On Brexit: an Open Letter to my European Friends and Colleagues

As I write this the UK is leaving the EU. It is doing so against the wishes of nearly half of those who voted, myself included. Young people voted predominantly to remain. So did Scotland and Northern Ireland. And though older people were predominantly leavers, the very old, those who still remember World War II, on balance voted to remain.

There are many reasons for this. Nostalgic English nationalism. (The UK is an asymmetrical union of four nations.) A narrow and exclusive version of English identity. ('The spirit of the Blitz' and all that.) The loss of political memory among our leaders. (The generation of politicians who fought in World War II have gone.) The anger of many who have been left behind economically, who were then endlessly told that this was because of the EU. As a part of this some, perhaps not too much, racism. An often self-interested ideological commitment to unregulated capitalism. (The EU 'interferes in the market' because it sets environmental and social standards.) Decades of lies about Brussels (the EU 'straight banana'), amply circulated by much of the British press (including the present Prime Minister when he was a journalist in Brussels.) The virulent mendacities of that press (much of it owned by self-interested press barons living in offshore tax havens.) The unwillingness of major political figures (Tony Blair and Gordon Brown aside) to champion the benefits of EU membership. (The EU was always a convenient alibi if things went wrong.) The ample manipulation of social media. Cynical political opportunism. (To mention him again, the present Prime Minister believes in nothing except himself: for him Brexit was never more than a route to power.) The feeble character of an opposition whose leadership believes in socialism in one country. Britain's bizarre electoral arrangements. A political system that has stopped working because the two major parties have been seized by ideologues. The belief that once 'Brexit is done' the problems will disappear. (It is self-evident that Brexit will take decades to get 'done'.) The inability to see (this takes us back to the nostalgia) that Britain is a moderate-sized power, and that since we no longer live in the nineteenth century, we cannot send a gunboat if Johnny Foreigner isn't buckling down as he is meant to. That this is a stupid act of national self-harm is self-evident. It is an attempt, very likely successful, to reinforce unregulated, so-called 'Anglo-Saxon', capitalism. It is also profoundly unsettling for very many.

There's a word-cloud (it's from June 2019 when it was still unclear whether Brexit would take place) created by psychologists which shows the result of a survey of Remainers.[1] I've copied it below, and it pretty much catches how I and most of the people I know, feel. That phrase, 'most of the people I know', points to another reality. This is that the Brits have been living in insulated tribes which correlate substantially with level of education and economic prosperity. (The word cloud equivalent for Brexiteers would obviously be quite different.) And age too. For Brexit can also be understood as a coup by those who are over fifty against those who are under thirty. There is much that makes me angry (and devastated, and depressed and ashamed) about Brexit. (Choose any word from the cloud below.) But it is probably this generational selfishness that upsets me most. Having been rebuffed by President de Gaulle in 1963 and 1967, the UK joined the EU in 1973. (There was a referendum confirming this in 1975). This means that I have lived and benefitted for most of my adult life from EU membership. Along the way I, along with many others, have learned to be Europeans.

My own story in this is unremarkable. Hundreds of thousands are in a similar position. As a British academic I have worked with colleagues from around the world (I cherish my friendships, for instance, in Brazil and Taiwan.) But I have worked most of all with friends from northern Europe. So my story is about working in France and Norway with colleagues who (mostly) happen to be French or Dutch or Norwegian. But this is the minimal version. For the story is also one about decade-long friendships, about watching children grow up, and now it is about growing old. It has been about collaborations that chased after ideas that were to become important, or in some cases were destined to disappear without trace. It has been about appreciating places with these friends and colleagues. Flat wet Dutch polders, steep valleys and old houses in Haute Savoie, and the lakes and wooded hills around Oslo. It has been about staying in touch. Knowing people who are the same but different. Appreciating those similarities and differences. Misunderstanding one another and knowing one another well enough to joke about those misunderstandings. Going into differences to learn rather than to score points. Appreciating, for instance, that what seems to be rudeness probably isn't if you are in the Netherlands. (It's matter-of-factness.) That it's perfectly possible to have lunch at 11.15 in the morning. (That's Norway). Or to dress down at work, and to dress up in the evening. (Norway again.) Or that the French language – and French practices – work very differently to those in English. (Leaving aside the obvious jokes about British food, try puzzling out the difference between the French 'faire cuire' and the English 'to cook'.[2])

So I am lucky. It's not just the EU. But the EU has made it a whole lot easier. I'm a Brit no doubt. A bit confused because I was raised and live in England but most of my family is Scottish. (When Scotland gets independence and rejoins the EU as surely it will, I will quickly apply for a Scottish passport.) But I am also a European. (Identities are really not mutually exclusive, despite Brexiteer claims to the contrary.) I came to this realisation – that I am indeed a European – at a particular moment, in 1981. It happened like this

We (the small family of Sheila, infant Duncan and I) spent four months in New Hampshire at the end of 1980. People were unfailingly kind. We made good friends. We were welcomed into many homes. (Let's face it: Americans are often kinder to strangers than Europeans.) We had (still have) very close American friends. And then we moved straight to Paris for five months. I'd been invited to the École des Mines de Paris, and we settled in half of a house in the suburbs at Combs-la-Ville. Sheila and I both had some French. It wasn't perfect. (Christine Ockrent's TV news was initially a challenge.) And some of the clichés about France – or Paris – applied. Or do I mean that some the idioms were different? Like the need to deal with the arrogance of petty officials with verbal aggression. (I am still proud that I successfully lost my temper in French with a bank clerk who airily told me to come back some other day when she might perhaps have time for me.) But, this was the weird bit, language and culture notwithstanding, Sheila and I simply felt at home in Paris in a way we hadn't in New Hampshire. That was the moment when I, we, felt ourselves to be European.

I went to the École des Mines because Bruno Latour introduced me to Michel Callon. 'You and Michel will get on well', Bruno said, or something like that. And so it turned out. We met and we talked. In the end we talked endlessly together, in French, and later in a mix of French and English. We visited each other's homes; our families became friendly. And, yes, we wrote a whole lot together. So Bruno was right. But he had pushed us together because I was unusual in my small anglophone discipline: I spoke and understood French. I learned French at school, but mostly I learned it by living in a French exchange family. Kind and tolerant people. (Shamefully, in retrospect I know that I did not appreciate that kindness nearly as much as they deserved.) My grammar school in Watford on the outskirts of London was twinned with the Lycée Saint Cloud on the edge of Paris. So, in 1958 (I was eleven) I went to Paris on the boat train with a hundred other boys and was dropped into the famille Roger with virtually non-existent French. Madame Roger sized me up straight away, and wisely subjected me to basic but intensive day-to-day lessons. 'Ceci est une cuillière!' she would say, brandishing a spoon in my face. 'Répète apres moi!' When I mumbled something back, she would insist, 'non pas une couillère, une cuillère!' During my second visit a year later, I briefly understood a family supper table conversation for the first time. A transcendental moment. And successive years of kindness both with the Rogers and in other French homes broadened and deepened my spoken French. (I never learned to write it properly. On the one occasion I tried my friends told me to stick to English: it was easier for them to do the translating.)

I was very keen to go on a French exchange (very few children went when they were so young), and I'm not quite sure why. But I think it is because, from age eight, my parents had packed three kids and a whole lot of camping gear into the car and started going to France. The idea was that we would walk in the hills as we had done in Scotland and the English Lakes. France was an adventurous extension to this outdoors logic. British tourists were unusual then (exchange controls were still fierce), and Brits were a bit of a novelty. I didn't learn any French, but (near lethal traffic encounters aside) France was a place of wonder. Other kinds of sounds. Smells. Sunlight. Baking rock faces. Lizards. Crickets. Heat. Okay, I know this was (a junior version of) English romanticism. But (a memory, an example) I played and walked in the forests of the Auvergne with eight-year old René Ricot, son of the local garde forestier. We had only two words in common, though we communicated without any difficulty at all. So when we returned with an adder that we'd killed (the adder looped over the end of a stick) the fury of the adults was quite unjust: we'd said to them we were going to hunt vipères (one of the two words we had in common) and we'd simply been told to

go off and enjoy ourselves. So it's just a guess, but I think France was first woven into me in 1954. And, as they say, one thing leads to another. This first contact was to turn into a ramifying web of talk and work and collaboration that stretched across northern Europe. And it was to lead to an endlessly enriching set of European friendships.

This is the sadness, then, and the anger, and the frustration. Lives include othernesses woven into us from the next street, the next village, and the next town. Or, yes, the next country. (My father was woven into Europe by his pre-war Alpinism. That's partly why we were in France in 1954). We are, as it were, fractal beings. We include others. The whole of British history is a set of weavings and includes ever so many versions of 'Europe'.[3] That's why exclusive nationalism is such nonsense. Britain's stupid and self-destructive departure from the EU will not stop this. People with British passports will still be European in endlessly many ways, and at some point, if the planet holds up, the UK will rejoin the EU and we can start to undo the damage that is now being done. But for the time being it will be just a little harder for our children and our grandchildren to remake this fractal tapestry for themselves. This is why I am both so angry and in mourning.

John Law

31st January 2020

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[1] It's by Emma van Deurzen at https://www.bps.org.uk/blogs/european-semester-psychology-2018/existential-and-emotional-impact-brexit.

[2] There's a piece that touches on this, co-authored with (Dutch) academic Annemarie Mol, coming out shortly in a Sociological Review Monograph. The Monograph is called 'On Other Terms'.

[3] See the fine essay by William Dalrymple in the book 'A Love Letter to Europe'.