


Britishness in Flux: The Impact of Brexit on National Identity

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Abstract

This paper critically investigates the future of British national identity, commonly conceptualised as "Britishness", in the context of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European union. It situates Britishness within a broader analytical framework that examines the dynamic relationship between State institutions, political structures and National identity in the United Kingdom. Drawing on historical inquiry and contemporary analyses, the study demonstrates that Britishness, originally forged in the 18th century through the consolidation of the Acts of unions and, subsequently, reinforced by imperial narratives, has undergone significant transformations due to the dissolution of the British Empire, the gradual process of devolution, and the United Kingdom's engagement with European integration. The Brexit referendum, functioned as a critical juncture, since it was framed by identity politics and nationalist rhetoric, and it revealed deep regional divisions within the United Kingdom. Divergent voting patterns in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales underscores the plurality of national and sub-national identities operating in the UK, and challenged the coherence of Britishness as a shared political Identity. The paper argues that Brexit has intensified debates about national identity, sovereignty, and the potential reconfiguration of the UK's political union, thereby compelling a reassessment of national identity in an era of heightened populism and political polarisation. In response to these challenges, the study contends that Britishness must adapt to a post-Brexit era by redefining its civic and ethno-cultural dimensions besides balancing inclusivity with distinctiveness. Hence, the need for a revitalized "Citizen Nation" model to sustain British identity amid ongoing significant transformations.

Keywords: Brexit; Britishness; National identity; United Kingdom (UK).

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Introduction

The concept of national identity is frequently understood in terms of the two major categories of variables interacting in its forging. Both the civic and the ethno-cultural dimensions play a significant role in defining what national identity means (Smith, *Gastronomy or geology? The role of nations and nationalism*, 1995). They, undeniably, represent a determinant criterion in the process of national identification.

The civic nationalism used to be associated, since it emerged, with a liberal connotation in the “West” where it is regarded as a manifestation of a particular level of civic maturity of the liberal pragmatic State (Kohn, 2017). While ethnic nationalism, which is more oriented towards emotional nostalgic aspects, is said to stand as a typical trait of the non-Western world, as it reflects, according to the western narrative, pre-civic and sometimes tribal ethnic divisions (Brubaker, 1999). Thus, while civic nationalism is supposed to represent a form of liberal, Universalist, unifying and inclusive version of nationalism, its ethnic variant continues to be relatively qualified as illiberal, ascriptive, particularistic, and even exclusionary (Calhoun, 2007).

In practice, almost all national identities combine civic and ethnic elements, yet the proportion, the significance and the predominance of each aspect varies from one nation State to another and sometimes, it varies in the same nation state depending on the specific context. Smith, also, tried to illustrate the combination of both “subjectivist and objectivist” aspects of nationalism, as he defined national identity in terms of the shared values, memories and ethno-cultural symbols in addition to the civic institutional aspects that distinguish the members of the community known as a nation (Smith, *Gastronomy or geology? The role of nations and nationalism*, 1995). Accordingly, it is possible to define a civic nation as a community of citizens who share common political-legal institutions besides a set of established civic values and features, while the ethnic nation is better understood in terms of common ancestry or blood ties among the community members that represent an essential prerequisite to the nation building as well as to its survival after (Smith, *The nation: invented, imagined, reconstructed?*, 1991). Given that the ‘ethnic’ variables are often associated with ‘cultural’ features, “ethno cultural” is the frequently used term in nationalism studies.

Nations according to some scholars such as Rogers Brubaker can be associated with ‘structures of feeling’ that link categories of thought to emotional engagements, thus, they can also offer to the individuals a familiar background through which they, as a group, will be able to participate in making history and in taking decisions (Brubaker, 1999). In line with this, it is important to consider the fundamental role of nationhood and ethnicity in helping people make sense of their world and also in shaping nations as systems of cultural signification (Bhabha, 1999). After all, the significance of nations depends on their capacity to produce a meaningful framework that reflects social, political and economic life for their members, who, in response, will develop a sense of belonging towards the nation besides a commitment of solidarity to each other (Calhoun, 2007).

Despite the flourishing of a “universalist” trend in an age of globalisation, national identity remains one of the most debatable concepts of the contemporary era. The focus has, however, shifted from debating the origins, the components and the manifestations of national identities; towards investigating the different ways to reframe renegotiate and reconfigure them to serve new purposes in an age where the traditional notions of the “nation-state” have been challenged in an unprecedented manner. In this sense, adopting a

nationalist orientation implies rediscovering or reconstructing elements of a pre-existing past (Biswas, 2002).

Indeed, the reconciliation of the exclusive character of national identity, by definition, and the required inclusion imposed by the globalised dimension of a contemporary world, marked by a huge diversity at different levels, represents the corner stone of the current debate regarding nationalism and national identities.

It is commonplace to say that the decline of fixed, territorial identities and the rise of fluid, mobile forms of identification is one of the major transformations instigated by globalisation (Appadurai, 1996). Transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, which have become the new credentials of today's mobile world, are often defined in contrast to the spirit of nationalism. The convergence between the nation-state and the idea of society in scholarly accounts has also been questioned under the growing debate about 'methodological nationalism'² or the 'territorial trap' (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) (Agnew, 2015). Yet, despite all these radical transformations, the nation and nationalism remain enduring forces.

In the United Kingdom (UK), Britishness has, since the early days of the Union, been affected by the different institutional measures adopted by the British state. Also, this national identity has played a key role in framing British political and social life. The present essay focuses on the contemporary dialogue between the State and the nation in the UK within the particular framework of national identity in a post Brexit context.

This essay begins with an exploration of the literature that highlights the different dimensions of the contemporary British national identity, in a context which is essentially characterised by the collapse of the British Empire, massive nonwhite immigration; devolution and European (dis)integration. In order to understand the relationship between national identification in Britain and the political choices of the British electorate during the EU referendum (2016), it would be interesting to have an idea about the influence of national identification on the voters' inclination towards remaining or leaving the European supranational sphere. After that, the divergent effect of the referendum on the different constituent territories of the British State needs to be explored. Ultimately, the last part of the essay turns its attention to discussing the possible reconfiguration of Britishness in a post-Brexit context.

1. Contemporary Understanding of British National Identity:

In order to understand the contemporary meaning of the British national identity, it is important to go back to the period of its emergence so as to comprehend its origins as well as to identify its constructing pillars. In fact, an exact period of the emergence of Britishness has never been determined with precision.

There has been an ongoing contention regarding its association with the establishment of the British State and the eventual causal relationship between the two. It was not, though, clear which of the two was forged following the emergence of the other. That is, was it the British State that gave Birth to the British identity or it was, instead, the existence of a common British National identity that contributed to the emergence of the British State?

According to the frequently cited scholars in this regard, mainly Linda Coley, the idea of belonging to Britain is strictly linked to the existence of the British State itself (Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation*

²Methodological Nationalism is understood as the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern World.

1707-1837, 1992). This latter was established through a purely institutional process, following the unions of England with Wales, Scotland then Ireland. Historical investigations suggest that the creation of the British State was the outcome of an institutional Act motivated by the quest of mutual interests mainly economic and military ones.

Accordingly, it has been admitted, so far, that the institution of the State existed previously to the concept of the nation, and that the related sense of attachment to this State in the form of British national identity was not shaped before the birth of the British State. This implies that the sense of attachment as well as the solidarity among the population have emerged as a manifestation of a post institutional transformation' consciousness about common features and interests promoted by the institution itself such as Commercial profit, Protestantism and the Empire (Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation 1707-1837*, 1992).

Interestingly, one of the key features introduced through the different narratives regarding the forging of the British national identity, was the contrast with the Other (Europe and Catholicism represented by France). In fact, the conflict and the contrast, with the other, played an essential role in producing a sense of solidarity and belonging within the new State which in turn, led to the fashioning of the Nation.

It should be highlighted, as well, that both the nation and the State in the United Kingdom weren't established within a vacant social and geographical territory. The United Kingdom has been, since the beginning, a multi-nation State generated through the Union of distinctive political and social entities. Similarly, the correspondent National identity emerged as a new level of identification that co-existed with the previously forged loyalties and identities.

In this sense, the associated national identity with the British State was superimposed over existing divergences similarly to the UK State itself (Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation 1707-1837*, 1992). The new identity gained more significance, sense and persuasion with the rise of the institution of the British Empire, when the new identity became related to the glorious British Empire. Thus, identifying oneself as British was equivalent to identifying with the Empire that used to rule the four corners of the world.

It is admitted that the allegiance to the UK manifested through the objective commitment to the State was a matter of "self-interest" more than an emotionally based allegiance or an ideologically oriented identification; a matter of reason rather than feeling (see for example: (Anderson P. , 1992); (Bell, Raiffa, & Teversky, 1988); (Nairn, 1977). This pragmatic identification or utilitarian understanding of belonging and allegiance is confirmed through acknowledging that the glorious Empire was the top attractive feature of embracing the new national identity.

David Marquand suggested that " Empire was not an optional extra for the British... it was their reason for being British as opposed to English, Scots or Welsh" (Marquand, *How united is the modern United Kingdom?*, 1995). Similarly, Richard Weight believed that "The United Kingdom was primarily established to further the quest for Empire." In the same line of thought Weight suggested that "When the Empire disappeared, the original *raison d'être* of the United Kingdom Disappeared too" (Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000*, 2002). On the other hand, John Mackenzie claimed that in the late nineteenth century, when the Empire became inextricably linked to what it meant to be British, British Patriotism was transformed into an imperial patriotism (Mackenzie, 1984).

Considering the centrality of the institution of the Empire, in the forging of the nation in the UK, the occurring transformations to this Empire would systematically impact the nation as well as the national identity in Britain. Obviously, by the Second half of the previous century there has been an ongoing debate

regarding the viability of Britishness, precisely, after the decline of the British Empire during this period of time (Marquand, 1995).

The collapse of the empire has raised the debate over the significance of the Union and the meaningfulness of being British in post imperial United Kingdom given that the Empire represented the core motive for the British to privilege their British national identity over any other existing allegiances.

In other words, since the institutional union was established within a purely imperial context, the collapse of the empire would result in the collapse of a fundamental pillar of the United Kingdom. David McCrone underlined that “if we accept that in essence Britishness was an imperial identity, then the loss of empire eroded that identity at home and abroad” (McCrone, 1997). It is admitted, then, that the rise into international power by the Empire established existentialist ties between the state and the nation in the UK. This existentialist dimension of the relationship between the two implies that the stability of the nation depends, significantly, on the stability of the State.

Consequently, as the State was losing its imperial feature, the British nation and national identity as well, were facing new challenges framed by the radical transformations of their forging elements. Indeed, the original background of the British National identity has significantly changed following the disappearance of the majority of the forging elements and the considerable transformation of some others; yet, interestingly, new influential variables have also emerged.

The previously discussed features which forged the British national identity have either collapsed such as the Empire or they have lose their significance and influence such as Protestantism and even the Monarchy which has become less significant to the British, mainly, after the death of the late Queen ‘Elizabeth the Second’. Colley noted in this regard:

As an invented nation heavily dependent for its ‘raison d’être’ on a broadly Protestant culture, on the threat and tonic of recurrent war, particularly war with France, and on the triumphs, profits and Otherness represented by a massive overseas empire, Britain is bound now to be under immense pressure.....We can understand the nature of present debates and controversies only if we recognize that the factors that provided for the forging of a British nation in the past have largely ceased to operate (Colley, *Britons : forging a nation 1707-1837*, 1992).

Also, the contrast with European other, especially after Britain’s official integration into its former Other through joining the then European Economic Community (EEC), is no more a determinant feature that distinguishes the British people. Furthermore, mass non-white immigration from the former Empire, encouraged by immigration policies, adopted after the Second World War, refashioned the demographic, the racial, as well as the ethnic profile of the UK. And finally, the extensively growing debate over the significance of the Union and the eventual break up of Britain by the end of the previous century within the post devolution context.

To make reference to national identity studies, Breuilly suggested that national identity is mostly about the political attachment the individual feels towards the state” (Breuilly J. , *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* Liah Greenfeld, 1994). Yet, in practice understanding national identities has always been a matter of balance between the ethno cultural as well as the civic elements with a significant focus on the most influential ones following the particularities of each case.

In Britain, for instance, national identity is mostly about the political attachment of the individuals to the civic institutions since the allegiance to the British State contributed to the forging of the British nation. In other cases, this process is reversed given that the shared ideological and emotional components (values, emotional allegiance and other shared social and ethno cultural features...) exist first. Then, once they reach a specific point among a particular community, this latter becomes ready and motivated to create common political institutions in order to govern them and defend their shared interests. This description resonates well with the generic process of emergence of the concept of Nation State where the nation provided the institution of the state with social (public) legitimacy.

In view of the previously debated elements which framed the British national identity and considering the progressive transformation of the institutional configuration of the British State, it would be more practical to tackle Britishness as an unfixed concept. Furthermore, Britain's common political institutions are acknowledged in the current essay as central to the British people's common identity, hence, it is suggested that the British shape their national character through the civic institutions that govern them (Hague, 1999).

Hence, assuming that the British national identity was associated with the British State, and considering the complexity of this State, the current study revolves around issues related to multilayered identification and more particularly to the dichotomy of local identity versus a separate British one.

In a nut shell, the British national identity is very sensitive to the institutional transformations; whenever these institutions are threatened, the whole sense of Britishness becomes under challenge and debates about national identity raise to the fore. The UK's membership to the EU in the previous century, for instance, has raised debates about the viability of Britishness, already a supranational identity coming under a new level of European "supranationalism".

Also, when the devolved executive and legislative bodies were established in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the discussion about "national vs local identity" took a new dimension. Obviously, the Brexit has likewise had a considerable impact as it would have transformed the people's sense of political belonging and raised identity debate mainly regarding the significance of British national identity. It, clearly, illustrates how politicians make use of or even instrumentalise nationalism as a way to face a situation of socio economic uncertainty (Nairn, 1977).

2. Understanding Identity Politics behind the UK's Withdrawal from the European Union

Withdrawing from the European Union was, indeed, a political decision with multifaceted motives and multidimensional effects. In order to understand the logic behind such decision, it is important to be aware of the configuration of the British political system especially with regard to the center-periphery relationship. The British Political apparatus is basically framed by the British Political Tradition model and the Differentiated Polity Model (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003). The first model, as it would be understood from its label, is more conservative and focuses on the supremacy of the central government with a limited notion of power sharing in a hierarchical method of state affairs' management. The second model, however, tends to be more efficient through the limitation of the central state's authority. It privileges the transfer of power to the peripheries via different mechanisms. That is, the limitation of central government's prerogatives in favor of the peripheries in order to encourage plural network that enables more power negotiation. Ironically, what used to be Political tradition at the domestic level switched to embrace the Differentiated Polity Model regarding the relationship with the EU (Brussels), as far as the central British State became itself a periphery with regard to the regional and global context of European integration.

Initially, the decision of joining the then EEC (European Economic Community), since the 1960's, could be interpreted as an attempt to resist or to push up the declining curve and to restore the international influence lost after the collapse of the Empire. If Britain was pushed to join the European sphere, for different considerations, it was obvious since the very beginning that the legislative as well as the political configuration of this Union didn't align with the established British System.

At the beginning, the United Kingdom was reluctant to join the continental project governed by a logic of power-sharing that risked to bring the "supreme" notion of British "national sovereignty" under challenge. In fact, even after joining the EU, the UK has shown resistance to different European dispositions and measures such as the abolition of borders' controls under the Schengen agreement, and also the currency Union of the Euro zone. Describing this delicate relationship, it would be suggested that the UK has joined the EU for purely economic reasons; however, this membership impacted considerably the political decision-making process. Jürgen Habermas (Habermas J. I., 2016) assessed:

The British have a different history behind them from that of the continent. The political consciousness of a great power, twice victorious in the 20th century, but globally in decline, hesitates to come to terms with the changing situation. With this national sense of itself, Great Britain fell into an awkward situation after joining the EEC for purely economic reasons in 1973... British policy in Brussels was always a standoff carried out according to the maxim: 'have your cake and eat it.

The EU illustrates a post-national institution where political and economic integration contribute in fostering harmony between existing differences. Yet, the mechanisms leading to integration requires power to be implemented. This idea of implementing power could become conflictual regarding the limits as well as the outcome of power sharing between the two levels of governance within the context of the EU. Vernon Bogdanor suggests that the belief that the supranational governance embodied by the EU was not compatible with domestic institutions pushed the British Elite to rethink their country's membership in the EU (Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, 1999). He explained:

[Our] conception of parliamentary supremacy [...] makes it difficult for [us] to accommodate [ourselves] to structures of government, such as that of the European Union, whose *raison d'être* is that of power-sharing. It will make it difficult also for [us] to accommodate [our]selves to the devolution of power downwards to a parliament in Edinburgh, a national assembly in Cardiff, and an assembly in Belfast.

In the case of Britain, thus, the clash between the powers of each level resulted into a conflict between the UK and the EU. Accepting that one of the two unions was abandoned in an attempt to restore the "holly" principle of sovereignty may, however, run the risk of being used against the United Kingdom by the devolved local governments. These latter might be encouraged further -which was the case- to request more representation, sovereignty and to some extent institutional autonomy. Paradoxically, the same London-based Political class (the conservatives in particular), clamming power from Brussels, persist in legitimising the current configuration of the British political system based on the supremacy of parliamentary sovereignty and the central Government in Westminster.

The British conception of parliamentary supremacy didn't correspond to the logic of power sharing with the structures of the supranational institution of the European Union. As a result, the belief that the supranational level of governance embodied by the EU didn't comply with prerogatives of domestic institutions, encouraged the British political class -essentially the conservatives- to rethink their country's membership in the EU. Moreover, the significant changes that characterised the beginning of the millennium including the financial crisis, the rise of far right populist parties and the problems related to the managing of the refugees' crisis in addition to the resulted concerns over the uncontrolled immigration provided a favorable context to the emergence of explicit calls for a withdrawal from the EU. The growing voices in favor of such an option led the British Government to submit it to public consultation.

The referendum, that took place on June 23rd, 2016, resulted in a majority support for the leaving option with 52% in favor of the Brexit and 48% against it (Hobolt, 2016). Following these results, negotiation started, under article 50 of the treaty of the EU to reach an agreement setting out the framework of Britain's future relation with, and the conventional terms regarding its way out of the EU. Then, on the 31st January, 2020, the United Kingdom, officially, left the European Union, under a transition period that ended on 31 December 2020.

Interestingly, the idea of multilayered identification is elementary to the understanding of the UK/EU relationship from the perspective of identity studies, this multilayered identification is already well illustrated through the United Kingdom model itself. The UK represents, in political terms, a centralised model of Union state where local, regional national and supranational identifications coexist. yet it remains an unconventional or at least a "non uniform" union State or as Mitchell argues, "not a union state but a state of unions" (Mitchell J. , 2007).

Unexpectedly, the "Union State" was not unanimous regarding the decision of leaving the continental union due to the heterogeneous regional results of the referendum. Most Brexit supporters came predominantly from England and Wales, while the largest populations to vote against Brexit came from Scotland and Northern Ireland³. This divergence opened up the issue of identification within a multi-national United Kingdom. The UK's decision to leave the European Union, an institutional event, reignited the national identity discussion with a strong political connotation; a discussion that started short before with the devolution agreements during the late 1990's and the Scottish independence referendum in 2014.

The voters' preferences regarding the membership of the EU were significantly shaped by pragmatic considerations, mainly the political and economic repercussions of each choice. With regard to national identities, the majority of electors identifying themselves as primary British stood in the grey zone as their votes varied between remaining and leaving the EU. For people, with exclusive local identities, it is possible to distinguish between two groups. The English or Welsh exclusive identity who voted predominantly for leaving the EU and those identifying themselves as exclusively Irish or Scottish who were in favor of remaining in the Union (Richards & Heath, 2019).

The divergent positions regarding the institutional relationship between Britain, the nation of four nations from one side, and the supranational level represented by the European union from another side fostered the tensions between another supranational level and its peripheries, that is, between the central

³EU Referendum Results posted on the BBC website : https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

Government in Westminster and the devolved bodies in the four countries. The outcome of the referendum has, indeed, revealed a fragmented country at different levels which illustrates a clash of interests and, eventually, of identities, between regional, national and supra national levels.

3. The “Dis-United” Kingdom and The Aftereffects Of The Brexit Referendum

Indeed, nationalism and national identity rhetoric continue to be intensively employed in the political realm, mainly, by contemporary far right political figures to mobilise people and communities during delicate times. In the United Kingdom, as well, this rhetoric was remarkably used by the British political class to deal with the uncertainty that has characterised the Brexit context.

It was mentioned earlier in this paper that the Brexit was the outcome of a clash between two unions at different levels (UK-EU); the two unions have been for decades seeking, in vain, a common ground through successive balanced concessions. It may sound strange that within a globalised context the micro level overcame the macro level when the British privileged the supremacy of their national institutions over the interests of a supranational inclusion.

The prominence of the identity issue during the pre and post-Brexit era indicates how national identity discourse could be instrumentalised to serve institutional agendas. In this regard, it could be suggested that nationalism was the inspiring ideology of the withdrawal from Europe. With respect to the institutional as well as the identitarian construction of the United Kingdom from one side and given the flagrant divergence that marked the results of the referendum within the UK, it is obvious that the Brexit would have substantial implications for the four countries of the UK.

3.1. Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland maintains an intricate relationship with the United Kingdom, considering the particular circumstances of its establishment following the independence of the Republic of Ireland. The referendum about the withdrawal from the EU has invigorated the silenced debates about identity, nationalism, autonomy and the borders.

In fact, the particularity of the Northern Irish case within the context of Brexit stems, also, from the shared physical border with the EU. Compared to the other three countries of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland is the only territory that shares land borders with the EU. In this sense, the free circulation of people and goods has been impacted differently in Northern Ireland after the Brexit. For this reason, the issue of the border .i.e. the choice between hard and soft border between Northern Ireland and the republic of Ireland was one of the topics that triggered a harsh debate during the withdrawal negotiations.

It should be clarified likewise that, even within Northern Ireland, different positions regarding the issue of the borders emerged. The Nationalist parties under the leadership of Sinn Fein demanded a referendum on Irish unity⁴ and supported a soft border with the Republic of Ireland. On the other hand, the Unionists led by the Democratic Unionist Party were in favor of a hard border with the Republic of Ireland suggesting that a no deal regarding this intricate issue would isolate Northern Ireland from the rest of the Union (UK).

The Key point is that the Brexit referendum has forced the people to make a choice based on the old debate about Nationalism vs. Unionism. Yet, the pattern has somehow been reversed. Unionism used to be

⁴ The leader of Sinn Fein, Mary Lou McDonald (2018) states, “Brexit will hamper the economy, agreements, and restrict the rights of citizens.”

in favor of large cosmopolitanism with an internationally focused state whereas nationalism has been associated with reestablishing the Union (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) with a smaller and more inward-looking Irish state. Now, the nationalists through their support of Northern Ireland membership to the EU seem to be seeking a large cosmopolitan and internationally focused state.

3.2. Scotland

Scotland represents another complicated pattern which differs considerably from the Northern Irish case. In Scotland debates about Brexit, especially in the aftermath of the elections, become systematically associated with the debate over the independence of Scotland. It is worth reminding that this independence debate reached its peak by 2014, when a referendum was held to decide whether to remain part of the United Kingdom or to leave the Union.

The majority of the Scottish (67%) voted, then, in favor of the “no independence” option. Following these elections, it was suggested that the Scottish independence debate has been closed once and for all. This was not the case, as far as two years later, when the results of the 2016 referendum were released, the Scottish found themselves in front of a collective “leave” decision which doesn’t match with their own “remain” choice. This concrete divergence and the consequences thereon drew the attention again to the clash between Westminster and Edinburgh and to the issue of coexistence between the two.

To elaborate further on these ideas, the results of the referendum didn’t only reflect that the political choices of the Scottish people do not necessarily converge with those of the Union but they have also raised the debate about the Democratic logic of such referenda. Scotland left the EU because the majority at the supranational level voted for that; whereas the majority of the people in Scotland wanted to remain. This situation represented, according to the Scottish Nationalist Party politicians, a consistent change in circumstances that would justify a call for another round of public consultation regarding the Scottish independence. Nicola Sturgeon has, effectively, claimed another referendum on Scottish independence, as Brexit negated the assurances about Scotland’s place in the EU at the first Independence referendum in 2014. A number of commentators and politicians have therefore predicted that a breakup from the UK became possible, and others believe that the mood shift in Scotland is now tangible (McEwen & Murphy, 2022).

3.3 Wales

Theoretically, the Welsh case would seem to be categorically different from the Scottish and the Northern Irish cases, as far as Wales voted in harmony with the UK majority to leave the EU. In Wales there have been no border or independence issues to be debated after the Brexit. Nevertheless, Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales), which is a nationalist party revived the Welsh national identity debate in the Brexit context. It is noticed that the nationalism advocated by Plaid Cymru resembles the one adopted by the nationalist parties both in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The civic, inclusive, as well as “utilitarian” nationalism, with regard to the relationship with the EU, explains the party’s understanding of national identity (Williamson, 2018).

The significant impact of Brexit on the political discourse in Wales could also be perceived through evoking the eventual demands for an independent Wales. Even if Wales has voted to leave the EU, the Brexit succeeded, indeed, in making room for a new discourse and a new framework of the relationship between Wales and the UK. It has, simply, transformed the politics of the nationalist wing towards a tougher stand in order to secure the interests of Wales in an era of uncertainty.

Neither Wales in general, nor Plaid Cymru, had such determined assertions regarding independence before the Brexit. The latter seems to transform the politics of Plaid Cymru. Considering that the leave campaign was about “taking back control” it is clear that, in the 2017 election manifesto, party former leader Leanne Wood has stressed that Wales also needs to take control in face of the “grave risks” ahead of this election. Wood further claimed that these risks touch different areas including “farming, ... communities, even ... the very identity [of Wales] as a nation ... All of that is under threat from a Tory party that can only be described as cruel and reckless” (Cymru, Action Plan 2017, 2017).

3.4 *England*

In England, the so called “English question”, already triggered in the aftermath of devolution, took a new dimension after the Brexit. If we accept that the reasons which led to the Brexit were not exclusively or principally identitarian, it should be, nevertheless, underlined that the impact will have significant identitarian dimensions. Although the different constituent parts of the UK reacted differently during and after the Brexit, the related policies of nationalism have started displaying convergence. Henderson et al. suggest that the Leave vote associated with a strengthened English national identity, may in the future contribute further to the emergence of a politicised English nationalism (Henderson, Jeffery, Wincott, & al, 2017). An opinion poll conducted for the Daily Telegraph in (2017) found out that a majority of those surveyed believed that Brexit was more important than maintaining the integrity of the UK (Riley-Smith, Rayner, & Johnson, 2017).

Nationalist parties started employing the nationalist rhetoric in order to gain more power for their devolved bodies suggesting that the current devolution agreement doesn't respond to the occurring institutional changes (Ward & Ward, 2021). Also, nationalism has been instrumentalised by these nationalist parties through a progressive focus on pragmatic motivations and interests rather than emotional and nostalgic aspects.

The purpose is certainly to reach new constitutional or political configuration of the UK after the withdrawal from the EU, especially with regard to the powers previously exercised by the EU over areas of government activity that would otherwise devolve.

4. A Perspective on Post-Brexit Britishness

National identity is constantly changing in response to the permanent transformations of the general context, Kathryn Woodward points out that “Identities are diverse and changing, both in the social context in which we make sense of our own positions and in the World” (Woodward, 2017). Evidently, the dialogue between the institutional State and the ethno-cultural community is of great significance to the understanding of the British case. By the beginning of the 21st century the world witnessed a globalisation of different structures mainly economic ones; however, cultural structures including cultural identities displayed high localisation embodied and supported by the rise of far right ideology during the first two decades of the 21st century (Moffat, 2018). This cultural localisation in the Western hemisphere during an age of economic globalisation will unavoidably impact the States in general and Union States particularly. Castells notes in this concern, “...re-legitimising the state by shifting power from national to local level may end up deepening the legitimisation crisis of the nation-state, and the tribalisation of society in communities built around primary identities” (Castell, 1997).

It is worth noting that the significant emergence of far right populist discourse in the political scene could be qualified as a direct threat to supra nationalism and **to collective identities**. In this sense, it is suggested that the resistance to the European identity should be put in the framework of rising global far

right populism (Luhman, 2017). The Brexit would be seen as a defeat of capitalism against populism, in its country of origin. It illustrates how identity questions have overcome material and economic interests in Britain to the extent of framing the political choices of the British people. In the same line of thought, Habermas, commenting on Brexit, asserted that “It never entered [his] mind that populism would defeat capitalism in its country of origin. Given the existential importance of the banking sector for Great Britain and the media power and political clout of the City of London it was unlikely that identity questions would prevail against interests”(Habermas J. , 2016).

This consistent shift converged with the different theories that addressed the gradual transformation of the British State at the institutional level and suggested a near dismantling of the United Kingdom⁵. It has been suggested, in this regard, to avoid focusing on the debate over the viability of Britishness as a national identity and to focus, rather, on the appropriate ways to optimise the existing common features so as to persuade, collectively, all the inhabitants of the Union State about their equality and value regardless of whatever allegiance they may individually prioritise (Colley, *Britishness in the 21st Century*, 1999).

Considering that today's allegiances are based on political rights rather than cultural identities (Breuilley J. , *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* Liah Greenfeld, 1994), it is proposed to neglect the ‘antiquated elements’ of national identity that risk to incite divisions; and to embrace, instead, a revived ‘Citizen Nation’ based on shared civic rights and sovereignty of the people (Colley, *Britishness in the 21st Century*, 1999). Such an approach suggests a moderated interplay of the civic and the ethno-cultural with an obvious primacy of the civic in order to act as the inclusive factor in face of a de facto diversity. An excessive inclusion, may also result in a flat identity where the feature of distinctiveness is not clear.

Indeed, the version of Britishness forged in the nineteenth-century is hardly appropriate for the significantly different context of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, even during these periods of crisis, it should be noticed that this extensive academic and political interest in Britishness is a sign of its adaptability as well as viability.

The Brexit itself, while intensively introduced by its opponents as an illustration of the internal divergences that have been long-silenced, could as well be regarded as an action towards rebirth; in the sense that the withdrawal from one institutional Union would boost the other union. Thus, Britishness may develop, in different directions in the future.

In short, redefining and reconstructing “Britishness” turns out to be a priority to reinvent a strong nation-state (Yeandle, 2013). Thus, reinterpreting British national identity with regard to both its historical past and its political future might be one of the possible ways to protect this identity from becoming obsolete. The challenge of creating an appropriate meeting point between the past and the future is at the core of what Britishness is supposed to target in the contemporary era (Morley & Kevin, 2001), and also how to combine what should be globalised with what ought to remain localised. The focus needs to shift from the roots or the sources which are beyond control towards the routes that take into account the continuous transformation of the context.

⁵See for example: Tom Nairn, *After Britain* (London: Granta, 1999), and from another political perspective see John Redwood, *The Death of Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), then for a contemporary reading check Arthur Aughey (2013) *endism: the ideology of British break up* :The british question

Finally, for the “civically” shaped national identities, “utility” remains one of the most important features; though a utilitarian conception of national identity restricts the broad concept of national identity in ‘interest’ which remains relative and most of the time divisive. Yet, any study of the existing narratives concludes that the British national identity forged in the eighteenth century was not inherited but learned and practiced to serve the interest of the British community (Colley, *Britons : forging a nation 1707-1837*, 1992). Interestingly, some nations are forged through the existentialist feeling which seeks a utilitarian framing that generally takes the form of an institution; whereas, in other cases like in Britain the utilitarian *raison d’être* exists first.

Conclusion

Discussions about institutionalism and ethnicity are not new in British history. It is the context, rather than the content, which has significantly evolved. At the time of writing this article, and after more than four years since the effective withdrawal from the EU, it is still unclear how the British people’s rejection of the European project will turn out.

Nevertheless, immediately after the referendum, internal debates, on how the four countries that comprise the UK would react, have come to the fore. In fact, this new institutional measure has transformed the traditional actors of the established dialogue between the State and the nation in the United Kingdom.

In their campaign, the Conservatives have clearly instrumentalised the European Union’s otherness, which has, for a long time, been their motto of nationhood in contemporary British politics. In this sense, it may be time to consider whether the Brexit will contribute to the revival of a version of Britishness based on a European “Other”, or whether the notion of otherness has already lost all its relevance in a globalised world. For sure, it is far too soon for the full effects of Brexit to become apparent.

Moreover, while classic accounts have greatly contributed to the understanding of the historical and institutional development of national identities, they have overlooked their resonance among people’s daily lives. This latter depends significantly on investigating the real sources as well as the concrete influence of national identity.

The British identity, for instance, is frequently represented as a sort of state identity, an attachment to the institutions with a focus on its sources and origins rather than on its contemporary significance to the British themselves and its impact on their choices, decisions and social solidarity among them.

To conclude, it should be recognised that being British is not an exclusive feature that requires the abandon of other loyalties. Obviously, the “exclusionary” framing of Britishness didn’t exist in the past as far as the forged British national identity in the eighteenth century existed besides other identities and loyalties without demanding their annulment. National identity is, thus, about distinctiveness rather than exclusion.

Brexit as an “institutional act” has left the politics of the UK fractured and will continue to have significant repercussions on Britishness too, especially with the excessive rise of far-right ideology that pushes the identification issue toward a more general polarisation within the society. The real challenge today is not about choosing one identity over another; it is rather about securing a vision that best serves the interests of the people while reflecting who they are.

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