland), or even a Frexit (for France), a theme developed in particular by nationalist and/or sovereigntist political parties, often described as populist, including in the context of the 2019 European Parliament elections. The results of the 2016 referendum have been analyzed; researchers and journalists have sought to understand how the British public could have chosen *Leave* (see for example, Bailoni, 2017; Henkel, 2019; Fieldhouse et al. 2020). The arguments of Charles de Gaulle, justifying the French veto to the two applications of the United Kingdom to join the European Economic Community, in 1963 and 1967, were then (re) mobilized, often out of context. The French President considered, on the one hand, that the United Kingdom's Atlantic tropism was incompatible with the European project and on the other hand, that the *acquis communautaire* of the time could suffer from this enlargement, in particular with regard to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which was not unanimously supported at the time.

Many Europeans did not believe in divorce, could not really envisage it, and did not understand the results of the British vote. The campaign of the *Leave* supporters was widely questioned, with the denunciation of fake news, particularly with regard to the financial benefits to be gained from leaving the United Kingdom for each British citizen. A simple and convenient explanation that avoided addressing

a rather disturbing fact: the citizens of all Member States do not view Europe, and the European Union, in the same way, and it is very difficult to share and communicate in such a context (see Nowicki, Radut-Gaghi & Rouet, 2017). The Brexit forces us to admit that more than forty years of integration and transposition of European texts into British national law have not succeeded in installing a European identification among the population. British integration began, and thus ends, with economics.

Is Europe, for a majority of British people, only economic (Tombs, 2020)? Several factors can explain the results of the Brexit referendum. For Hobot (2016), one must take into account political disillusionment, the lack of confidence of citizens in the politicians in power, the lack of consideration of economic problems such as those related to immigration. However, these themes are widely shared by other Europeans and do not allow us to distinguish between Europhiles and Europhobes. However, the question put to the British people in the referendum was to choose between *Leave* and *Remain* in a very clear-cut manner, without being able to assess the type of participation in the European Union desired by the citizens.

The results of a survey of a sample of nearly 1,700 people in June 2017, just days after the Brexit process began, provide insight into the position of British citizens (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2018). It is clear that the economy is the top priority for British citizens. The continuation of free trade with the EU is envisioned by a large majority of citizens: 78% of respondents demand free access for European companies to British markets and 81% aspire to the same for British companies within the EU. Thus, confidence in the leadership is low, but confidence in the country is high, and a large proportion of those surveyed believe that the UK is able to make its own trade deals with many countries around the world. The pursuit of trade with the EU is part of a utilitarian perspective, with a search for compromise on the rights of EU citizens in the UK. However, this last element is divisive: a quarter of respondents are totally opposed to accessing British social benefits for foreigners, whether European or not, while the majority remain in favor of a controlled free movement of European citizens in their country. The end of unfettered free movement has led to the departure (or return) of many Europeans (Alemanno & Kochenov, 2021).

Finally, a majority position emerges from this survey: the priority to the economic implies a compulsory negotiation after leaving the customs union to obtain access to the EU internal market and the acceptance of a compromise concerning the migration of EU citizens.

Beyond economics: otherness and identity

After the United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, a referendum was held two years later, and 67 percent of Britons voted to remain. This result may suggest a significant shift in public opinion between 1975 and 2016 (Bailey & Budd, 2019), but it was already about having access to a large market, ensuring the country's economic growth, and limiting constraints on growth. The free movement of persons was introduced in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome for economic purposes: it applied only to workers. The generalization came much later, in particular with the 1990 directives that allowed all European citizens to move and settle in other EU countries, whatever the reason. The United Kingdom did not join the Schengen area, which ended internal border controls in 1995. So, the evolution of public opinion may well be very relative!

The free movement of people and European citizenship have favored an important evolution of attitudes that are often minimized: European citizens can invest in a living space, confront different cultures and customs, integrate into another country without questioning their origins, and build a European identity. Thus, the European foreigner becomes European and is no longer really a foreigner, in a renewed relationship to otherness. Europeans may no longer be part of a migration process and become "mobile citizens" within a progressively restructured political and societal space, for example, by temporarily settling in another EU country (Rouet, 2011). What was the situation in the UK? The integration of migrants, European or not, is obviously possible there, regardless of whether the country belongs to the EU or not, but a posture of mobility of European citizens is difficult to envisage in a different context of relationship to otherness, abroad, on the part of British citizens who do not appreciate very much the status of "member State" submitted to Brussels for their country, a former imperial power, with a certain "postcolonial melancholy" (Menon & Wagner, 2020).

To understand the Brexit, we must therefore go beyond the recurrent explanations, particularly the denunciation of migration in a context of high unemployment and Brussels considered as an institution confiscating resources that should be allocated to the British, and take into account the question of identity, the difficult combination or articulation of a British identity with a European identity (van der Zwet *et al.*, 2020; Wilson, 2020; Wolkenstein, 2022). In this context, it was quite easy to scapegoat European institutions and migrants. However, the United Kingdom is a multinational state, and not every citizen can identify with Britishness. The referendum highlighted significant differences of opinion between England and Wales on the one hand, and Scotland and Northern Ireland on the other. The

dominant British in England rejected the EU more than the British in Scotland, and it would be necessary to go further into the analysis of identity and the determinants of identification to try to understand this differentiation. The political evolution of the last twenty years and the rise of nationalist movements within the different British nations may explain a strengthening of national identities, to the detriment of a relative British multicultural identity, likely to be more open to migration.

The special Eurobarometer 517, conducted at the end of 2021, i.e., without the United Kingdom, shows that the majority of Europeans have a favorable opinion of the EU and consider that their country's membership is a good thing. More than 80% believe they are happy to live in the EU (European Union, 2021). Among the assets mainly cited: respect for democracy, human rights, the rule of law, then the economy and solidarity between Member States. The Eurobarometers, organized since 1973, show that national and European identities are not mutually exclusive, but are combined. A majority of French people, for example, feel both French and European, as confirmed by a recent survey (IFOP for EuropaNova & the JDD, 2021). A minority (depending on the survey and the year, between 15 and 30 percent) feels only French, while in the United Kingdom in 2010, less than half of Britons felt European, the lowest score in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2010). A European identity that conflicts with, rather than complements, the national identity, which makes it difficult to accept any European federalist project and finally explains why, beyond the economic aspects, no British government for more than 50 years has ever supported the idea of deepening European integration.

It is, therefore, not only a question of highlighting a priority economic prism but also a particular national posture, supported politically, which has favored the development of a deeply rooted Euroscepticism among citizens driven by a feeling of exclusive identity and who have long been trying to assert themselves in a multinational political environment.

Brexit, success or failure?

Now the divorce is effective in the texts: after a withdrawal agreement adopted in October 2019 and entered into force on February 1, 2020, a trade and cooperation agreement was signed between the European Union and the United Kingdom on December 30, 2020, to take effect on January 1, 2021, after a difficult negotiation. Customs and migration controls have been put in place under complicated conditions. The free movement of people is no longer applicable as before, nor is the free movement of goods because even if the agreement does not provide for

any customs duties, trade is subject to formalities and controls.

The Brexit, since the referendum until today, is very often considered in the European press as a failure. For the past six years, the media (as well as many politicians and researchers) have reported on the difficulties of various kinds and the negative consequences in the short and medium term. This has resulted in long queues of lorries before the border in France, tedious new formalities, administrative delays, and a drop in trade. The media had to be educational in explaining to their audiences the complexity of the Northern Ireland protocol or the tensions in the fisheries sector. The political and diplomatic context was also much commented on, both in terms of European positions towards the United Kingdom and internally, between England and Scotland in particular. Besides, Brexit was also a good opportunity for European citizens to learn about the United Kingdom and its four constitutive nations!

It will obviously take a few more years to be able to draw the lessons that the European community will learn from this rupture (Faucher & Hay, 2020). However, it is often argued that the European Union is built on exogenous crises such as the subprime crisis or the Covid crisis. These crises have been factors of cohesion. The same was true of the Brexit, although it was an internal crisis.

The European Union was able to preserve its internal market and showed inventiveness in the negotiations to overcome, perhaps temporarily, certain major problems caused by the breakup, such as the question of the border between the north and south of Ireland. From this point of view, the Brexit can be considered a success for the EU.

Neither the European Union nor the United Kingdom has any interest in a long and confrontational process. The lack of understanding of each other's positions can justify the punitive overtones often seen on the part of the EU, whereas it is essential to recognize the rejection of the European project by a majority of citizens across the Channel and to stop seeing the Brexit as a missed opportunity or a failure of European integration. Unlike the countries of the former Soviet bloc that joined in 2004 and 2007, the United Kingdom has never really been part of a Europe of the peoples and therefore has never "returned back to Europe" by joining the EEC. In Great Britain, as in the European Union, citizens have everything to gain by trying to understand and accept that not everyone is European in the same way, and that the Brexit is also a success for the British, who can build now a different and accepted partnership relationship with the other Europeans. The latter can also build on this result to deepen their internal relations and choose a new form of community integration.

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